

# TRAILS to RAILS: John Mix Stanley *and the Pacific Railroad Survey of the 1850s*

In the mid-1850s the US Government conducted surveys for the United States Pacific Railroad seeking routes for a transcontinental railroad line across the American West. The collected results, published as *Reports of Explorations and Surveys to Ascertain the Most Practicable and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean*, represent the first attempt at a unified, geographical description of the West. The report includes prints from sketches by eleven artist-explorers, including John Mix Stanley, commissioned to visually record the terrain, native inhabitants, flora, and fauna of the surveys from first-hand perspectives.

The printed lithographic images numbered over 650 plates and the final reports amounted to twelve large volumes. The lithographs were hand-colored in combinations of brown and black, green and black, and sometimes blue, with each individual color applied separately using a lithograph stone. Of the eleven artist-explorers, more of Stanley's images are found in the publication than any other—he not only completed his own works of art, but finished sketches begun by other artist-explorers as well.

The map below shows the various routes of the explorers through the Western United States. In total, five major surveys were commissioned: a Northern Pacific Survey, St. Paul to Puget Sound; a Central Pacific Survey, St. Louis to San Francisco; two Southern Pacific Surveys, Oklahoma to Los Angeles and Texas to San Diego; and a Pacific Coast Survey from San Diego to Seattle. John Mix Stanley was a member of the Northern Pacific survey headed by Isaac I. Stevens, Governor of the Washington Territory. None of the exact routes charted in these expeditions would be used in building the transcontinental railroad, yet the artist-explorers produced iconic early images of the West that played a key role in the attraction and expansion of the region—from the forging of trails to the construction of rails.

