

John C. Fremont's Impressions of Las Vegas

Primary Source Analysis



John C. Fremont. Photo courtesy of Library of Congress.

John C. Fremont (1813-1890) was an American military officer and explorer who led five expeditions to the American West between 1842 and 1853. His second expedition (1843-1844) brought him to Las Vegas, and he became the first person to include it on a map.

Read the following excerpts from John C. Fremont's trail notes describing Las Vegas.

May 3, 1844 – After a day's journey of 18 miles, in a northeasterly direction, we encamped in the midst of another very large basin, at a camping ground called las Vegas – a term which the Spaniards use to signify fertile or marshy plains . . . Two narrow streams of clear water, four or five feet deep, gush suddenly, with a quick current, from two singularly large springs . . . The taste of the water is good, but rather too warm to be agreeable.

May 4, 1844 – We started this morning earlier than usual, travelling in a northeasterly direction across the plain. . . . In about five hours' ride, we crossed a gap in the surrounding ridge, and the appearance of skeletons of horses very soon warned us that we were engaged in another dry *Jornada*,¹ which proved the longest we had made in all our journey – between fifty and sixty miles without a drop of water.

Travelers through countries affording water and timber can have no conception of our intolerable thirst while journeying over the hot yellow sands of this elevated country, where the heated air seems to be entirely deprived of moisture.

Focus Questions

1. Summarize what Fremont has to say about the weather and climate in Las Vegas.
2. How would you describe Fremont's journey? Was it challenging to travel to Las Vegas?
3. Based on his description, does Las Vegas seem like a good place to camp. Why or why not?

¹ A day's journey