Frémont-Preuss and Western Names

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AT THE THRESHOLD OF THE DELINEATION of the territories between the Mississippi and the Pacific Ocean stand the three Frémont expeditions of 1842, 1843–1844, and 1845–1846. Government expeditions like those by Lewis and Clark and Zebulon Pike, many trapping expeditions, especially the one sent by John Jacob Astor to the mouth of the Columbia in 1812, and the journeys of Jedediah Smith had given the people of the United States a glimpse of the vastness and richness of the lands included in the Louisiana Purchase, the Oregon Territory, and the northern provinces of Mexico.

With Frémont the systematic and scientific exploration of the West started. Associated with him was a trained German topographer and cartographer, Georg Karl Ludwig Preuss, or as he signed himself, Charles Preuss. "The map that Preuss drew of this expedition [1843–1844] altered the entire course of western cartography," states Carl Wheat in his classical account of the cartography of the western United States.[1]

Preuss drew three great maps in addition to numerous smaller maps and sketches. The first, published in 1845, accompanied Frémont's *Report of the Exploring Expeditions to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842 and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843–1844*; the second, published in 1846, bore the title *Topographical Map of the Road from Missouri to Oregon*; the third is entitled *Map of Oregon and Upper California*, published in 1848. Since Preuss was only an assistant and the name Frémont appears prominently on the imprints of all three maps some confusion as to the classification of the maps has developed. Libraries list the map of 1845 as Frémont's and those of 1846 and 1848 as Preuss' maps; unfortunately Carl Wheat perpetuates this error in his book. In

[1] Carl I. Wheat, *Mapping the American West*. American Antiquarian Society, 1954.

California Place Names I preferred to give Frémont and Preuss as joint authors.[2] There is no doubt that Preuss constructed the first two maps entirely, and the map of 1848 chiefly, on the basis of topographic sketches made in the field. On the other hand, Frémont was responsible for the creation of the maps and supplied many of the astronomical and geodetic data as well as much of the geographical nomenclature.

Place-naming is an essential part of map-making. We can not imagine a map on which the orographic and hydrographic features are not labelled. Indeed, a name once placed on a map will endure, although it might have been placed there by mistake or might be purely imaginative. When Cabrillo sailed along the coast of California in 1542 he saw the Santa Lucia Mountains covered with snow and called them Sierra Nevada. Probably no other explorer ever again saw snow on the coast ridges, and certainly for the next two hundred years no white man beheld the range which is now called Sierra Nevada. But the name stayed on the maps for a mountain range or some other orographic feature, and when Padre Crespi finally saw the mighty mountain range in 1772, the name had been known for centuries and the cartographers had only to identify the name with the range. The name Buenaventura for an imaginary river flowing from the Rocky Mountains through a gap in the Sierra Nevada to the Pacific Ocean made Frémont believe in the existence of such a river almost until he reached New Helvetia in February of 1844 – just because it was shown on the maps in his possession.[3]

On the other hand, when the great pathfinder Jedediah Smith traversed the west in the 1820's he bestowed a great number of geographical names, including many Indian names. Hardly any have been preserved. Why? Smith died before he had a chance to construct and publish the maps of his travels.

The first of Frémont's western expeditions, with Preuss as topographer and cartographer, lasted from June to October 1842

[2] Erwin G. Gudde, *California Place Names*. University of California Press, 1949.

[3] "Forming, agreeably to the best maps in my possesion, a connected water line from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, I felt no other anxiety than to pass safely across the intervening desert to the banks of the Buenaventura..." (Frémont, December 11, 1843). – The name with a date refers to Frémont diaries in the *Report of the Exploring Expeditions...*, first published as a U.S. Senate document in 1845, but repeatedly reprinted. Recently edited by Allan Nevins and published by Longmans, Green & Company, in 1956.

If explorers ever had a chance to bestow geographical names, it was Frémont and Preuss. But their contributions to geographical nomenclature amount to very little. One is almost inclined to say that their achievment during the first expedition, as far as nomenclature is concerned, was to march from Westport to the Wind River Mountains, climb what Frémont believed was the highest elevation of the Rocky Mountains, name it Fremont Peak, and return.

