

The First American Ascent of Mont Blanc

THE HOWARD MANUSCRIPTS

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DR. JEREMIAH VAN RENSSELAER and his friend, William Howard, received their degrees in medicine in 1817 from the University of New York and the University of Maryland, respectively, and left soon afterward to visit the medical centers of England and the Continent, following this with the Grand Tour.

In the spring of 1819 they journeyed to Italy and ascended both Aetna and Vesuvius. Returning over the Simplon in the early part of July they reached Geneva and Chamonix, where they made various excursions to the glaciers and conversed with old Dr. Paccard and the local guides, among whom was Jacques Balmat—styled by Howard “The Columbus of Mont Blanc.”

As a result their curiosity was aroused and, on July 12, 1819, they stood upon the summit of the Monarch of the Alps. To be sure, they required twelve hours on the previous day to reach the Grands Mulets from Chamonix, and passed an uncomfortable night in a tent constructed of sheets. On the day of their ascent they reached the Grand Plateau with difficulty, and in mounting the “Ancien Passage” it was feared that Howard would be compelled to return. But at half-past twelve they were on the summit and remained an hour and a half, the weather being fine but very cold. They spent a second night at the Grands Mulets, and reached Chamonix with sunburned faces and eyes so inflamed that they had to ride to Geneva in a darkened carriage. But they were young then, and Mont Blanc was still a great adventure.

This was the first American ascent of the great white mountain, and Howard's letters from Geneva were printed at Philadelphia in the *Analectic Magazine*¹ for May, 1820, as “A Visit to the Summit of Mont Blanc, in a letter from an American Traveller to his Friends in the United States.” When Howard returned to Baltimore the revised account was published, in April, 1821, in a little book entitled, “A Narrative of a Journey to the Summit of Mont Blanc, made in July, 1819.”²

¹ New series, vol. i, 375-400.

² Baltimore (Fielding Lucas, Jr.), 12 mo., pp. 49, one plate; reprinted in *A.J.*, xxxiii, 13; republished by Lucas Brothers, 1856.

Van Rensselaer had not let his pen rest idly. While at Antwerp, in September he corresponded³ with the editor of the *Vaderlandsle Letteroeffeningen* in regard to the ascent, but nothing appears to have come of it. While still at Geneva he had written to Professor Silliman in New Haven, and in November, 1820, the *American Journal of Sciences and Arts*⁴ contained a narrative entitled "Account of a Journey to the Summit of Mont Blanc."

The ascent by Howard and Van Rensselaer, if one includes that of Dr. Paccard and excludes those by Chamonix peasants, was the eighth; and the narratives which they wrote were the first printed descriptions in America of the ascent of an alpine snow-mountain. These accounts have taken their place in mountaineering literature, and received due attention from Mathews,⁵ Montagnier⁶ and other students of alpine history. The present paper deals with the future activities of these men, whose biographies hitherto have been neglected; and with manuscript material, recently brought to light, concerning their ascent of Mont Blanc.

Jeremiah Van Rensselaer was born at Fort Crailo, the old family mansion in Greenbush, New York, on August 4, 1793, and graduated from Yale with the class of 1813, receiving his M. D. from the University of New York four years later. After his return from the European tour he began practice in New York City, following a period of apprenticeship in the office of his uncle, Archibald Bruce, then professor of materia medica and mineralogy, where his many-sided ability soon became evident. He was for many years secretary of the New York Lyceum of Natural History, before which he presented his "Essay on Salt," and in 1825 published a "Treatise on Geology," which was well received. During the period 1820-41 he contributed eight papers to the *American Journal of Sciences and Arts*, covering a wide range of scientific subjects. He became associate lecturer on geology to the Athenaeum (the name of William Howard appears in the list of patrons), and a director of the American Academy of Fine Arts; while among the numerous honors conferred upon him were membership in the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Royal Academy of Sciences at Naples.

³ Letter in author's collection.

⁴ Vol. ii, 1-11; translated in *Bibliothèque Britannique, Sc. et Arts*, Genève, 1820, xiv, 219-34.

⁵ *Annals of Mont Blanc*, 121; *A. J.*, xxv, 608 ff.; Dübi, *Paccard wider Balmat*, 271.

In 1840 he visited Rome and remained in Europe for three years, resuming practice in 1843. In 1851, after more than thirty years of medical activity, he retired and, with the exception of periods spent in European travel, lived at Greenbush until his death⁶ on February 7, 1871. Van Rensselaer was married twice: to Charlotte Foster, of Boston, and to Anne Ferrand Waddington, of New York, who survived him by more than twenty years.

Two portraits have come down to us: one, a miniature⁷ by an unknown artist, painted about the time of Van Rensselaer's return from the first European journey; the second,⁸ done by Terry, of Rome, apparently in the summer of 1841.

