



EMIGRANT TRAILS HALL OF FAME

OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION



- **Trapper, Trader, Explorer, Guide, Indian Agent**
- **Born 1799, County Cavan, Ireland**
- **Died 1854, Washington, D.C.**

Thomas Fitzpatrick

Thomas Fitzpatrick was an Irish American who arrived in the states at age seventeen. He entered the fur trade in 1823, accompanying the William Ashley party that traveled up the Missouri River. He was quickly recognized as a leader, with the fundamentals of a good education. In late 1823 he and Jedediah Smith led a small party into Wyoming, wintering in the Wind River Valley. Told by the Indians of a route into the Green River Valley, he and Smith can be credited with the rediscovery of South Pass for use by the fur trade, and later by westering emigrants.

He led Ashley and party over South Pass to the Green River in the fall of 1824, and following their winter trapping, participated in the first fur trade Rendezvous on the Green in July 1825. Over the course of the next few years, he was extremely active in the fur trade, working with Jim Bridger, Jim Beckwourth, David Jackson, Joshua Pilcher, William and Milton Sublette, and other luminaries among the Mountain Men. In 1830 he and four partners purchased the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Fitzpatrick served as the senior partner.

In 1835 Fitzpatrick, Bridger and Milton Sublette purchased Fort William (later Fort Laramie). Joshua Pilcher and the American Fur Company purchased Fort William from them while at the Rendezvous the following year. Fitzpatrick at the time was leading the Whitman-Spalding missionary party toward Oregon. He continued as a major figure in the fur trade, taking pelts east to St. Louis yearly and returning to the mountains with supplies and trade goods for the annual Rendezvous.

Fitzpatrick assumed a new role in the West after the decline of the fur trade. In 1841 he led the first wagon company west, which included the Bidwell-Bartleson party and the Catholic missionary party of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet. The following year he led the second westbound party of emigrants, including Elijah White, over a large portion of the trail west of Fort Laramie. In 1843-44 Fitzpatrick was employed by John Fremont as guide for his second and longest expedition, crossing the Blue Mountains to the Dalles, then travelling south into Nevada and over the Sierra Nevada to Sutter's Fort. In 1845 he guided military parties, including Stephen Kearny and James Abert, throughout the West. In 1846 he was appointed Indian Agent for the Upper Platte and Arkansas River Valleys and was responsible for negotiations with a number of tribes.

From Fort Leavenworth he provided advice to the Army regarding western forts, recommending Fort Laramie, Fort Hall, a site at the Big Bend of the Arkansas, and near Fort Bent on the Santa Fe Trail, advice that was subsequently followed. In 1851 he planned and organized the massive gathering of Plains Indians that resulted in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851. He continued in his role as Indian agent until 1854 when he died of pneumonia on a trip to Washington, D.C. regarding the Treaty of Fort Atkinson. He was buried in the Congressional Cemetery.

Fitzpatrick acquired the nickname "Broken Hand" as the result of a firearms accident in 1836 that crippled his left hand. He was greatly esteemed over the years by Indians, military, emigrants, and settlers. Western historian Will Bagley wrote that Fitzpatrick was "the most renowned wagon-train pilot of all time."