THE PHYSICAL FEATURES OF THE UNITED STATES.

IN describing the physical features of a country, we have to consider the skeleton or framework of mountains to which its plains, valleys, and river system are subordinate, and on the direction and elevation of whose ports its climate is in a very degree dependent.

The skeleton of the United States is represented by two great systems of mountainous ranges or combinations of ranges— one forming the western, the other the eastern, side of the framework by which the central portion of our continent is embraced. These two systems are the Appalachian ranges and the Cordilleras. These systems are of very different importance to the district that may be properly considered—the total breadth of the complex of ranges will be, in its maximum, over 1,000 miles.

The Cordilleras are a part of the great system or chain of mountains which border the Pacific coast of both divisions of the American continent, and forms its dominating and most interesting feature. In South America, however, the chain—there called the Andes—is comparatively more regular, but on the other hand, exceedingly elevated. It is also remarkable in the way in which it hags the coast, forming a lofty wall, as it were, on the Pacific side of the continent, and being that the cause that there are neither harbors nor navigable rivers on that side, and, besides, giving rise to extraordinary peculiarities of climate at its western base. The chain is also remarkable for the grandeur of its volcanic manifestations; its highest points being sublime volcanoes— which, however, are gradually losing their power, and approaching the dormant, or even the extinct, condition.

The Andes rise at the Equator, and almost disappear, so that a salient of little less than 48 miles in length, and having an elevation of only 6,464 feet at its summit, there unites the two oceans. From the latitude of the north, the ranges rapidly in elevation, and through Central America and Mexico become more and more complex in character, while the volcanic cones which are separated along their axes again increase in altitude, and at the same time their manifestations. Two of these cones— Popocatepeti and Izalco— are the culminating points of North America, being the only summits which surpass 17,000 feet in altitude.

From Mexico the system of the Cordilleras enters our territory, still widening and gaining in complexity. Just above the northern border of Arizona, along the parallel of 35°, occurs the greatest depression of the Cordilleras existing anywhere north of southern Mexico; here the continent may be traversed without rising to an elevation of over 2,000 feet. The country along this line is a table-land, with many short and broken ranges of no great altitude built upon it, but deeply excavated by numerous cataracts, as the narrow valleys of the streams are, in the Cordilleran, universally called, and of which that of the Colorado river may be taken as the type. On this basin there is a transverse east and west line of volcanoes, similar to that which traverses Mexico; these grand volcanic cones, of which San Francisco Mountain is the tallest and best known, rise to nearly double the altitude of the plains on which they are built up.

The greatest width of the Cordilleras is along the line passing from the vicinity of San Francisco, by Great Salt Lake, to Fort Laramie, or between latitudes 38° and 42°, which is included—as they may properly be—the total breadth of the complex of ranges will be, in its maximum, over 1,000 miles. The whole area embraced within the mountainous belt which we call the Cordilleras may be relatively from the plateau, as seen from the western side, to an elevation of from 4,000 to 6,000 feet above it. Right through the centre of the Wasatch passes the Union Pacific Railway, by name of one of those deep gorges which cut the range almost to its base, and with the aid of which it would have been almost impossible to traverse the continent, whereas now this latitude, except by anaremos detour either to the north or the south.

Between the Wasatch and the Rocky Mountains is the most elevated portion of the great continental plateaus, which embraces the basin of the ‘Paria’ beginning with the San Luis Park, and ending with the so-called Larimer Range, which, with the South, Middle, and North Parks, from a plateau, traversed by spurs of the Rocky Mountains, and having an elevation of from 8,000 to 12,000 feet above the sea-level, the highest portion being in latitude 42°, along the northern edge of the South Park, from which there is a gentle decline in both directions. The great freshwater Tertiary plateaus of southeastern Wyoming belong to the same lofty plateau, and it is over these that the railroad passes, keeping always at an elevation equal to, or in places even greater than, that of the summit of the Sierra Nevada on the line of the Central Pacific Railroad.

