Devils Tower, Wyoming: An Examination of a Clash in Cultures

By Brenda L. Haes

When the National Park Service issued a ban on climbing during a month of Native American ceremonies at the site, climbers objected. This is the story of the culture clash that culminated in court decisions in the matter.

Rocky Mountain Entrepreneur: Robert Campbell as a Fur Trade Capitalist

By Jay H. Buckley

Prior to their establishment of Fort Laramie, Robert Campbell and business partners already were active in the business life of the fur trade. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Campbell gained financial success out West.

Seventy Times Seven

By Larry K. Brown

The son of the notorious “Ma” Barker shot a deputy sheriff in Wyoming. His wife, implicated in the crime, was tried and sentenced to prison in Wyoming.

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Wyoming Picture


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Our e-mail address is: rwig@uwyo.edu

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Rocky Mountain Entrepreneur:

Robert Campbell As a Fur Trade Capitalist
By Jay H. Buckley

Between 1825 and 1835 Robert Campbell emerged as a fur trade entrepreneur. Campbell served as clerk for Ashley-Smith, as brigade leader for Smith, Jackson, and Sublette, and as supplier and financier for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Campbell quickly became a dominant figure in the American fur trade. In addition to leading fur brigades, Campbell and his partner William Sublette built several trading posts (most notably Fort Laramie), supplied the annual rendezvous, and challenged John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company on the Missouri River. Through it all, Campbell's business acumen helped him pursue economic opportunities that paved the way for future financial success as a Missouri businessman.
Campbell's tenure in the fur trade provides an example of frontier capitalism. As a central figure in the complicated history of the rivalries, politics, struggles, and strategies of the upper Missouri fur trade, he greatly influenced the fur trade, including the men and companies involved, established friendly relations with numerous Indian tribes, resurrected fort-building and the demise of the rendezvous system, and helped to link St. Louis to its most important commercial enterprise—the fur trade. During the Rocky Mountain fur trade era (1825-1840), few individuals fit the role of a successful businessman as well as Campbell. Fur trade historian Dale Morgan remarked that a good, balanced history of the trans-Mississippi West fur trade in the 1830s would have to be centered, at least in part, around the life and career of Robert Campbell.¹

Campbell experienced many of the same things common to mountain men, but his profitable career was the exception rather than the rule. Better educated and more articulate than the average mountain man, Campbell left numerous letters, documents, and papers. Fewer than a dozen mountain men left the mountains with any significant amount of wealth. Campbell's personality, honesty, education, and business acumen helped him become one of these successful entrepreneurs. Campbell seized the leadership and partnership opportunities offered by Ashley, Smith, and Sublette. Although he probably never really enjoyed nor cared for the solitude and romance of the mountains, Campbell saw the wisdom of making money while the good times lasted and then managed to leave while it was still profitable. To Campbell, the prospects of success outweighed the risks involved.

Like other mountain men, Robert Campbell hoped his ambition and hard work would lead to economic success and rapid upward mobility, eventually culminating in wealth and prestige. Yet relatively few of the hundreds of mountain men ever achieved financial success. What were the key elements that mountain men needed to make the fur trade a viable means of acquiring wealth and how did Robert Campbell become a successful Rocky Mountain entrepreneur? Some of the factors that spurred Campbell's successes include developing relationships and making important connections, dealing diplomatically with Indian friends and foes, and dealing with competitors while implementing innovative changes in the fur trade.

Born February 12, 1804, to Scotch-Irish parents Hugh Campbell and Elizabeth Buchanan in Aughalane, Tyrone County, Ireland, Robert was the youngest of six children. His family owned several farms and served as landlords to tenants who worked the land. Unfortunately, Hugh Campbell, Sr., died in 1810, leaving his wife Elizabeth, and his children Ann, Hugh, Andrew, Elizabeth, James Alexander, and Robert in a precarious financial situation. As economic conditions in Ireland worsened, many Scotch-Irish immigrated to Pennsylvania and the other middle colonies seeking better economic opportunities. Because of their landholdings, Hugh Campbell's


³ Robert Campbell Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri. Aughalane is a rural area just east of Newtownstewart near present-day Plumbridge.

family fared better and the children could afford to attend school. Robert's oldest brother Hugh, who had recently studied medicine at Scotland's prestigious Edinburgh University, decided to leave Ireland in 1818 with hopes of achieving success in America. Hugh entered commercial pursuits in Milton, North Carolina, before settling in Richmond, Virginia, where he began building a reputation as a man of integrity with a keen business sense. His letters home told of his success and when he invited his younger brother Robert to join him, Robert readily agreed.  

In 1822 Robert boarded the *Climax* and began his trans-Atlantic voyage from Londonderry to Philadelphia. After arriving in America, he traveled to Hugh's home and began working as a clerk at his store. Hugh offered Robert what he needed most: encouragement, friendship, occasional censure, and numerous business contacts. Hugh served as Campbell's most significant acquaintance, as well as a father figure, advisor, and financier. He instilled in Robert the need to cultivate friendships and form business relationships. Hugh's most important advice to Robert came in a letter in the fall of 1825. He wrote “You doubtless are aware that when fortune smiles friends remember us...Take Care my dear Robert of making cronies—I do believe that no occurrence of a trifling nature that has ever given me more cause to regret.”

When Robert contracted a lung infection, Hugh advised him to go West in hopes of regaining his health. Campbell rode a river boat down the Ohio River and arrived in St. Louis in 1824 where he was hired as a clerk by his next important contact, John O'Fallon, for whom he worked from the fall of 1824 to the summer of 1825. As a founding member of the Erin Benevolent Society, O'Fallon helped Scots-Irish immigrants find opportunities in America. Campbell's brief education, his internship with Hugh, and being literate prepared him for this new clerical position. O'Fallon, the nephew of Superintendent of Indian Affairs William Clark, had just received an appointment as the surlet at Council Bluffs in 1821 and was friends with the important men of Missouri, including the Chouteau family and Senator Thomas Hart Benton. Campbell assisted O'Fallon with procuring and delivering supplies to points along the Missouri from St. Louis to the Platte River. Campbell's health continued to decline and he still suffered from congestion and occasional bleeding in his lungs. He sought professional advice about his respiratory ailments from St. Louis physician Dr. Bernard G. Farrar, who suggested a rugged outdoor lifestyle as the best cure. Campbell obtained a reference letter from his employer and sought his fortune in the fur trade.

The St. Louis-based fur trade had begun during Spanish and French occupation, played a key role in the settlement and development of upper Louisiana, and provided the impetus for westward expansion. The Louisiana Purchase, the Lewis and Clark expedition, the Treaty of Ghent, the Transcontinental Treaty with Spain, Mexican Independence, and Missouri statehood had opened up commercial interests in the Rocky Mountain fur trade and on the Santa Fe Trail. Men such as Manuel Lisa, the Chouteaus, Andrew Henry and William H. Ashley were all trying their hand at harvesting beaver pelts that brought between $3 and $10 in St. Louis, a fabulous sum for the day. When Ashley and Henry realized that trapping parties could yield higher returns and profits than trading with the Indians, they obtained licenses to trap the upper Missouri. Newspaper advertisements seeking hundreds of “Enterprise Young Men” to ascend the Missouri and work for one to three years brought prompt responses from men like Jedediah Smith, David Jackson, William Sublette, and Jim Bridger. Unfortunately, Henry and Ashley’s firm faced repeated failures with capsizing keelboats, raiding Assiniboines and Atsinas, and an Arikara attack in 1823.

