

Military Expeditions and Botanical Collections in the West--John C. Frémont and the Sacramento River Massacre of 1846

Bill Helmer, Independence, CA; Bristlecone Chapter, CNPS; M.A. Geography, CSU, Chico; email for references at amargosa23@gmail.com

Many familiar plants in California have been named for John C. Frémont, the controversial explorer, military commander, and free agent provocateur during the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848. Examples found in California are *Fremontodendron californicum* (California Flannel Bush), *Layia fremontii* (Tidy Tips), and *Populus fremontii* (which I call the Heart-leaf Cottonwood instead of the Fremont Cottonwood).



John C. Frémont, 1856 print, possibly from a promotion of his campaign as the Republican Party's first candidate in 1856, Library of Congress

Recently, a meticulously referenced book by Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe* (Yale Univ. Press, 2016), documented atrocities committed by Frémont and his Party in the spring of 1846 while in Alta California of Mexico. Partly because California Native Plant Society's board of directors decided to change the name of their journal from *Fremontia* to *Artemisia*.



FIGURE 1. Frémont's route in California, 1845-1846. Map depicts Native territories within the context of the Mexican claim of Alta California and the Oregon Country disputed by the United States and the United Kingdom until the Oregon Treaty of June 15, 1846. After crossing what is now Donner Pass in 1845, Frémont first went to Monterey in March 1845, and then north to Oregon in May, then returning south to Monterey again in July 1846 during the Mexican-American War.

In early April 1846, members of Frémont's expedition, including Kit Carson, found River Nomlaki (Central Wintun) or Yana families processing salmon near the confluence of the Sacramento River and Battle Creek, near present day Cottonwood. Although Frémont may not have been with this party, he allowed his men to massacre two hundred or more individuals under the false pretense that the American settlers were in danger and that their request for help was being honored.

Of course, this area was occupied by Indigenous nations who did not accept any unknown group claiming their ancestral lands through the right of force, whether it be Spain, Mexico, or the United States. Indigenous resistance was everywhere, but there was no cultural background to prepare any of the tribes for the Euroamericans' unprecedented cruel and relentless violent attacks with advanced lethal weapons.

Despite this history of genocide, the Nomlaki (Central Wintun), Yana, River Patwin, and Klamath Tribes still remain in their ancestral territories, protecting the land and continuing their unbroken cultural heritage:

Paskenta Band of Nomlaki Indians
P.O. Box 709
Corning, CA 96021
Website: <https://paskenta-nsn.gov/>

Grindstone Indian Rancheria of Wintun-Wailaki Indians
P.O. Box 63
Elk Creek, CA 95939
No website

Round Valley Indian Tribes of the Round Valley Reservation
77826 Covelo Road
Covelo, CA 95428
Website: <https://www.rvit.org/>

Redding Rancheria
2000 Redding Rancheria Road
Redding, CA 96001
Website: <https://www.reddingrancheria-nsn.gov/>

Cachil DeHe Band of Wintun Indians of the Colusa Indian Community
3730 Highway 45
Colusa, CA 95932
Website: <https://www.colusa-nsn.gov/>

Kletsel Dehe Band of Wintun Indians
P.O. Box 1630
Williams, CA 95987
Website: <https://www.kletseldehe.org/>

Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation
P.O. Box 18
Brooks, CA 95606
Website: <https://www.yochadehe.org/>

Klamath Tribes
P.O. Box 436
501 Chiloquin Blvd.
Chiloquin, OR 97624
Website: <https://klamathtribes.org/>

Why are so many plants named after Frémont? The connection was John Torrey, the eminent botanist of New York and Princeton, who was the recipient of many of Frémont's plant collections during his Western expeditions of 1842, 1843-1844, 1845-1846, and 1853-1854. Torrey, along with Asa Gray and Sereno Watson of Harvard University, were the first to classify Frémont's collections and sometimes named plants in Frémont's honor.

Frémont's 1845-1846 expedition to Mexican Alta California was different from past explorations in that its primary purpose was military, and any scientific rationale was secondary. Yet Frémont had a genuine interest in botany since his earliest expeditions in the upper Mississippi River basin in 1830s with the German botanist Karl Geyer, and he routinely conducted plant collections along the Sacramento River in 1846 while simultaneously initiating search and destroy missions against the indigenous people that he encountered. Frémont's campaign of terror in the Sacramento Valley and southern Oregon was a calculated, genocidal strategy to clear the region of native resistance so that the more sparsely populated Mexican population could be more easily conquered by the American settlers who worked on or owned Mexican Ranchos.