The only well-defined range between the Wasatch and the Rocky Mountains is the Yellowstone; and this is the only high and well-marked chain in the Cordilleras which has an east and west trend. South of the Yellowstone is a region of tremendous cataracts, rugged and almost incomparable where the streams—branches of the Colorado—have worn down their beds in the soft, horizontally-stratified rocks, in the most surprising manner, so that the region is one which almost entirely forbids all passage through it.

Between the Wasatch and the Sierra Nevada there are a number of nearly parallel ranges, which have a direction a little east of north and west of south, and are generally long, narrow, and precipitous. These ranges rise from a base of 4,000 feet high, to nearly that, and run obliquely across from the Sierra Nevada to the Humboldt River, which marks the limit of their extension toward the north. Beyond this, we strike the southern edge of the Irregular volcanic plateau which covers in large a portion of central Oregon and Washington Territory, as well as of southwestern Idaho, northern Nevada, and northwestern California. Rising to a considerable height above this volcanic plateau is the range of the Blue Mountains, which lies to the west of Snake River, in eastern Oregon, and which is perhaps less known than any other chain of mountains within our limits.

To the west of Snake River are groups of broken ranges, which have here yet received names, and which have been but little explored, although they have been for years the scene of much, or less successful, gold-seeking.

Here it may be remembered, that the central portion of the Cordilleras, or that embraced in the belt of States and Territories lying between, and including, Colorado and California, has become very much better known than the regions to the north and south. With the publication of the work of the various State and United States surveys which have been going on adjacent to the line of the Overland railroad, we shall soon be placed in possession of quite detailed maps of the region in question, while the extremes southern and northern portions of the Cordilleras, within our limits, have, as yet, received but a scanty share of attention.

The height above the sea-level of the various ranges of mountains indicated above

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* The name “Cordilleras” has been proposed for the valley, and is gradually coming into use, as a substitute for the former term, ranges west of the Rocky Mountains, which is now considered as an erroneous term when applied to the Cordilleras.

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THE PHYSICAL FEATURES OF THE UNITED STATES.

now demands a brief notice. The most elevated portion of the range is on the
highest region of the plateau, or in the belt which extends from California to Colorado. The
height of the Sierra Nevada is near the junction of 38°27' and lies on the kames of
over 14,000 feet, while the passes have an elevation of not far from 13,000. The culminat-
ing points of the Sierra, Mount Whitney, falls a little short of 14,000 feet, the latest meas-
urement giving 14,386 feet as its height. From here towards the north the range declines
greatly, and, from the railroad to the base of the peaks, the rise is only 14,000 feet or
less. At Lassen's Peak there is a great break in the range, which, indeed, may, indeed,
be said to have an end. Beyond this, the Sierra and the Cascade range assume rather the
form of a plateau, on which, however, several great volcanic cones have been built, tilt-
gleing with Shasta and continuing with Pilot, Hood, Adams, St. Helena, Rakoule, and
Baker. Of these, Shasta and Rakoule are the highest, and of almost exactly the same
altitude, if the results of the latest measurement of the former by the United States Coast
Survey are to be depended on, differing as they do by no more than 2,000 feet from the
former cone by the United States Coast exploring expedition.

The highest points in the Rocky Mountains are none of them, so far as known, quite
equal in altitude to the highest in the Sierra Nevada; but while there are only a few
peaks in the last-named chain which exceed 14,000 feet, there are in the Rocky Mountains
a very large number which range between 14,000 and 15,000, their differences of altitude,
in fact, falling within the limits of horizontal error of measurement, so that a long time
must elapse before they can be arranged according to their relative rank. It is, indeed,
one of the most curious facts, in connection with the different mountain groups of the
Confederacy, that the dominating peaks are so nearly of the same height.*

The culminating points of the Walthum, Uinta, and East Humboldt ranges will, it
is believed, not exceed 13,000 feet in elevation; but no definite statement has yet been
published in regard to these mountains by the chief of the "Fortieth Parallel Survey,"
and without observations they have been examined and measured.

The drainage of the region enclosed by the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra
Nevada is very remarkable. Owing to the great elevation of the central portion of the
plateau, the streams rising on the western slope of the range which crown on the eastern
edge of the range. The rise of the Cordillera have to find their way to the sea by means of long
detours to the north and south. The sources of these streams are in the Wind River range,
where the Colorado, the Columbia, and the Missouri head.