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8 Robert Campbell, “A Narrative of Colonel Robert Campbell's Experiences in the Rocky Mountains Fur Trade From 1825-1835 (St. Louis: Campbell Papers, Missouri Historical Society, n.d.).
11 Advertisements appeared on February 13, 1822 in the *St. Louis Missouri Gazette & Public Advisor*, on March 16 in the *Missouri Intelligencer*, and on March 20 in the *Missouri Republican*. Other notices ran periodically in various Missouri newspapers that spring and over the next few years like the one on January 18, 1823, that appeared in the *Missouri Gazette & Public Advisor*. 
Nearly $100,000 in debt, Ashley and Henry faced financial ruin and ended their partnership. Meanwhile, Jedediah Smith crossed South Pass, located the beaver-rich Green River basin, and established contact with the Crows, Utes and Shoshones. Ashley received the exciting news about the beaver bonanza along the Green River and about the need to supply the men remaining in the mountains. Holding a rendezvous would help Ashley avoid the loss of men and pelts to the Blackfoot Confederacy and the Arikaras on the upper Missouri, the expense of building and using costly trading posts on the river to collect and transport furs, and relying on Indians to do the trapping. Great overland caravans replaced river transportation for bringing needed supplies into the Rockies during the summer and exchanging them with mountain men and friendly Indians for fur at the summer rendezvous, which the returning men sold in St. Louis in the fall. Ashley’s innovation of trapping rather than trading enabled him and his successors (including Campbell) to dominate the northern and central Rockies fur trade for almost a decade. Moreover, the switch from trading to trapping represented an important economic change and anticipated a broader shift to corporations and markets in America by the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Campbell’s next important contacts included Ashley and Smith, who had formed a partnership in 1825. In early October, Ashley sent Smith to gather men and supplies for the following year and due to Campbell’s connections with O’Fallon, Smith hired Campbell to clerk for the Ashley-Smith firm. Smith, Campbell and their 68 men, with pack horses and mules, left St. Louis on November 1, traveling along the south side of the Missouri River before reaching Fort Riley on January 1, 1826. Due to the lateness of their start, Smith decided to winter with the Pawnee along the Republican River. Campbell and Smith impressed the Pawnee chief Ishkatupa, who insisted they stay in his lodge, and also formed a lasting friendship.

Ashley received word that the expedition had halted so he brought additional men and supplies and reunited with Smith and Campbell. Not having sufficient numbers of horses, the men took turns walking to Cache Valley in present-day Utah where they arrived in June for the 1826 rendezvous. In less than three years Ashley’s men had trapped 500 packs of beaver (50,000 pelts) worth more than $250,000 on the east coast. Ashley now had the money necessary to launch his political career so he dissolved the Ashley-Smith firm, selling his share to David E. Jackson, and William L. Sublette who formed the partnership of Smith, Jackson, & Sublette (SJ&S) on July 18, 1826. Campbell acted as witness and recorder for the transaction and agreed to continue providing his clerical services to the new company and Smith’s two new partners, Bill Sublette in particular, were the next important contacts Campbell made.

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15 Campbell, “Narrative,” 4-6. Smith’s confidence in Campbell enabled Robert to attain leadership positions very quickly in the Ashley-Smith and later the Smith, Jackson, & Sublette partnerships. Morgan, Jedediah Smith, 172-4.


17 Campbell provides one of the few records of this important transaction. Campbell, “Narrative,” 8-9. An addendum to his narrative states that in the summer of 1826 “We remained in Cache
Campbell's success in building a friendship with influential men such as Hugh Campbell, John O'Fallon, William Ashley, Jedediah Smith, and William Sublette created a network of influential contacts with connections to high-ranking military officers, government officials, financiers, and merchants. His reliable character made him a valued associate and presented him with a string of employment opportunities that helped him to become a major player in the fur trade and to earn a substantial amount of money at the same time.

Knowing the right people was not enough to succeed in the fur trade. One also had to become proficient in the diplomatic negotiations with Indians. The same integrity, honesty, and character that earned Campbell lifelong friends also won him the trust and confidence of many Indians. Campbell was adept in his relationship with Indian tribes because of his open and honest nature, and his genuine friendships with Indian leaders. Campbell's first Indian contact was with the Pawnees during the winter of 1825-1826. Ashley had unwisely sent Smith and Campbell to the Rocky Mountains from St. Louis in the late fall. Winter quickly set in on the Plains, forcing their party to take refuge at a Pawnee village on the south side of the Republican Fork of the Platte River. One third of the mules died and their 70-man party suffered greatly for want of provisions. In their situation, they consumed the Pawnee corn caches for sustenance. When the Pawnees returned from their buffalo hunt, Smith and Campbell paid them for the corn they had consumed, which impressed Chief Ishkatupa so much that he insisted the two stay in his lodge until they left a few months later to join Ashley. Ishkatupa would be the first of many Indian leaders from the Missouri to the Columbia—men like Cut Face (Shoshone), Insillah (Red Feather or Little Chief; Flathead), Bracelette de Fer (Iron Wristbands; Shoshone), Friday (Warshinum; Arapaho), Eshehunska (Long Hair, Old Burns; Crow), and Arapooish (Rotten Belly; Crow)—who would regard Campbell as a friend.

While Campbell was expanding U.S. fur interests, the British fur companies were actively working to hinder American competition and settlement to the Pacific Northwest. In 1821, the Hudson's Bay Company sent trapping brigades to the Snake River country to trap all of the beaver and create a "fur desert" as a political move aimed at keeping Americans from venturing into the Oregon Country, an area that had been under British/American joint-occupation since 1818. Hudson's Bay Company leader John McLoughlin sent out Peter Skene Ogden and a large number of proficient Iroquois trappers formerly of the NWC to once again cover the region. On May 23, 1825, one of the most notorious confrontations between British and American trappers occurred at Mountain Green, later known as Deserter's Point, near present-day Ogden, Utah. As a result, 29 men—most of them John Grey's Iroquois trappers—joined the Americans with the promise of higher wages and status as free-trappers.

After Campbell had spent a year learning the ropes from David E. Jackson, Smith, Jackson & Sublette assigned Campbell as the leader of the northern brigade, which included the Iroquois trappers who had left the HBC. Smith, Jackson & Sublette relied solely upon Campbell to uphold their interests against the HBC. Campbell readily adapted to his new role and his brigade set out to trap the Flathead country along the headwaters of the Missouri, Columbia, Deer Lodge and Bitter Root rivers. Campbell made a good impression, not only among his band of Iroquois but also among the Valley only a couple of weeks, long enough to complete the traffic with the trappers. After we left Cache Valley, Jackson and Sublette met us on Bear River. Ashley then sold out his interest in the fur trade to Smith, his partner, and to Jackson and Sublette, the new firm being known as Smith, Jackson, & Sublette." Dale L. Morgan Papers, MS 560, Microfilm reel 77, frame 1074, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Marriott Library-Manuscripts Division, in coop. with UC Berkeley, n.d.); Morgan, West of William H. Ashley, 149-153; John E. Sunder, Bill Sublette, Mountain Man (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), 64.