To be sure, Frémont and Preuss travelled along a well-known road and many geographical features had been named by the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1803–1806, or by traders, trappers, and emigrants who had travelled along the Oregon Trail. Nevertheless many streams and mountains had remained without a name, and in other cases the identity of the names was very questionable. Under date of July 12, 1842, Frémont complains, "I had great difficulty in ascertaining what were the names of the streams." Apparently it never occurred to him that he had a perfect right to do some naming himself, especially since he knew that Preuss would produce a useful map which would perpetuate the names. Spanish navigators often deliberately disregarded existing names along the Pacific Coast in the belief that the perpetuation of "their" names would add to their prestige as explorers. No such thoughts were apparently in the minds of Frémont or Preuss.

Even more astonishing it is that no attempt was made to ascertain the Indian terms of geographical features. In a book which Frémont doubtless knew, Washington Irving's *Astoria* (1836) the author complains, "We cannot but pause to lament the stupid, commonplace and often ribald names entailed upon the rivers and other features of the great West, by traders and settlers," and he considers it a worthy object to publish maps with all the Indian names which could be ascertained. Frémont himself states on August 27, 1842, "The names given by the Indians are always remarkably appropriate." Yet, in his diary he mentions only one such name: "a small creek [tributary to the Kansas], called by the Indians *Mishmagwi*"[4], and Preuss has on his map, covering the long stretch to the Rocky Mountains, exactly three Indian names for creeks: *Wakarussi* and *Nemahah*, tributaries to the Kansas, and *Kioway*, a tributary to the South Fork of the Platte.

[4] Frémont p. 10.

Outside of Fremont Peak only four, all commonplace, names were given by the expedition. On the upper Platte a break through the mountains was called *Hot Spring Gate* because there was a hot spring near by; *Goat Island* was so called because of the presence of mountain sheep; *Island Lake* because there was an island in the lake; *Pass of the Standing Rock* because a rock had fallen off the cliff and stood upright in the pass.

Otherwise Frémont and Preuss adhered strictly to existing names, and where no name could be ascertained the feature was left nameless. However, their efforts to ascertain existing names constitutes a definite contribution to western place naming. The streams which form the Kansas River were called by Lewis and Clark Republican, Solomons, Grand Saline, and Smoky Hill forks. Preuss by adopting these names perpetuated them. If we still have some French-Canadian names along the route it was due to the fact that Preuss placed the original version on the map: the tributary of the Platte still called *Loup Fork* was so labelled by Preuss while Lewis and Clark had the American version, *Wolf River*. In other cases, however, the French version was disregarded: *Fer-à-Cheval* became Horse Shoe Creek.

In May, 1843, Frémont and Preuss started out on their second, more ambitious expedition. It stands to reason that this trip had to be more productive for geographical nomenclature simply because of the vast territory covered. Yet again, it is astonishing that not more than about two dozen original names were applied on a four thousand mile trip, of which several hundred miles at least were through unknown territory.

On the route from the Missouri to South Pass in Wyoming, the same as covered in 1842, only one new name was added: a tributary to the Republican Fork of the Kansas River received the grand and original name Prairie Dog River.

When the party approached Great Salt Lake Frémont had a chance to place a really interesting name on the map, a name, to be sure, which had been anticipated by other travellers. The action of a geyser near Beer Spring on the Bear River: "is accompanied by a subterranean noise, which, together with the motion of the water, makes very much the impression of a steamboat in motion; and, without knowing that it had been already previously so called, we

gave to it the name of *Steamboat spring.*"[5] A few days later he had another chance to bestow a name of his own to a little stream emptying into Salt Lake. He did not enrich Western American nomenclature by it. He added only another commonplace descriptive name, the kind that even at that time existed by the thousands in the country: "We named the stream *Clear Creek*".

On September 9, 1843, Frémont used for the first time an incident name for a geographical feature: "We ferried with our miserable rubber boat to the next island [of Great Salt Lake] which Frémont baptized *Disappointment Island* because he expected game there but did not find it. None of the rest of us were so crazy as to expect that on a bare rock without trees or water."[6] Preuss failed to record the name on his detailed map of the Great Salt Lake and on modern maps the island is designated as Fremonts Island.