William Howard was born in 1793, the fourth son of Col. John Eager Howard (1752-1827), who fought at Germantown, Monmouth and the Cowpens, became Governor of Maryland (1788-91), was elected to the Senate, and became a candidate for Vice-President in 1816.

William's birthplace was the family homestead, Belvedere, where in 1826 the possibility of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad was first discussed—a matter which was to influence the future course of his life. Family tradition relates that Dr. Howard entered upon the practice of medicine in Baltimore, in 1820, after returning from his tour with Dr. Van Rensselaer, but had the misfortune to lose his first patient, a friend whose life he strove in vain to save. He thereupon withdrew from medicine, although he continued as adjunct professor of anatomy in the medical school of the University of Maryland, his alma mater, where he worked under Dr. J. B. Davidge during the winter 1820-21.

His interest in mathematics now became predominant, and he resigned to enter the service of the U. S. Government engineers. He became actively concerned in the locating of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, being appointed one of three to examine the country and determine the route.⁹ He was also locating engineer for the Chesapeake and Ohio canal.

In 1828 he published a "Report of the Survey of a Canal from the Potomac to Baltimore," and in the following year the Franklin

⁶ Obituary in *Am. Medical Record*, April 1, 1871. See also F. B. Dexter, *Yale Biographies and Annals*, 1805-15; sixth series. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1911.

⁷ In the possession of his grandson, Mr. Peyton J. Van Rensselaer, New York.

⁸ In the possession of Mrs. A. Courtland Van Rensselaer, Massachusetts.

⁹ Scarf, *Chronicles of Baltimore*.

Institute of Philadelphia brought out his "Specification for an Improvement in Locomotive Engines."

In 1828 he married Rebecca Ann Key (1809-80), daughter of Philip Barton and Ann Plater Key, by whom he had an only son, William Key Howard, who served in the Civil War.

In September, 1829, Howard came to Philadelphia and took steamboat to New York (then requiring twenty-two hours), and several days later voyaged to Albany on the steamer "North America," being somewhat delayed by the vessel grounding. His journey continued from Schenectady by packet-boat to Utica, Rochester and Buffalo. Thence onward by steamboat to Sandusky, to load passengers and goods, and to Detroit, where he dined with Governor Cass on October 8. On October 14 he was at Pigeon Prairie, and two days later at the mission at St. Joseph's, whence he proceeded to the shore of Lake Michigan and returned to Chicago.

His little diary¹⁰ ends abruptly at this point, and the reason for this journey, an extended one for that time in America, is not stated, although one may surmise that it was for the purpose of examining inland waterways.

Howard got together an immense private library,¹¹ covering all branches of science and literature. When it was sold, after his death, there were included with it his "Surgical Instruments for Amputating, a pair of Duelling Pistols by Mortimer, and 20 dozen Madeira and Sherry Wines and Curacao, and Maraschino, &c." It is not without interest to discover that among the books were the following: "La Nouvelle Héloïse," Saussure's "Voyages" (4to.), Auldjo's "Ascent of Mont Blanc," Coxe's "Switzerland," Ebel's "Traveller's Guide through Switzerland," "Lettres sur la Route de Genève a Milan," Leuthold's "Cent Vues Suisses," a "Carte du Mont Blanc," and twelve copies of his own "Ascent to the Summit of Mont Blanc." For its time this was an unusually good alpine collection.

Dr. Howard's untimely death from causes which cannot now be ascertained occurred in 1834. His likeness is preserved in a

¹⁰ Collection of the American Alpine Club, presented by Mr. C. R. Howard.

¹¹ "Catalogue of the Splendid Library and Philosophical, Chemical and Astronomical Apparatus, of the late Dr. William Howard, to be sold at Auction, commencing on Wednesday, Dec. 10th, 1834, at 10 o'clock. . . . The sale will take place at No. 175 Baltimore Street, over the clothing store of Mr. S. T. Walker. Grundy & Co., auctioneers." (Library of Congress.)

youthful portrait,¹² apparently of the English school, painted abroad during the course of his journey with Van Rensselaer.

Several years ago, when comparing Howard's book with the text of his paper in the *Analectic Magazine*, I came to the conclusion that both accounts must have been based on a journal. Only recently I discovered that the manuscript was still extant, in the possession of his grandson, Mr. W. Key Howard, of Virginia, who has kindly permitted me to examine it.

In addition to the manuscript, there is a sketch-book with rough drawings, made on the Riviera, the Rhine and elsewhere. Howard wrote in this from time to time, copying chemical formulae, details of various machines and scientific apparatus which interested him. On the flyleaf of the book is the autograph of his guide,¹³ who inscribes his name *Marie Coutet fils, guide a cha Mo Nyx*.

