

Antoine Leroux

Guide to the Mormon Battalion

Antoine Leroux, today, is almost completely forgotten when one studies the history of the West in the 1800's. Of the great explorers of that time, we remember Kit Carson and Jim Bridger, both of whom benefited from widely-published biographies of their lives. Antoine Leroux's accomplishments go almost unnoticed.

And yet, here is a man who was one of the first trappers to reach the headwaters of the Missouri. He trapped the Gila River as early as 1826, journeying to the future site of Yuma that same year. He became a noted guide and expert of the mountains of Colorado and Utah and the deserts of Arizona. He was the chief guide of at least four major expeditions and of numerous lesser journeys. Kearny, Sitgreaves, Bartlett, Gunnison and Whipple would all praise his ability to successfully pilot the various western expeditions he was asked to lead.

His place in Mormon Battalion history is sometimes forgotten as well. Many battalion rosters leave off Leroux as a guide because his initial duty was as General Stephen Kearny's guide. Shortly after the battalion left Santa Fe, Kearny would send Leroux back with orders to guide the Mormon Battalion to San Diego. Colonel P. St. George Cooke, commander of the Mormon Battalion, relied on Antoine Leroux as his lead pilot and mentions Leroux quite frequently in his daily journal entries. Cooke's famous wagon road, created by the battalion during its 1,800 mile-long march, was surveyed by Antoine Leroux and other guides attached to the Battalion.

Antoine Leroux, also known as Watkins Leroux, was unique among other explorers of the time. He was literate and kept journals, some of which survive him. He could speak many languages, including English, French, and Spanish, and could converse with many Native American tribes in their own native tongue.

He was a land owner, owning the vast Leroux Land Grant of New Mexico and Colorado. He held several important positions in the early government of New Mexico. His expertise of the West was welcomed in Washington D.C. He made several trips to the capital and had extensive correspondence with lawmakers, as they considered the route for the new transcontinental railroad.

Antoine Leroux died June 30, 1861, at the age of 60. He was buried in the nave of the parish church in Taos, New Mexico.

"In all the burials at Taos during a period of fifteen years, no one, including, for example Carlos Beaubien, received such an honor in his place of burial as did this noted guide and mountain man." - Forbes Parkhill in *The Blazed Trail of Antoine Leroux*, p. 217.