A few more new but insignificant names are mentioned in Frémont's diaries of the next months: *Fishermen's Camp* (north of Webers Creek at Great Salt Lake) because the place looked "picturesque," or *Fall Creek* (tributary to Snake River) because of the many falls. Not until October 13, 1843, does he record a new name which belongs to the big names in the United States: "the *Great Basin* – a term which I apply to the intermediate region betw. the Rocky Mts. and the next range [Sierra Nevada], containing many lakes with their own system of rivers and creeks, (of which the Great Salt is the principal) and which have no connexion with the ocean, or the great rivers which flow into it."[7]

About the same time Preuss placed on his map the names of two of the larger falls of the Snake River west of Fort Hall: *American Falls* because a number of Americans drowned here a few years before, and *Fishing Falls* because "before the falls the fish rise in such multitudes that they [the Indians] can pierce them with their

[5] Frémont, August 25, 1843.

[6] Preuss, September 8, 1843. – The name with a date refers to the diaries of Charles Preuss, to be published in the *American Exploration and Travel Series* of the University of Oklahoma Press.

[7] This statement was doubtless inserted when Frémont edited his journals after the return to Washington. He failed to delete his later references to the Buenaventura River. The existence of a water course from the Rocky Mountains through the Sierra Nevada would have excluded the existence of a "great basin" whose rivers have no connection with the ocean.

spears without looking."[8] The falls are now called Salmon Falls, probably because the name for nearby Salmon River had been in use earlier.

On November 13, 1843, Frémont again made use of an incident to name a bay near the cascades of the Columbia River. A German botanist, named Lüders had lost all his equipment in a canoe badly handled by Indians. Frémont named the place, "a spot of smooth water," *Lüders' Bay.* At the same time he named another bay *Graveyard Bay* because of the presence of an Indian cemetery.[9]

From the Columbia River the expedition turned south with the intention of turning east at Klamath Lake, crossing the desert in order to reach the mythical Buenaventura River and march along its banks back to the Rocky Mountains. In travelling parallel with the Cascade Range both Frémont and Preuss remark in their diaries about the high snow covered peaks which served as milestones – but neither thought of making use of the explorer's privilege of naming these peaks. On the map are recorded only the names of the three peaks which had been current for some time: Mount St. Helens, Mount Hood, Mount Jefferson. The others are left nameless.

After turning east from Klamath Lake the party came upon the headwaters of a river recognized as a branch of the Sacramento. Preuss labelled the stream properly *Headwaters of the Main Branch of the Sacramento River.* Unfortunately, later cartographers disregarded this and called the stream Pit River, a name given to the lower course of the stream. Thus we have here, as with the Mississipi and Missouri, the geographical anomaly that a tributary between its source and the confluence is much bigger and longer than the main stream. It would have been easy to reach New Helvetia by following the course of Pit and Sacramento rivers but Frémont was still in "full expectation of reaching [the non-existing] Buenaventura River."[10]

From here to the crossing of the Sierra Nevada we have a number of original place names simply because the route followed was off

