

“The Best Mountain Road in the West”

In 1857, Congress funded construction of the Fort Kearney–South Pass–Honey Lakes Wagon Road (Lander Road), marking the government’s first efforts to boost western emigration and fulfill its “Manifest Destiny” through road construction.

During the summer of 1857, Frederick W. Lander’s team of engineers surveyed 3,000 miles of potential routes in 90 days. Lander selected a northerly route with plenty of grass, water, and timber that crossed fewer streams than the existing Oregon and California trails.

“[A]ll routes examined are supposed . . . to favor the ox team immigrants [sic] and water and grass must be found at short intervals of distance.”

Frederick W. Lander

The next summer, laborers, engineers, and surveyors assembled for the hard work of road-building, constructing nearly 230 miles. His team finished construction in 1859. As many as 13,000 emigrants used the new road that year.

“A Strict and Firm Man”



Born in 1822 to a prominent Massachusetts family, Lander became a respected engineer by his early thirties. He surveyed and oversaw construction for a section of the Pacific Wagon Road known today as the Lander Road. Mount Lander in the Wind River Range and the town of Lander, Wyoming also carry Lander’s name.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

ALBERT BIERSTADT accompanied Lander’s 1859 expedition and sketched scenes, from which he later created paintings. Works created from his trip with Lander helped establish Bierstadt as an important American landscape artist. ALBERT BIERSTADT (1830–1902), THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS, LANDER’S PEAK, CHROMOLITHOGRAPH, 1869, 21 3/16” X 34 9/16”. AMON CARTER MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, #1968.40