19 Lyndon S. Clayton, "The Role of the Iroquois in the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company and Expansion of the Fur Trade: Western Canadian Interior, New Caledonia, Columbian Enterprise and the Snake Country, 1790-1825," (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1999); John P. Reid, Contested Empire: Peter Skene Ogden and the Snake River Expeditions (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 103-13. While Ogden's brigade encamped on the river, one of John Weber's groups, under the direction of Johnson Gardner, attempted to lure Ogden's men away by promising higher wages and by claiming the British men were trespassing on American soil. The next morning a contingent of Americans waving flags confronted Ogden and told him he must leave or be driven out. Gardner's ploy worked. The Americans received 700 beaver pelts and were joined by 29 of Ogden's men. In reality, the British and Americans were both trespassing on Mexican soil and the only man possibly possessing a Mexican license, Etienne Provost, remained aloof from the conflict. Provost was but one of a number of Americans and Mexicans operating out of Taos and Santa Fe, trading and trapping in the southern and central Rockies. Jack B. Tykal, Etienne Provost: Man of the Mountains (Liberty, Utah: Eagle's View Publishing, 1989), 48-54; David J. Weber, The Taos Trappers: The Fur Trade in the Far Southwest, 1540-1846 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 49.

Flatheads and Nez Perce by honoring their request that his men not hunt buffalo in the Bitterroot Valley for a week or two. Campbell’s friendship had a profound influence upon Flathead Chief Insillah, who was among the first Indians baptized by Catholic Father Pierre Jean De Smet. Father Adrian Hoecken wrote Father De Smet from Flathead Camp in the Blackfeet country that:

Among our dear Flatheads, Michael Insula or Red Feather... is well known and much beloved by the whites, who have had occasion to deal with him, as a man of sound judgment, strict integrity, and one whose fidelity they can implicitly rely. A keen discern of the characters of men, he loves to speak especially of those whites, distinguished for their fine qualities, that have visited him, and often mentions with pleasure the sojourn among them of Colonel Robert Campbell, of St. Louis, and of Major Fitzpatrick, whom he adopted, in accordance with Indian ideas of courtesy, as his brothers.21

While returning to the Three Forks, Blackfeet attacked Campbell’s party along the Jefferson River and killed the Iroquois Chief Pierre Tevanitagon, for whom Pierre’s Hole is named.22 Following the incident, the Iroquois and freemen decided they would go no further and desired to return to the Flathead camp to spend the winter. Campbell’s hunt had been very successful, averaging 70-75 skins per man. Though he needed to remain close to keep his Iroquois trappers from British influence, Campbell traveled through deep snow to report the fall hunt results to the partners wintering at Cache Valley. As Utah, western Wyoming, and southern Idaho produced ever decreasing numbers of beaver due to the extensive trapping of the previous four years, Smith, Jackson & Sublette turned their attention northwest to Flathead country and northeast to Crow territory. Campbell’s brigade trapped the Big Horn, Wind, Tongue, Rosebud, and Powder rivers, concentrating on the area in eastern Wyoming between the Big Horn mountains and Black Hills. Part of the area he trapped in during 1828 and 1829 is now part of Campbell County.23

In 1828 Campbell led a brigade to the Crow territory along the Yellowstone and its tributaries. As they moved east, Campbell’s brigade cached 150 pelts at the junction of Little Wind and Wind rivers. A band of Crows discovered and raided their cache. Campbell confronted their chief, Arapooish, to implore him to find out who stole the pelts and have them returned to their proper owners. Amazingly, Campbell’s reputation among the Crows, particularly his friendship to the principal chief of the Crows, Long Hair (Old Burns), enabled him to get the stolen skins back.24

Campbell related “I went into that country trapping as before stated. I then went up to the Cache river at Po-po-agie, where it joins the Wind river, and made a cache there to put in my beaver. A war party of Crows that had been down to the Cheyennes and Arapahos, were returning and found my cache. They took 150 skins.” Campbell was staying in the lodge of the principal chief of the Mountain Crows, Eshehunska (Long Hair, Old Burns). Some Crow warriors brought in some scalps and held a scalp dance during which some of them recounted their exploits. “Among other things they boasted of having found my cache. The old Chief then came into my lodge and said to me ‘Have you been catching beaver?’ ‘Yes!’, I answered. ‘What do you do with it?’ asked the chief. ‘Put it in the ground,’ said I. ‘Where is it?’, he enquired. I drew a plan of the ground, where my beaver had been cached. The old chief then said, ‘You talk straight about it!’ Long Hair related that there had been no white traders among them for four years and that a war party had found Campbell’s cache and opened it, taking 150 skins. Exhibiting both integrity and charity, the chief told Campbell “Now don’t let your heart be sad. You are in my lodge, and all these skins will be given back to you. I’ll neither eat, drink nor sleep till you get all you skins. Now count them as they come in! He then mounted his horse and harangued the village, saying to his people that he had been a long time without traders, and they must not keep one skin back.”

21 Hiram Chittenden and Alfred Talbot Richardson, ed., Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre Jean De Smet, S. J. 1801-1873 4 vols. (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1905), 1231-32. In 1832, four Nez Perce Indians ventured to St. Louis to learn more about Christianity. Following their visit, Robert Campbell encouraged the establishment of missions among the Flatheads in the 1830s when he wrote on April 13, 1833, that “the Flat Head Indians are proverbial for their mild disposition and friendship to the whites and I have little hesitation in saying a missionary would be treated by them with kindness.” Cited in Hiram M. Chittenden, The American Far Trade of the Far West (1902: reprint, New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1935), 637, 902-03.
22 Campbell witnessed his first scalping when the Iroquois retaliated for the mutilation of Old Pierre by killing two Blackfeet. Campbell, “Narrative,” 16.
24 During this visit, the famous chief honored Campbell by allowing him to measure his hair, which Campbell found to be more than eleven feet long. Morgan and Harris, Anderson, 199-200. For a full account of Campbell’s negotiations with Arapooish (Rotten Belly) see Coutant, History of Wyoming; Washington Irving, Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A., in the Rocky Mountains and the Far West, Rev. ed. (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1868), 239-248.
Nearly all of the skins were returned, Campbell and Long Hair were both satisfied, and the chief broke his fast.\textsuperscript{23}

Some tribes, such as those belonging to the Blackfoot Confederacy—Blackfeet, Piegans, Bloods, and Atsinas (Gros Ventres or Grovan of the River)—did not welcome American trappers and traders because they realized the rendezvous system aided their rivals, providing ammunition and supplies to Shoshones, Utes, Crows, Flatheads, and Nez Perces. Confederacy members had benefitted from trading with the British along the Saskatchewan River and did not want to lose the advantages the British traders provided them. As hundreds of mountain men and thousands of Indians gathered to resupply and to participate in games and recreation, the presence of many trade goods and the huge horse herds served as the ultimate temptation for Plains Indians. As could be expected, several major encounters took place during the rendezvous era. Blackfeet raiders traded the horses and furs that had been stolen from the Americans with British traders for guns and tobacco. Fear of Blackfoot hostilities forced Americans to keep their brigades large enough to withstand an attack but large parties reduced trapping efficiency.\textsuperscript{26}

When Blackfeet attacked the trappers Indian allies, mountain men usually joined them in battle to support their friends. Such was the case of the two attacks at the Bear Lake rendezvous in 1827 and 1828. At the first one, a Blackfoot war party surprised and killed five Shoshones. Shoshone Chief Cut Face asked the mountain men to show their friendship and loyalty by assisting them in mounting a counterattack. William Sublette gathered nearly three hundred trappers and charged the enemy. Campbell recounts how the powder brought out in 1827 was so poor his men joked how they could pull the trigger and lay the gun down before it actually fired. In 1828, Blackfeet once again attacked Campbell’s men at Bear Lake, killing his cook. Campbell led the men to some willows for protection and after nearly four hours of fighting and with ammunition running low, Campbell and another volunteer broke through the fray and rode eighteen miles to Bear Lake where men awaiting the rendezvous came as reinforcements. The Blackfeet, correctly interpreting Campbell’s intentions, retreated before the relief party arrived.\textsuperscript{27}

The last major incident Campbell had with Atsinas occurred near Pierre’s Hole in present-day Idaho when Atsinas attacked mountain men leaving the 1832 rendezvous for the fall hunt near Teton Pass.\textsuperscript{28} The Atsinas made a fortification in the willows and fought tenaciously against the trappers and Indian allies so word was sent to the men in Pierre’s Hole of the battle and Campbell and Sublette brought reinforcements. After several more hours of fighting, during which Sublette received a shoulder wound, the Atsinas tricked the trappers into thinking a large party of Blackfeet were now attacking the unprotected men, women, and children at the rendezvous. The trappers raced back to Pierre’s Hole and the Atsinas fled under the cover of darkness. Several mountain men and Indians died and many were wounded while Atsina casualties totaled between 27 and 50.\textsuperscript{29} These attacks by members of the Blackfoot Confederacy demonstrate just how critical it was to make it through these skirmishes unscathed. Campbell was lucky and received no wounds while Milton Sublette, William Sublette, and Thomas Fitzpatrick did.