There is a tantalizing remainder of an expense account for Chamonix, the page being torn down the middle and the marginal half lost. All that can be made out is that Howard and Van Rensselaer bought milk and gloves, paid the guides a *pourboire*; and made a note to purchase a new thermometer—as they had the misfortune to break the one loaned them by Dr. Paccard.¹⁴

Howard then jotted down the graphic notes of the ascent, which follow:

"Set out from Chamouny Sunday, July 11, at 5 o'clock—at 10 began to cross the glacier of Boisson—danger—cracks—cross ladder—narrow ridges—cracks deep—stone long time falling—arrive 5 o'clock grand mulet—surrounded by ice—9 guides—found water—cold 4° above freezing Reaumer.

"Monday, 3 o'clock, left grand mulet—ascent difficult—grand plateau—breakfast—snow good—steepest ascent—steep slopes along side of which we walked on footsteps cut with axe—ended in a

¹² In the possession of his grandson, Mr. C. R. Howard, Virginia.

¹³ Couttet was the son of Saussure's old guide and, at the time when Howard and Van Rensselaer employed him, had been three times to the summit of Mont Blanc. In 1820 he was nearly killed in the Hamel accident, but lived to accompany Erasmus Galton on his ascent in 1850. Besides Joseph Marie Couttet, Howard and Van Rensselaer were accompanied by David Couttet, Eugène Couttet, Pierre Carrier, Alexis Devouassoux, Mathieu Balmat and three others.

¹⁴ "Dimanche 11 Juillet, 1819. 2 Américains avec 9 guides sont allés coucher aux Grands-Mulets. Arrivés le lendemain au sommet du Mont-blanc à midi 20, descendus à la Montagne de la Cote le même jour—ils ont cassé mon thermomètre—c'étoit Mr. William Howard du Baltimore et Dr. Vanransselaer de New-York des Etats d'Amérique." (From the *Paccard Journal*.)

precipice—so that a slip would have brought us to bottom—extremely fatiguing—gasping for breath, relief from vinegar and water—last only 10 or 12 steps without halting to gasp—rock—reach top—extremely cold in wind—sheltered warm—sun bright excessively—sky dark indigo blue—thermometer at freezing in sun.

“Arrived at top 12½—view around injured by clouds—all the highest alps at our feet—staid top 1½—descend much easier though full as dangerous—at grand plateau sun brighter than ever—below snow soft—sank up to thighs every 2 or 3 steps—descent to grand mulet extremely fatiguing—reaching it, however, at 5½*—rest—arranged our tent—charcoal fire—not so cold as last night.

“Tuesday—set out 4—crossed the glacier—snow hard—tracks of chamois—got to Chamouny 10½, the lower part of our faces one sore—eyes much inflamed.”

“*—Saw below a bridge of snow over a deep precipice, we had crossed day before, tumble in.”

The manuscript of the book, which is to be distinguished from the preceding notes, in a little red-morocco volume, is written in Howard's fine hand. Dated Geneva, July 22, 1819, it is entitled a “Journey to the Summit of Mont Blanc, July, 1819,” and begins, “My dear Mother . . .,” concluding, “Your affectionate son, Wm. Howard.” The frontispiece by Howard is a wash-drawing of “Mont Blanc, from the Lac de Chede, distant 9 miles,” while further on is the sketch entitled, “Passing a crevice in the Glacier of Boissons,” which differs in the number and position of the climbers from the illustration in the printed book. At the end is a map, done in sepia, apparently original, “Mont Blanc, with the path to its Summit.”

The manuscript is substantially the same as the text of the printed book and, for that reason is not reprinted here.¹⁵ At the end, however, is a summary which confirms the figures of time required in the ascent, as follows:

Recapitulation

Sunday, July 11, 1819—Left Chamouny for Mont Blanc—passed the glacier of Boisson, arrived at 5 P.M. at the Grand Mulet, where we slept.

¹⁵ The full text will be found in *A. J.*, xxxiii, 18.

Monday, 12—Reached the summit of Mont Blanc half an hour after noon, remained an hour and a quarter—returned to the Grand Mulet, where we passed the night.

Tuesday, 13—Returned in the morning to Chamouny—remained in bed till the evening.

Wednesday, 14—Returned to Geneva.

Van Rensselaer survived his old companion by thirty-seven years, and seems to have had no further interest in mountaineering, although, later on, he enjoyed relating his experience to his children. But this was characteristic of the times, and Howard appears to have had more of the climbing instinct than was usual. While he admitted that "we have purchased perhaps too dearly the indulgence of our curiosity," he was quick to add that "the difficulties are past and the gratification remains."

Howard and Van Rensselaer were men of giant mind, approaching genius, which in no wise detracts from our remembering them as the first American conquerors of Mont Blanc.