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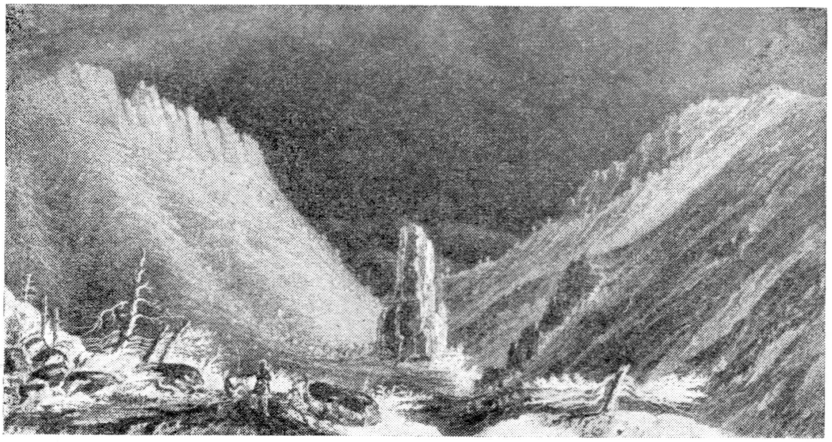
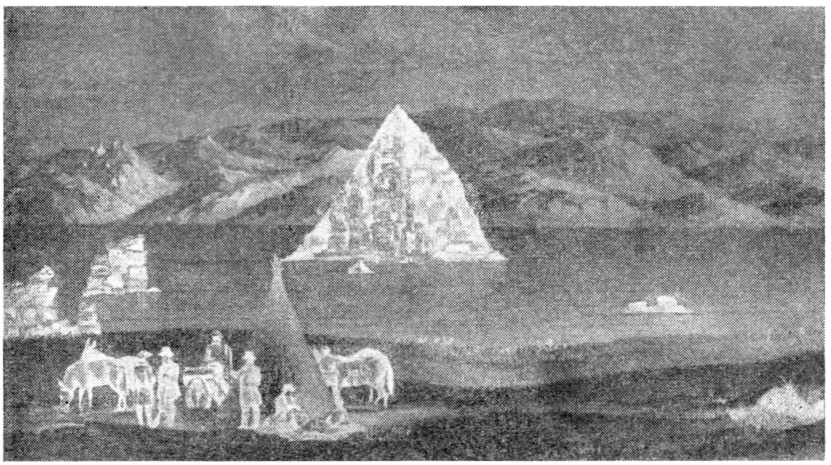
[8] Preuss, October 2, 1843.

[9] Frémont, November 13, 1844.

[10] Frémont, November 18, December 11, 1843; January 3 and 17, 1844.



Pass of the Standing Rock



Pyramid Lake

the beaten track.[11] On December 16th, the party crossed a mountain spur which formed a sort of climatic divide: "Shivering on snow three feet deep, and stiffening in a cold north wind, we exclaimed at once that the names of *Summer Lake* and *Winter Ridge*, [both still so-called] should be applied to these two proximate places of such sudden and violent contrast."[12]

On December 20th the party came upon another lake and here Fremont for the first time bestowed an honorary name: "I gave to it the name *Lake Abert*, in honor of the chief of the corps to which I belonged."[13] The important chief of the Corps of Topographical Engineers deserved a better geographical monument than a lake which contained "stinking salt water"[14] and which today is hardly more than a lake bed.

The dismal Christmas of 1843 was celebrated by naming a lake *Christmas Lake* now on some maps designated as Warners Lake. Then the party turned south again, bestowing the names *Mud Lake*, *Great Boiling Springs*, and *Pyramid Lake*. The latter was so named because a rock in the lake "presented a pretty exact outline of the great pyramid of Cheops."[15] These names are still in use, but the river between Pyramid Lake and Lake Tahoe is no longer known by Frémont's name Salmon Trout River.[16] It is now called Truckee River.

While crossing the Sierra Nevada in February, 1844, Frémont and Preuss ascended a high mountain and were the first white men to behold one of the most beautiful mountain lakes in the world, Lake Tahoe. It seems incredible that this beautiful sight inspired neither to bestow upon it a name worthy of its grandeur. On the big map the lake is left nameless and on the special sketch of the Sierra crossing, Preuss labelled it with the meaningless name *Mountain Lake*. It is interesting that Frémont mentions the Indian

[11] To be sure, they heard many Indian names (Frémont, May 23, 1844), but besides Klamath Lake neither Frémont nor Preuss recorded any of them.

[12] Frémont, December 16, 1843.

[13] Frémont, December 20, 1843.

[14] Preuss, December 21, 1843.

[15] Frémont, January 13, 1844.

[16] "It teems with the most magnificent salmon trout" (Preuss, January 15, 1844). "...this beautiful stream which we naturally called the Salmon Trout River." (Frémont, January 16, 1844).

word *tahve* which, years later, after many tribulations served to name the beautiful sheet of water.[17]

After having accomplished the arduous task of crossing the rim of the Sierra Nevada somewhere between Carson and Luther Pass and then recuperated in Sutter's hospitable Fort, the party moved south. Their intention was to cross the mountains into the Great Basin via the Walker Pass, named by Frémont for Joseph R. Walker, who had first crossed it. The names of many of the important rivers of the interior valley of California were properly applied upon Sutter's information and have been retained until the present day, except that Preuss mistakenly labelled the Tuolumne *Rio de los [l] Merced.* Preuss felt obliged to give the Spanish version of the streams because they were in Mexican territory. For some reason, however, *Rio Estanislao* is Americanized to *Stanislaus River.*