Despite Blackfeet hostilities, Campbell had befriended Iroquois, Crows, and Flatheads, and exhibited genuine friendship with Ishkatupa, Insillah, and Eshehnuska. After retiring from the mountains, Campbell served as a liaison for the government. His vast knowledge and association with dozens of Indian tribes resulted in two appointments as Indian Commissioner. The first was in 1851 when he joined Pierre De Smet, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Jim Bridger, and David D. Mitchell for the important Treaty of Fort Laramie and met with 10,000 Indians from tribes representing the Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Snake, Bannock, Crow and others on Horse

\textsuperscript{23} Campbell, “Narrative,” 21-22.
\textsuperscript{27} Campbell, “Narrative,” 19-20. Beckworth claims it was he and not Campbell who rode through the line. Delmont R. Oswald, ed., \textit{The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckworth, Mountaineer, Scout, Pioneer and Chief of the Crow Nation of Indians as told to T. D. Bonner} (London, 1892; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 101-10.
\textsuperscript{28} LeRoy R. Hafen, ed., \textit{[Warren A. Ferris] Life in the Rocky Mountains, A Diary of Wanderings on the Sources of the Rivers Missouri, Columbia, and Colorado 1830-1835, with Supplimentary Writings and a Detailed Map of the Fur Trade} (Denver: Old West Publishing Co., 1983), 222-3; The Atsina had probably taken the flag earlier when they had massacred a party of British rather than of having received it from the British as the Americans believed. W. F. Wagner, ed., \textit{Adventures of Zenas Leonard, Fur Trader and Trapper, 1831-1836} (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1904), 111-118; Washington Irving, \textit{Bonneville}, 73-80.
Creek of the Platte (south of Ft. Laramie). The Great Council lasted eighteen days and out of it grew the Treaty of Fort Laramie. After the demise of the AFC in 1865, Campbell turned his attention to try and eliminate corruption among the Indian agents on the upper Missouri and called for the abolition of the inadequate treaty system. President Ulysses S. Grant appointed Campbell to the Board of Commissioners for the Interest and Civilization of the Indians, which in 1870, established more amicable relations between the U. S. government and the Indians. 30

Campbell’s involvement in the fur trade increased during the 1830s. His intellect and courage had brought him to positions of leadership and responsibility for Ashley & Smith and SJ&S. Following the 1829 rendezvous, SJ&S entrusted Campbell to transport the furs back to St. Louis where he arrived in late August. Campbell received $3,016 for his four years of services to Ashley-Smth, and Smith, Jackson, and Sublette. 31 Fur traders Lucien Fontenelle and Andrew Drips proposed forming a threesome but Campbell declined, informing them he intended to form a partnership with his friend Jedediah Smith in the near future. Letters from his mother Elizabeth, sister Ann, and brother Hugh, along with family financial concerns finally convinced Campbell to take leave of the mountain business for a time and return to Ireland. 32

After returning from Ireland to St. Louis in July 1831, Ashley employed him in clerical work that fall while Campbell waited for his friend Smith to return from Santa Fe. 33 During Campbell’s absence, SJ&S had sold out to the Rocky Mountain Fur Company (RMFC), made up of Thomas Fitzpatrick, Jim Bridger, Milton Sublette,

30 Traveling with William Fayel (who recorded Campbell’s Narrative at this time) Campbell’s goodwill mission took him to Fort Laramie where he parlayed with Red Cloud about issues such as American encroachment into the Black Hills. Nadeau, Fort Laramie and the Sioux Indians, 161; Hiram M. Chittenden and Albert T. Richardson, eds., Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean de Smet, S. J. 1801-1873 (4 vol.; New York: Francis P. Harper, 1905), 673-75.

31 Morgan and Harris, Anderson, 272. Actual wages may have been $2,927.87 according to Ashley’s account records. Morgan, West of William H. Ashley, 198-202, 319.

32 Lucien Fontenelle and Andrew Drips to Robert Campbell, Council Bluffs, August 9, 1829. Campbell Papers, Missouri Historical Society. The pleading for Robert to leave the land of the “Blackfooted, Blackheaded and Blackhearted Savages” and to come home filled nearly every letter from his family. An example is a letter written from Hugh to Robert on November 13, 1828 saying “I conjure you to abandon it [the mountain trade]. . . Sell everything and come work with me. . . Return to civilization & Security. Do not—do not refuse me.” See also Ann Campbell to Robert Campbell, June 5, 1827, and June 11, 1829, asking Robert to return home. Campbell Papers, Missouri Historical Society.

33 Campbell wrote a letter to John O’Fallon to hear where Smith was. O’Fallon wrote back on June 30 that unconfirmed rumors reported the party had crossed the Arkansas without incident. He did not know that Smith was already killed. John O’Fallon to Robert Campbell, June 30, 1831, St. Louis. Campbell Papers, Missouri Historical Society. Morgan and Harris, Anderson, 272-3. Smith had sent Robert’s brother Hugh a letter in November 1830 and told him that he would have eight to ten thousand dollars to invest with Robert. Morgan, Smith, 323-4, 357-8.
Henry Fraeb, and Jean Gervais following the 1830 rendezvous. Smith, Jackson, and Sublette retained the right to serve as middlemen, sell the company's furs, and provide supplies at the rendezvous, provided the RMFC notified them in time. With SJ&S dissolved, Smith wanted to form a partnership with Campbell but since the latter was in Ireland, Smith purchased his own outfit and joined with Jackson and Sublette in trying his luck on the Santa Fe Trail. Unfortunately, Comanche warriors killed Jedediah Smith while he scouted ahead searching for water along the Cimarron Cutoff. \(^{34}\) Jackson and Sublette reached Santa Fe on July 4 before being joined by Fitzpatrick, who purchased supplies from the men and headed north through Taos, picking up Kit Carson and several others to help him take the supplies to the Rockies for distribution that fall and winter. Jackson and Sublette decided to end their partnership. With Jackson heading for California, Sublette returned to Missouri as the only possible supplier to the RMFC for the following year.

