

Alexander Majors

Founder, Pony Express
1814-1900

by Daniel Coleman

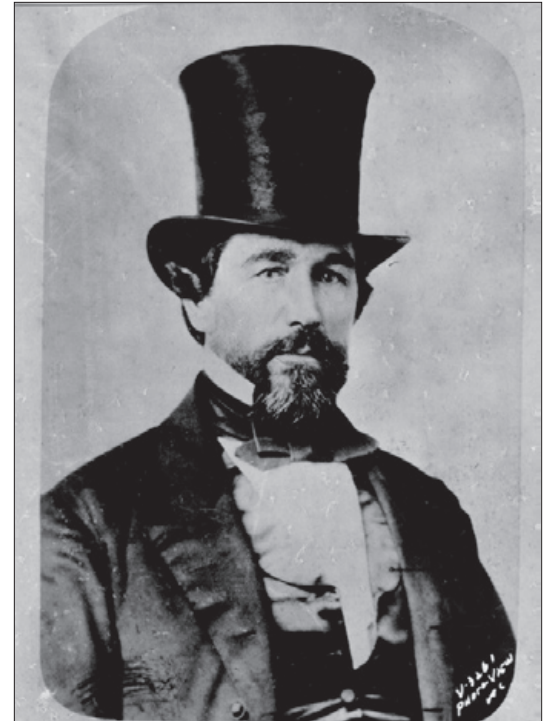
Alexander Majors was born in Simpson County, Kentucky, in 1814, near the town of Franklin. His family traveled to Missouri when he was four, in the very earliest days of settlement. They lived first in Lafayette County and in 1825 moved to an area near Fort Osage, then the furthest western outpost of the U.S. Army. The family later moved to Cass County, and in 1834, Alexander Majors married Katherine Stallcup and began farming near the Grand River there.

Majors began trading with the Potawatomi Indians in 1846, traveling to their reservation lands near present-day St. Mary's, Kansas. In 1848 he took his first wagon train from Westport to Santa Fe, turning a profit of \$1,500 for the approximately 90-day round trip. He soon moved closer to Westport, constructing a stately home for his family that still stands at 8201 State Line Road, and over the next decade built a commercial empire along the Santa Fe and California Trails.

In the peak years of the mid-1850s, Majors partnered with William H. Russell and William B. Waddell to manage freighting operations involving over 1,000 men, 5,000 wagons, and 40,000 oxen. In addition to running general stores, meatpacking plants, banks, and hotels, the firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell was the chief supplier of the U.S. military in the West.

These contracts made Majors Kansas City's first millionaire, and his business played a crucial role in the development of the city itself. For instance, Majors made a practice of unloading steamboat deliveries of westward-bound government supplies on the landing at the foot of the Missouri River bluffs several miles directly north of Westport, instead of the more commonly used Wayne City landing site near Independence. With the heavy use of Majors, and others who sought to emulate his success, this "Westport Landing" area, near today's City Market, became the original town site of Kansas City, Missouri.

Majors and his partners, however, overextended themselves financially and geographically and left the firm vulnerable to



devastating misfortunes. They sustained heavy losses during raids on three large wagon trains of provisions intended for U.S. forces combating the Mormon uprising in Utah in the late 1850s, and severe weather one winter killed over 1,000 head of cattle.

The firm was already deeply in debt when, in the winter of 1859, the impulsive Russell promised a U.S. senator that the firm could establish a faster line of direct mail delivery to California than any other then operating. The resulting Pony Express conducted letters between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento, California, in 10 days—11 days faster than the competition. While the skill of its legendary riders, including a young William “Buffalo Bill” Cody, made it a practical success, the project was a financial disaster. When the transcontinental telegraph link was finally made, rendering the service obsolete just 18 months after it started, Alexander Majors’ fortune was gone. In a few years his wagon trains were replaced by railroads, another new facet of a modernizing the West.

Majors died in Chicago in 1900, struggling to make ends meet on proceeds from his autobiography. He is now recognized as having played a crucial role in the growth of Kansas City and in the Pony Express, pulling off one of the most remarkable feats in United States history.

Sources

Lamar, Howard R., ed. *The New Encyclopedia of the American West*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Majors, Alexander. *Seventy Years on the Frontier*. Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1893.

“Three Partners Sacrificed Fortunes and Names to Found Pony Express.” *The Kansas City Times*, 3 April 1940, D1.

“‘Uncle Ben’ Majors Tells of His Father, a Hardy Pioneer Who Became Kansas City’s First Millionaire.” *The Kansas City Star*, 9 Jan. 1927, C1.

White, David A. *News of the Plains and Rockies, 1803-1865*. Spokane, WA: Arthur H. Clarke Co., 1996-2001.

© 2007