Besides giving the proper Spanish names to the eastern affluents of the San Joaquin River, the party applied one new name in California which has become of great importance: *Mohahve River.* On the 23rd of April, 1844, they were marching along a "considerable river," which dwindled away and was finally lost in the sand. It was the *Arroyo de los Martires* of Padre Garces, later known as *Rio de las Animas*; named by Jedediah Smith *Inconstant River.* The river did not enter the territory of the Mohave Indians whose habitat was on both sides of the lower Colorado. However, Frémont met on the same day a group of roving Mohave Indians, who gave him valuable information. This induced him to call the river after them although it was not within Mohave territory. Today the name cluster which developed in the California section of the Great Basin after Frémont had named the river, is spelled Mojave, while the name cluster at the Colorado, named directly for the tribe, is spelled Mohave.

Only one other name bestowed by Frémont on the return march is of historical interest. The spring at the station *Archilette*, about fifty-five miles west of modern Las Vegas, was called *Agua de Hernandez* and was placed on the map as *Hernandez' Spring*, in commemoration of a Mexican murdered there by Piute Indians.[18]

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[17] See the entry "Lake Tahoe" in Gudde, *op. cit.*

[18] Frémont, April 29, 1844. – Called Resting Spring on modern maps.

Otherwise the party left only a few more commonplace names behind: *Lake Fork* (now Kings River), *Pass Creek* (now El Paso Creek in the Tehachapis), *Rock Creek*, *Beautiful Camp*, *Beaver Dam Creek*.

In the spring of 1845 Frémont started on his third expedition, which involved him in the Mexican War and the conquest of California. Preuss did not accompany him this time but after his return in 1847 Frémont supplied the cartographer with the data of his expedition including a great number of place names, for Preuss' map of 1848.

On this expedition it seemed to have dawned on Frémont that he had an explorer's privilege of bestowing names upon physical features not previously named, and this time he made liberal use of it.

First of all he honored the men who were associated with him. Edward M. Kern, the topographer and artist of the third expedition, was commemorated in *Kern River*, and this name developed into one of the most important name clusters in California. Another member of this expedition, Richard Owens, captain of a company of the California Battalion and Frémont's "secretary of state" during the latter's short reign as governor of California, was honored in *Owens Lake*, *Valley*, and *River*. The names of the two guides, Kit Carson and Joseph R. Walker, and those of a number of minor characters are found in numerous geographical features, especially in California and Nevada. Preuss' name is not among those honored in Western geography, except possibly *Preuss Valley* in southwestern Utah, a name found on modern maps. Whether Frémont deliberately slighted him or whether Preuss was too modest to put his own name on his own map is hard to say.

Frémont also bestowed a number of geographical names in honor of his Washington friends and backers, but this naming was of little consequence. Most of Frémont's political friends were Southerners while most of the surveyors and mapmakers who followed Frémont were abolitionists. *Rhett Lake*, for Robert Barnwell Rhett, at that time congressman and later instrumental in the secession of South Carolina, became Tule Lake; *Poinsett River*, near Mt. Shasta, for Joel R. Poinsett, Secretary of War, 1837–1841, disappeared from the maps. *Mt. Linn* in Tehama County is not the

same mountain which Frémont named for Lewis F. Linn, 1833–1843 senator from Missouri.

In honoring fellow explorers Frémont put one great name on the map: *Humboldt River*, *Lake* and *Range* in Nevada. The river had been vaguely known as Mary's or Ogden's River. Frémont took the opportunity to honor the great German who was, and still is, considered the pioneer of scientific exploration. At the same time, Frémont tried to christen the great lake of the Sierra Nevada in honor of Humboldt's companion on his South American expedition, the French botanist, Aimé Bonpland. The name would probably have survived, if the friends of Governor John Bigler (1852–1856) had not succeeded in re-naming the lake in his honor.[19]

In trying to honor the French-American explorer, Jean N. Nicolette, once Frémont's superior, by changing the name of Sevier River and Lake in Utah to Nicolette's name, Frémont violated an unwritten law: geographical names which are well established and recorded on maps can be changed only for very important reasons. Sevier Lake was not only well-known and clearly identified by traders and trappers, but Frémont himself had used the name repeatedly and Preuss had recorded it on his map of 1845. Furthermore, up to then Frémont had scrupulously, even pedantically adhered to this unwritten law. What made him commit this blunder while hundreds of unnamed mountains, streams, valleys, prairies were at his disposal? The critics of Frémont who picture him as moody and unstable have here an additional argument in their favor. Frémont's name was naturally not accepted by later cartographers.