In October, Campbell traveled to Lexington where he met Thomas Fitzpatrick, who had just recently returned from the mountains, and William Sublette, newly arrived from Santa Fe. Together they formulated their plans for 1832. \(^{35}\) Sublette, who had just returned from the Santa Fe Trail, decided to outfit a train to supply the RMFC at the 1832 rendezvous. Robert Campbell bought his own outfit and accompanied him. Campbell employed five men and purchased ten pack horses laden with goods for his own small venture that he joined to Sublette's caravan. \(^{36}\) On April 25 Sublette received a two-year license to trade with the Indians from Superintendent of Indian Affairs William Clark, which included provisions to take 450 gallons of whiskey. \(^{37}\) Leaving Independence in mid-May, Sublette's train of some 60 men departed with Campbell bringing up the rear. Traveling up the Platte until they reached buffalo country near the Black Hills (Laramie Range), they reached the Black Hills a month later. \(^{38}\) They continued west, crossed South Pass and Teton Pass and descended into the Teton Basin, just west of the Tetons on the Wyoming-Idaho border. What was to become the largest and grandest rendezvous of the fur trade, the 1832 Pierre's Hole gathering was a gaudy affair with hundreds of men from the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, the American Fur Company, free trappers, engages, and thousands of Flathead and Nez Perce Indians. \(^{39}\)

Because of so much competition, Campbell needed to deal effectively with competition and display flexibility and innovation due to the changing circumstances. Two of the competitors Campbell faced during his decade in the Rockies were the Hudson's Bay Company and the American Fur Company. The Hudson's Bay Company's Snake River brigades had been quite successful in keeping American trappers from venturing further west than present-day Idaho. One of Campbell's successful diplomatic encounters with the HBC came in February 1828 when he and two companions traveled by snowshoes back to his men camped on the Snake River. On February 17, 1828, instead of finding his men, he arrived at the snowed-in Hudson’s Bay Company camp of Peter Skene Ogden at the confluence of the Portneuf and Snake rivers. Campbell, after traveling 44 days on snowshoes, could barely walk and needed to nurse his sore ankles. Even as a guest at a competitor's camp, Campbell was firm with Ogden, informing him that two of Ogden's trappers, Goodrich and Johnson, still owed considerable debt to SJ&S and had not been released from service and requested that they return. Ogden reminded him of the incident in 1825 when his Iroquois and a large catch of fur fell into American hands at Deserter's Point on the Weber River. Campbell used both skill and diplomacy in keeping his Iroquois trappers from defecting back to the British, in getting Goodrich and Johnson to rejoin him to repay their debts, and later in persuading the Flatheads to trade with the Americans instead of the British. \(^{40}\)

Campbell's challenge to John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company proved more difficult since the AFC was the most successful large-scale American fur company with trading operations extending from the Columbia to the Missouri. By the 1830s, they began attending the rendezvous. Following the 1832 rendezvous, the RMFC agreed to pay William Sublette nearly $16,000 to be settled the following year. Campbell arranged to

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\(^{34}\) Since Campbell was in Ireland, Smith had appointed newly elected congressman Ashley to serve as executor in the event Campbell was not present. As it turned out, both served as executors of Smith's will in the late summer of 1831. *Papers of the St. Louis Fur Trade*, Part Three: “Robert Campbell Family Collection,” (Bethesda: University Publications, courtesy, Missouri History Society, 1991-1994) reel 15, series 2, part 2, frames 44-47.


\(^{37}\) Sublette Papers, Missouri Historical Society.

\(^{38}\) Most likely this is when Robert Campbell chiseled his name on Independence Rock in Wyoming. Robert Campbell to Hugh Campbell, July 18, 1832, Lewis' Fork (Snake River). Campbell, *Roeby Mountain Letters*, 7-11.

\(^{39}\) Gowan's, Rendezvous, 73-95.

sell most of his merchandise, sent the men out on the fall hunt, and retained a few men to help him transport the furs to St. Louis.\(^{41}\) By October 3 he had made arrangements with Ashley to sell the 169 packs of beaver pelts and then he faithfully nursed his friend back to health at Sublette's Sulphur Springs ranch on the outskirts of St. Louis. While there the two discussed the developments of the past year and plotted together on how to capitalize on the future. On December 20, 1832, they formed the Sublette & Campbell firm of St. Louis (S&C) and planned their strategy to compete with their American Fur Company rival.\(^{42}\)

The early 1830s marked the heyday of the Rocky Mountains fur trade. The RMFC faced new competition from Boston merchant Nathaniel Wyeth, army officer Benjamin L. E. Bonneville, and various independent trapping parties like Gant and Blackwell, James-O. Pattie, Joshua Pilcher, Charles and William Bent, Ceran St. Vrain and others who edged in and garnered a portion of the beaver trade. With all of these new companies competing for pelts, the RMFC's returns began to diminish and even though S&C held the exclusive rights to supply the rendezvous, they realized that to survive they needed to diversify their portfolio and decided to challenge the American Fur Company on the Missouri River by building rival posts adjacent to those of the AFC. The firm saw the benefits of trading with Indians for buffalo hides in the growing robe trade. Moreover, S&C hoped to force the giant fur company to make concessions to keep the AFC stayed out of the mountain trade in exchange for S&C to withdraw from the Missouri or at least put enough pressure on them to produce a buyout.

Campbell had an insider's perspective on the fur trade, had lived through its dangers, and had contacts to procure merchandise and provide financing. With the political clout and financial resources of the Astors of New York and the Chouteaus of St. Louis, the AFC posed the most viable threat to take control of the Rocky Mountain fur trade in the 1830s. John Jacob Astor's company had recently moved west from the Great Lakes and Mississippi River regions and appeared content for a time to dominate the river trade. In 1832 the AFC decided to try its hand in the Rocky Mountains and sent out Lucien Fontenelle, Henry Vanderburgh, and Andrew Drips. Vanderburgh and Drips let others lead them to the furs and then outlasted them through cutthroat competition (ie. charging lower prices, using liquor to secure the Indian trade, etc.). Moreover, competition increased the use of liquor to gain an advantage and put competitors out of business. With so much rivalry, there were simply not enough furs to go around. With the Rocky Mountains crowded, Sublette and Campbell saw the wisdom in establishing a river trade to try and break the AFC's monopoly on the Missouri River. Additionally, S&C had the powerful political and financial backing from Ashley, now a congressman, who honored their drafts, handled their accounts, gave them cash advances at six percent interest, and sold their furs for a two and one-half cent commission.\(^{43}\) Although S&C owed Ashley upwards of $27,500, the partners had $46,750 coming from the RMFC as well as 11,000 pounds of fur to sell. They also reached an agreement to supply the RMFC at the 1833 rendezvous. Though Sublette and Campbell's ambitious undertaking to oppose the giant AFC appeared foolhardy at first glance, conditions seemed right for such a challenge. Astor, nearing 70 years old, had already contemplated retirement and 1833 marked the end of the American Fur Company's 25-year charter granted by the New York legislature in 1808. Astor foresaw a complete reorganization of the company headed by his son William in New York and Ramsay Crooks and Pierre Chouteau in St. Louis. While in Europe in 1832, Astor saw his first silk hat and recognized the beaver trade would soon decline. He saw the expedience of making profits from beaver pelts before the demand for them further diminished.\(^{44}\) Despite the AFC's apparent uncertain future, few bankers and suppliers offered S&C financial support. Undaunted, Campbell and Sublette combined their determination, experience, and confidence with Ashley's credit, business contacts, and political clout to give their opposition to Astor real promise.

Campbell and Sublette traveled east in December 1832 to learn the market conditions firsthand and to establish business contacts in Washington, New York and Philadelphia who would be willing to supply them during their forthcoming year. Yet even with Ashley's instructions and letters of introduction, few Washington money brokers willingly offered the partners assistance until Ashley made a speech in the House of Representatives praising the partners' abilities, character, and predicting their eminent success.\(^{45}\) Several bankers and

\(^{41}\) Articles of Agreement between the RMFC and Sublette quoted in Hafen, Broken Hand, 116-8.