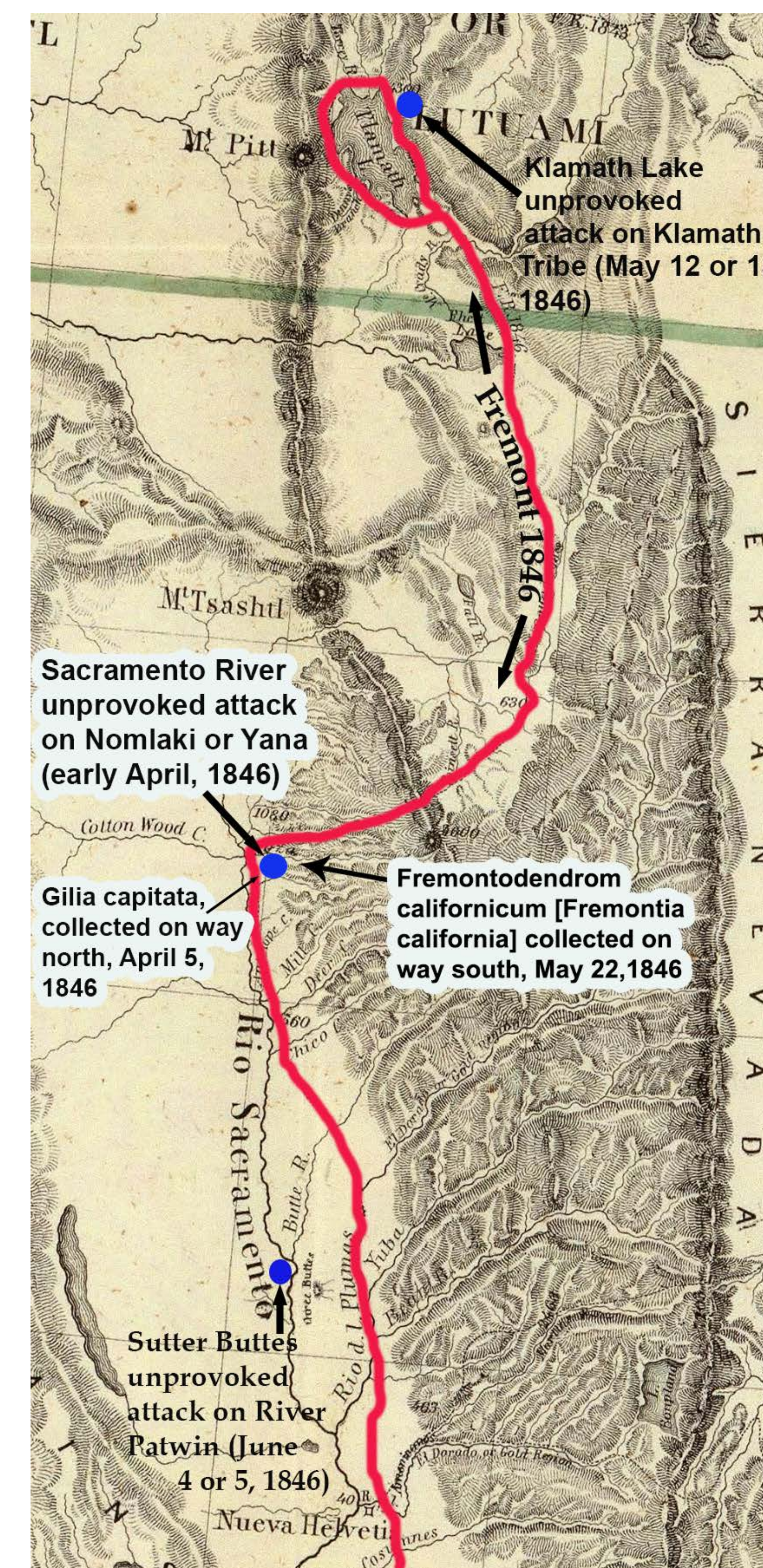


FIGURE 2. Frémont's route in northern California and California and Southern Oregon, depicting massacre and plant collection sites. Base map by Charles Preuss.



Fremontodendron californicum (Flannel Bush), California, photo by Raelynn Noel



John Torrey, 1840, Harvard University Library



Gilia capitata (Blue field gilia); California, photo by Jason Matthias Mills

On April 5, 1846, Frémont collected "A pretty little blue flower—fragrant—abundant on the prairies—*gilia capitata*--April 5 (Torrey 1846: # 241)."



Frémont Cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*) [Paiute, *sūnabi*] in the in the Alabama Hills [mögahu'pina (Paiute)]. The common name can be changed to Heart-leaf Cottonwood.