The greatest and best-known original name which Preuss placed on his map at Frémont's suggestion was the name for the entrance to San Francisco Bay – *The Golden Gate*. Frémont bestowed the name *Chrysopylae* to the entrance in the spring of 1846, two years before the discovery of gold, in analogy to *Chrysoceras*, the Golden Horn of Constantinople.[20] He foresaw the day when a rich commerce would pass through the entrance to the harbor of San Francisco like that which had for centuries passed through the narrows

[19] See footnote 17.

[20] John C. Frémont, *Geographical Memoir upon Upper California* (Washington D.C., 1848), p. 32.

between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Preuss cautiously put *Chrysopylae* or *Golden Gate* on his map and the American version naturally won out.

Another new name – new as far as North America is concerned – appeared on the map of 1848: *El Dorado. El Dorado*, 'the gilded one' was the name of a mythical Indian chief in the tableland of Bogotá but designated now a golden utopia. Preuss just finished the map when the intelligence of the discovery of gold near Sutter's mill had reached Washington. Thus he was able to place on the map the legend *El Dorado* or *Gold Region* along Feather River and the South Fork of the American River – the first map to record the gold fields.

The three Frémont expeditions have enriched the geographical nomenclature of the western United States by a few great and important names, as well as a number of smaller names. Considering the important topographical and cartographical pioneer work done by Frémont and Preuss and the immense distances covered, the number of original names bestowed was comparatively small. Of greater importance was the fixation of numerous previously existing names. With a few exceptions the names which Frémont used in his *Report* and which Preuss placed on the maps were accepted by later cartographers. The continual reprinting of Frémont's journal and the wide distribution of the maps – the United States Senate ordered 50,000 copies of Preuss' third map printed – assured the permanency of most of the names used by the explorers. Great names, including Great Salt Lake, the Sierra Nevada and many others, did not originate with Frémont and Preuss but were preferred by them and thus given permanency. The spelling of many names, to be sure, appear different on later maps. Frémont made the attempt, at least in a number of cases, to approximate the native pronunciation of Indian names: *Wallah-Wallah*, *Wallahmath*, *Tlamath*, *Tsashtl*. These names are now Walla Walla, Willamette, Klamath, Shasta.

It is also worth mentioning that three foreign generic terms became naturalized in western North America by the Frémont expeditions. The French terms *butte* for an isolated low mountain, and *fourche* for a tributary or branch of a river, and the Spanish term *cañon* for a narrow defile or gorge of a creek or river.

Today the geography of the West is filled with buttes, forks, and canyons.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the Frémont expeditions rendered a service to Western geography by taking off the map the name Buenaventura. This name, as mentioned above, stood for a great river supposed to flow from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. Preuss was apparently convinced that this river did not exist – at least he makes no mention of it in his diary. The more romantic Frémont clung to the belief of the existence of such a river until the solid chain of the high mountains of the Sierra Nevada convinced him of his error. Except for occasional use of the name for the Sacramento and the Salinas the name now disappeared from the maps.

Orinda, California

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Cape Nome, Alaska. "When the M S chart of this region was being constructed on board H.M.S. 'Herald' attention was drawn to the fact that this point had no name, and a mark (?name) was placed against it. In the hurry of dispatching this chart from the ship, this? appears to have been inked in by a rough draughtsman, and appears as Cape Name, but the stroke of the 'a' being very indistinct it was interpreted by our draughtsman here as C. Nome, and has appeared with this name ever since. — This information is from an officer who was on board the 'Herald' when the chart was being constructed." (Hydrographic Department, Admirality, London, to George Davidson, August 9, 1901).