\(^{43}\) Clokey, Ashley, 186.


supply houses took this speech to mean Ashley was reentering the fur trade and so they quickly offered Campbell and Sublette credit. Of particular assistance was Robert Campbell’s brother Hugh, now part of Gill, Campbell & Company who operated a Philadelphia store at 94 Market Street. While Campbell and Sublette enjoyed Christmas Eve at his home, Hugh agreed to supply S&C with the majority of their dry goods. Sublette and Campbell wrote Ashley requesting $2000 and informed him of their decision to go to New York for their hardware. They asked for his assistance in notifying Redtle Forsyth & Co. of Pittsburgh to get two new keelboats that would handle 18 to 20 tons. On March 8, Ashley’s New York broker Frederick A. Tracy completed the sale of Campbell and Sublette’s furs and by the end of the month, S&C had paid off all their debts and still had nearly $15,000 left over to outfit their forthcoming enterprise.\footnote{Sublette mentions Tracy gave him $176,500 at Ashley’s request. See Robert Campbell and William Sublette to General William H. Ashley, Philadelphia, December 24, 28, 31, 1832, and January 8, 1833. Campbell Paper, Missouri Historical Society.}

With their finances in order, the two partners implemented their plan. Campbell hired 25-year-old Frenchman Charles Larpenteur as a clerk, received his license to trade on April 15 from William Clark, and started west. Campbell drove along livestock–20 sheep, two bulls and four cows—the sheep to supplement their diet of bacon and hard-tack until they reached buffalo country, and the cattle to start a herd at their post at the confluence of the Yellowstone of the Missouri.\footnote{Sublette and Campbell’s trading license enabled them to trade at 33 places in Indian country for a year and a half. Sunder, Sublette, 124. Campbell’s 45-man train, with supplies valued at $15,000, moved with precision, leaving Lexington, Missouri, on April 28. Carter, “Robert Campbell,” 55. Ashley always praised his efficient co-adjutants Campbell and Sublette for a “great deal of his success in the government of his men” while he was in the fur trade and that they excelled in keeping the men under strict rules and thorough discipline. The regularity of their marches and order in their camps became adopted as the rule or code for all American traders traveling to the mountains. W. G. Eliot, Jr., 1838 memorial address cited in Morgan, The West of William H. Ashley, 317n. Larpenteur spent the next 40 years on the upper Missouri, the majority of the time as an AFC clerk. Eliot Coues, ed., Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri: The Personal Narrative of Charles Larpenteur, 1833-1872 vol. 1 (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1898), 11-67. An enjoyable account of the 1833 Campbell caravan and its members is told in Mae Reed Porter and Odessa Davenport, Scotsman in Buckskin: Sir William Drummond Stewart and the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade (New York: Hastings House, 1963), 27-28.} Due to Campbell’s organization and efficient leadership the caravan traveled rapidly, successfully beating the AFC’s supply train led by Lucien Fontenelle to the 1833 rendezvous and enforcing the RMFC obligation to purchase supplies from S&C. Rival trader Nathaniel Wyeth commended Campbell’s caravan “for efficiency of goods, men, animals, and arms, I do not believe the fur business has afforded a better example of discipline.”\footnote{Nathaniel Wyeth to Mr. F. Ermatinger, Green River Rendezvous, July 18, 1833. F. G. Young, ed., “The Correspondence and Journals of Captain Nathaniel J. Wyeth 1831-6,” Sources of the History of Oregon (1899): 69.}

The competition between the AFC, the RMFC, and the HBC, in addition to the added pressures from Bonneville and small outfits, had taken its toll and few trappers garnered any significant profits. By the rendezvous’ end, Campbell had doubled his profits by trading $15,000 in goods for fur worth at least $30,000. Campbell left to find Sublette, whom he expected to meet near the mouth of Yellowstone, taking the profitable years’ furs with him. Campbell avoided misfortune once again when his bull boat capsized and he went under the water three times before making it to shore. He arrived at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers near Fort Union on August 28.\footnote{Campbell, “Narrative,” 29; Brooks, “Campbell’s Private Journal,” 117; Terrell, The Six Turnings, 225.}

Meanwhile, Sublette boarded the steamboat Otto and with a large keelboat full of a valuable cargo of merchandise, supplies, equipment, and 30 men, set out for the upper Missouri establishing 12-13 new posts at strategic points to trade with the Sioux and other tribes and to compete with the AFC. The most important post would be located near Fort Union at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers.\footnote{The identifiable posts built by Sublette & Campbell of St. Louis include: Fort William on the Upper Missouri; a small post near Fort Jackson, sixty miles above Fort Union; a Mandan trading house near old Lisa’s Fort; a tiny post on White River near Fort Kiowa; a trading group at Crow Camp on Wind River; a post near Fort Tecumseh and Fort Pierre; and a Yellowstone post eight miles from the rivers’ mouth. Sunder, Sublette, 127n.} Upon Campbell’s arrival at the Yellowstone’s mouth on August 28, he waited for Sublette, who arrived two days later with his large keelboat full of supplies and an abundance of liquor for the Indian trade.

Campbell took responsibility of building Fort William, named in Sublette’s honor, while Sublette, his brother Milton, and nine or 10 men left in late September and floated the summer’s furs down the Missouri to St. Louis.\footnote{Coues, Larpenteur, 50n., 53.} In a letter to his mother written before Sublette left, Campbell recalled how “after both [had] travelled nearly 4,000 miles in four months” that their planning and timing enabling them to meet within two days was truly remarkable. He told her that he and his 60 men had already completed four houses in 10 days and that he expected to stay there all winter trading with the
Crees and Assiniboines for beaver skins and buffalo robes. In a letter to his sister Anne, Campbell explained his real reason for staying in the fur trade was not the excitement or love of adventure, but that his primary objective was “to make money” and “were it not this we would all endeavor to fashion ourselves to civilized life and no doubt feel ten times the happiness which we enjoy here.”

To Campbell fell the full responsibility of building his main operation post. Campbell deftly organized the men and instructed them to cut cottonwood pickets. Located two miles by land, six miles by water below Fort Union, the fort was 150 feet by 130 feet with a stockade of eighteen-foot cottonwood pickets. “The boss’ house stood back, opposite the front door; it consisted of a double cabin, having two rooms of 18 x 20 feet, with a passage between them 12 feet wide. There were a store, and warehouse 40 feet in length and 18 feet in width, a carpenter’s shop, blacksmith’s shop, ice house, meat house, and two splendid bastions.”

By November 15, only a few buildings remained unfinished so Campbell sent most of the men out to find Arapahos, Cheyennes, Crows, Sioux, and other Indian tribes to alert them of the new fort and invite them to come and trade. Shortly thereafter, a large village of Assiniboines assembled near the fort.

Campbell’s Fort William journal demonstrates that the handful of successful entrepreneurs like Campbell were not a reckless breed of men and did not fit the devil-may-care stereotype. For the most part, they were serious-minded, sober, and often religious. Campbell let his men have Sunday off and devoted time to reading the Bible, writing family and friends, and fasting. He expressed gratitude to God “for his gracious goodness in preserving me through all the dangers I have passed” and prayed for wisdom, understanding, and judgment “to lead well and incline his heart to seek after thee as the one thing needful without which all worldly gain is but dross.”

Campbell found loving his neighbor quite difficult, especially when the resourceful McKenzie at Fort Union was willing and able to drive out competition through threats, purchase, and cutthroat competition. As the chief upper Missouri outfit post for the AFC, Fort Union represented the finest, largest post for hundreds of miles. With more than 500 men employed and thousands of dollars in trade goods, McKenzie could afford to feel confident. McKenzie began driving fur prices out of Campbell’s reach, sent spies to watch and report on the activities at Fort William, used homemade liquor from his still to insure Campbell could not secure any of the Indian trade, and even stole Campbell’s favorite dog.

Of greater consequence, however, was the fact McKenzie gave his agents carte blanche permission to pay any price to secure the Indians’ furs. This costly method wiped out some of the profits, but it effectively enabled his agents to undersell Campbell on all parts of the river. McKenzie’s ploy worked and by spring Campbell only had 100 packs of buffalo robes (10 robes to the pack) while McKenzie had 430 packs.

52 Robert Campbell to his mother Elizabeth and sister Ann, Junction of the Missouri and Yellowstone, September 12, 1834; Campbell Papers, Missouri Historical Society.
53 Coues, Larpenteur, 61.
56 McKenzie paid Francois Deschamp $40 for information on the happenings at Fort William and $700 per annum for his services. Brooks, "Campbell’s Journal," 115.
57 Campbell and Sublette’s other forts also fared poorly. In addition to buffalo robes, Campbell had traded for packs of beaver (five), wolf (six), and fox and rabbit (one). Coues, Larpenteur, 59-64; Terrell, The Six Turnings, 228n.
peting vigorously at the various rival posts near the 13 S&C established, McKenzie compelled the partners to divide their forces, weakening them for their eventual overthrow, McKenzie only had to wait for his eventual victory. 58

Yet despite McKenzie’s apparent victory, the AFC desperately wanted to put the damaging publicity they received for operating the liquor still at Fort Union behind them. American Fur Company officials met with Sublette in New York in January and February for a week’s worth of negotiations that resulted in their buying out the competition. 59 In a letter to McKenzie dated April 8, 1834, AFC officials explained that they had reached an agreement with Campbell and Sublette to “keep them from purchasing a new equipment” available to them because of their esteemed reputations and the backing of Ashley. 60 The AFC agreed to retire for one year from the Rocky Mountain area with the condition that Campbell and Sublette relinquish their attempts to trade on the Missouri. Additionally, the company promised to purchase Campbell and Sublettes’ posts and their merchandise. Campbell arranged with McKenzie to sell the partners’ merchandise and Missouri trading posts, sent part of his men south to Fort William on the Laramie, and was back in St. Louis by early August. 61

Dwindling profits and the increased competition at the last few rendezvous indicated to Campbell and Sublette that the beaver trade was dwindling. For the last ten years, transporting goods from the east to supply the mountain men and hauling the 100 pound packs of beaver from the mountains to St. Louis had been the

58 The American Fur Company records are full of letters on how to crush Sublette & Campbell by paying extravagant prices to keep the robes and trade flowing to the AFC. Mattison, “Upper Missouri,” 15-16.
60 Cited in Chittenden, American Fur Trade, 354.
61 Campbell, “Narrative,” 30, 45. Campbell, “Private Journal,” 115-18; Hugh Campbell to Robert Campbell, Philadelphia, February 14, and April 5, 1834, Campbell Papers, Missouri Historical Society; Carter, “Robert Campbell,” 67; “Correspondence of Robert Campbell, 1834-1845,” edited by Stella M. Drumm and Isaac H. Lionberger, Glimpses of the Past, 8 (Jan-June, 1941): 3-65; Coues, Larpenteur, 63n; The actual contract of the transfer and reorganization was signed June 3, 1834. James L. Clayton, “The American Fur Company: The Final Years,” (Ph. D. diss., Cornell University, 1964), 152, 170-210. With the negotiations completed, a potential rival bought out, and his monopoly of the Missouri River trade restored, John Jacob Astor retired from the fur trade several months later. On June 1, 1834, Astor sold the Northern Department to Ramsay Crooks and the Western Department to Bernard Pratt, Pierre Chouteau and Company. Evidence suggests the AFC wished to engage Campbell as a partner, which, in light of the competition between Campbell and McKenzie, would have been interesting.
rule. Ashley's rendezvous system had been revolutionary, adequate for beaver skins wherein mountain men could be the chief suppliers. Now, Campbell and Sublette saw the wisdom in returning to the old, established method of trading with the Indians for fur, particularly tanned buffalo robes. They had the foresight to perceive the beaver trade was nearly over and the next big wave would be bulky buffalo robes transported east in wagons. The post trader would replace the mountain man and rendezvous system. In fact, this proved true as only five small AFC rendezvous occurred after 1834. Campbell and Sublette, therefore, made plans to establish a central trading post to control the vast interior.62

The establishment of such a post part-way between St. Louis and the fur trapping areas meant a much shorter distance for transporting supplies and furs to and from the mountains. Located just 800 miles from St. Louis and fewer than 30 days march from Independence, Missouri, a fort on the Laramie River would serve as a type of oasis in the desert, provide a storage facility for the bulky buffalo robes, and offer protection from the elements, Indian raiding parties, and rival companies. Not only would the shorter trip be less hazardous, the fort could operate year-round due to its favorable location and easy access to both trappers and Indians.

Because a large part of Campbell and Sublette's financial success depended upon Indians, location of the post was critical. The partners agreed that the second Fort William (Campbell later renamed it Fort Laramie) should be located in the heart of buffalo country at the junction of the Laramie and Platte rivers. Situated between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains, they recognized it as an excellent gathering place for a large number of Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Sioux Indians, who could come and go, bringing their furs in at any time. The site also served as an intersection of the great Platte route to the mountains, the trappers trail from Fort Pierre south to Colorado, Taos, and Santa Fe, and the only permanent post between Fort Union in Montana and Bent's Fort in Colorado and their 1834 license granted them the right to trade there.63

With the AFC out of the way in the Rocky Mountain trade, Campbell and Sublette prepared for a prosperous year in 1834. Campbell and Sublette gained a profit from the sale of their posts and supplies, but even though they had an agreement meant the AFC could not send a supply caravan to the 1834 rendezvous but Nathaniel Wyeth had already left Independence on April 28 on his way to supply the rendezvous.64 Wyeth had an agreement with Thomas Fitzpatrick and Milton Sublette to supply RMFC in 1834 but they owed Campbell and Sublette a large sum of money. The RMFC agreement

with Wyeth represented their desire to get out from under the domination of Campbell and Sublette. Sublette realized that if Wyeth beat him to the rendezvous, he and Campbell would lose out. He quickly caught up with Wyeth's train by mid-May and when he arrived at the Laramie River at the end of May, he had a three-day lead on Wyeth.65

Campbell and Sublette carried out their plans to build a fort near the confluence of the Laramie and North Platte rivers to effectively enter the buffalo robe trade of the Plains and be close enough to the mountains to supply the mountain men. About three-quarters of a mile up the Laramie River from its junction with the Platte, Sublette crossed over to the west bank and dispatched a dozen men with provisions to begin construction on the second Fort William (Laramie).66 With fewer


64 Clokey, Ashley, 196.


66 Hafer and Young, Fort Laramie, 27.
provisions to carry, Sublette moved quickly, easily beating Wyeth to the Ham’s Fork rendezvous and, since he was the RMFC’s principal creditor, the RMFC was obligated to purchase his supplies before Wyeth arrived. After affecting the dissolution of the debt-ridden RMFC, Sublette left the rendezvous on July 10, taking 60-70 packs of beaver and arrived back at Fort William [Laramie] ten days later. Sublette reached Missouri in late August with his load of furs.67

The Rocky Mountain Fur Company had a disappointing beaver hunt. Too much competition and sinking profits caused the company to dissolve. Despite Campbell and Sublette’s agreement with the AFC dividing the mountain and river trade in 1834, an AFC party under Lucien Fontenelle and Andrew Drips trapped in the partner’s territory in 1834. Toward fall, Fitzpatrick, Milton Sublette, and James Bridger joined Fontenelle and Drips, to form Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick, & Company. With the Rocky Mountain Fur Company dissolved, this new AFC controlled company purchased the mountain interests of Sublette and Campbell, including a provisional offer to buy Fort William [Laramie] the following year. In less than a year, the AFC had gained control of both Fort Williams, but Campbell and Sublette had made a substantial profit from their business dealings.68

On April 9, Robert Campbell left St. Louis for Fort William [Laramie] to transfer the fort to Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick, & Company and to bring down accumulated beaver pelts and buffalo robes. Leaving St. Louis with two companions, Campbell made excellent time, reaching the fort in May. Campbell spent 15 days finalizing the transfer arrangements with Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick, & Company. After collecting his employees’ furs at Fort William [Laramie], Campbell, Andrew Sublette and 12 companions built several bull boats to transport the 460 buffalo robes back to St. Louis. A land party took the 630 beaver pelts back on the mules Campbell had brought the supplies on.69 Robert Campbell became the first American to successfully navigate the North Platte for a considerable distance. The shallow river provided multiple dangers, but until quicksand forced him to land near Scott’s Bluff, he proceeded without much difficulty.70 Just below the forks of the Platte, Campbell encountered a hostile Arikara village. Using sign language and a gift of tobacco, Campbell got his party safely through. Traveling on the north shore, they rode their mules as fast as they would carry them until they reached the Pawnee Loup village on the Loup Fork of the Platte, passed Lucien Fontenelle’s AFC caravan and a group of Oregon bound missionaries before arriving in St. Louis in August.71

Campbell had the luck to survive dangers, the pluck to successfully compete with larger rivals, and the vision to foresee the decline of the beaver trade and the increase in the robe trade.

Robert Campbell wisely left the mountains before the beaver trade collapsed. Too many trappers relying on too few resources nearly brought the beaver to extinction. Coincidentally, the fashionable French silk hat became affordable, striking the death knell for the beaver trade. Even in 1834 when Campbell and Sublette built Fort William [Laramie] they realized buffalo hides would be the next major fur commodity. The financial panic of 1837 brought a sudden end to the high prices for fur. The dwindling beaver supply, an overabundance of competitors, and the success of Fort Hall, Fort William [Laramie], and Bent’s Fort brought an end to the rendezvous system in 1840. The qualities of leadership and enterprise that brought Campbell success in making money in the fur trade carried over into his St. Louis business affairs upon his return to civilization and he became one of St. Louis’ leading citizens and wealthiest merchants. Campbell engaged in various merchandising ventures, including real estate, invested in railroads and steamships, and mercantilism. Supplying western forts from his mercantile store in St. Louis, Campbell continued to participate in the fur trade.

In 1836 Campbell and Sublette commenced several business ventures in St. Louis. Campbell operated a general mercantile store at 7 North First Street. In addition to receiving the majority of business coming in from Santa Fe and Chihuahua, Campbell supplied explorers such as Fremont, fur companies, gold rushers and other overlanders, opposition groups to the AFC, as well as treaty presents and annual Indian annuities.

67 Sublette and Campbell had thus put down the potential threat of Nathaniel Wyeth, who, upon being beaten to the rendezvous, took his forty-one men and merchandise on to the Snake River. Wyeth’s group arrived a little above the Portneuf and Snake confluence on July 14th and began building Fort Hall. Hafen, Broken Hand, 140-43.
68 It appears that after the Rocky Mountain Fur Company (comprised of partners Milton Sublette, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Jim Bridger, Jean Gervais, and Henry Freab) dissolved after the 1834 Ham’s Fork rendezvous, Campbell and Sublette decided to focus on their St. Louis plans to settle down and “entirely withdraw from the Indian country.” Sunder, Sublette, 144.
69 Campbell recorded in a July entry about 630 beaver skins; 386 skins #1 grade, 118 #2, 30 #3, and 96 small #2. He listed 460 buffalo robes; 30-60 damaged, 50-60 painted, 15 yellow calves, about 25 rub, and 3 others damaged. Papers of the St. Louis Fur Trade, Part 3 “Robert Campbell Family Collection,” series 2: 82.
70 Campbell, Rocky Mountain Letters, 21-3.
Campbell also provided merchandise for Fort William (Laramie), Fort Kearny, the majority of goods sold at Bent’s Fort, and commodities bought and shipped by Judge William Carter at Fort Bridger. In 1855 an army officer related how Campbell’s name was good for any amount of money and more highly valued than government currency.

Campbell’s reputation as the leading financier and main competitor to the American Fur Company and the Chouteau coalition emerged. As historian John Sunser wrote, “to upper Missouri fur trade investors in St. Louis and the East, Campbell represented anti-Chouteau capital in its purest form.” Through thrift, sound judgment, and persistence, Campbell used his financial assets and political connections effectively and continued to prosper from the fur trade from his St. Louis operation base, only now it was buffalo hides rather than beaver pelts that garnered high profits. Campbell continued to antagonize the American Fur Company throughout the 1840s, 50s, and 60s. He provided the financial backing for Alexander Harvey and Charles Primeau in the late 1840s and 50s to challenge the AFC on the upper Missouri. Harvey, Primeau & Co. built Fort Campbell on the opposite bank of the river from Fort Benton. Fort Campbell did a surprisingly good business in buffalo robes and garnered about half that of Fort Benton. For a time, the firm of Robert and William Campbell (no relation) continued operations until Robert’s brother Hugh joined him in St. Louis in 1859. A year before, former St. Louis mayor John F. Darby honored Campbell as one of the 31 pioneers in business who helped build St. Louis. St. Louis historian J. Thomas Scharf said that Robert Campbell “did as much perhaps as any other single individual to give St. Louis her early fame in the far West” and was “for nearly a half century a conspicuous figure in St. Louis business and social circles, and in every relation of life was eminently worthy of the regard in which he was universally held.”

While Campbell never enjoyed the mountain man lifestyle, he willingly faced the dangers to earn money. He put the capital to use in his St. Louis business ventures and was a courageous leader who displayed exemplary character and shared his considerable wealth with others. A very successful entrepreneur, Campbell lived to become a millionaire. He owned a handsome mansion on Lucas Place (now a museum, located on 15th and Locust Streets), as well as a great deal of real estate in Missouri and Illinois. His story provides an important connection of the economic development of half a continent and a closer look at the forces which projected St. Louis as the crossroads to trade, empire, and the western movement and illuminates the life of an enterprising young pioneer who helped open the West through the search of furs and profits.

It was during this time that one of Campbell’s clerks at his St. Louis store abbreviated “Fort William, on Laramie River” to “Fort Laramie.” The mistake caught Campbell’s attention and he recognized it as the proper name for the fort. Robert Morris stated, “Mr. Campbell changed the name of the fort. I have this fact from Mr. Campbell himself.” Campbell carried on a significant amount of correspondence with Fort Laramie’s post sutlers Seth Ward, William Bullock, and John Hutton. Agnes W. Spring, ed., “Old Letter Book,” *Annals of Wyoming* 13:4 (1941), 239n, 237-330; Coutant, *History of Wyoming*, 301-02.


The author, a native of Lyman, Wyoming, is assistant professor of history at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, where he specializes in the history of the American West, Native American history, and the history of 19th century America. He holds the PhD in history from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.