In the higher portion of the west triangular area embraced between the two great
rivers that divide the western slope of the Rocky Mountains lie the Great Basin, which
includes almost all the State of Nevada, as well as the western portions of Utah. Here
the amount of rainfall is very small, and the evaporation rapid, so that the streams grow
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forms a broad, moderately undulating plain, having a width of from ten to eighteen miles. This valley is, beyond a doubt, one of the most favored parts of our country; climate, soil, and natural features may with propriety be given in regard to that portion of the chain.

The subdivision of this eastern group of the Appalachians is necessarily rather artificial, for the mass of elevations is very irregular in its development. The most continuous range is that of the Green Mountains, but they are divided into a number of smaller branches. The most notable is the Green Mountain range of Vermont, which extends from the Connecticut River to the Canadian border. This range is about 125 miles long and 25 miles wide, and is characterized by its steep sides and rugged peaks.

The Appalachian Valley, or Kittatinny Valley, as it is usually called, stretches across Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. It is a long, narrow valley, having a width of from ten to eighteen miles, and is characterized by its steep sides and rugged peaks.

The Appalachian Valley is dotted with lakes. The highest points of the Laurentian range, as these mountains are called, are Mount Mansfield in Vermont (4,430 feet), and Mount Mansfield in Vermont (3,450 feet), and Mount Mansfield in Vermont (3,450 feet), are the highest points.

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called, is supposed to be where the Saguenay cuts the chain, and 4,000 feet is given as the approximate elevation, while peaks in the parallel ridges nearer the St. Lawrence exceed half that height. Among the summits seen with such picturesque effect from Goshen, Mt. St. Anne is the highest, and is given by Hayashi at 7,287 feet.

This range falls off in elevation as we follow it westward, and in the country between the Ottawa and Lake Huron the highest summits do not exceed to 2,000 and 1,700 feet. The range is made up of rounded hills, densely wooded, almost exclusively with coniferous trees on its higher portions. Its valleys are very wide and full of great ponds and lakes, so that one may traverse almost the whole region with the aid of the birds canons. At Sir William Logan remarked, in 1816, over a thousand lakes have already been laid down on the maps of the Canadian portion of the Laurentian Mountains, although the region has been as yet only imperfectly explored.

We have thus rapidly sketched the most striking features of the great ranges of mountains which form the frame-work of our territory, and have now to say something of the interior region thus enclosed. And the most noticeable facts in regard to this vast area are its slight elevation above the sea-level and the general plain-like character of its surface. These conditions are well illustrated by the statement that at Cairo, the junction of the Ohio and the Mississippi, we are 1,700 feet below the mouth of the last-named river, and yet only 315 feet above the sea-level. At Pittsburgh, the head of the Ohio proper, 925 miles further up, we have attained an elevation of only 629 feet. Going to the opposite direction, or following up the tributaries of the Mississippi and Missouri, which come in from the west, we have a similar condition of things. One may travel up the Platte or Kansas for hundreds of miles, rising so gradually and imperceptibly that the country seems all the time a level plain. From Council Bluffs to the source of Lodge Pole Creek—a distance of 1,600 miles—the average elevation is only two feet.

The Great Lakes, those vast expansions of the upper waters of the St. Lawrence, are among the grandest of the geographical features of the North American continent. They are remarkable for their immense area and uniformity of elevation above the level of the sea, and the consequent elevation above the sea-level which they afford for commercial intercourse between the States on their borders. Their combined area is equal to a little more than 90,000 square miles of surface. Erie, Huron, and Michigan are nearly on the same level, the expanse of the waters which form these lakes being only about 10 miles wide.

The dividing ridge between the Great Lakes and the waters flowing into the Mississippi and its tributaries is also everywhere low, and at the lower end of Lake Michigan it is so trifling that only a small amount of excavation has been required to cause the waters which formerly flowed into that lake to run towards the Gulf of Mexico. Lake Ontario is, indeed, 311 feet lower than Lake Erie, about half the descent from one to the other being made in one single portion of the vast body of water, forming a strait which, in all probability, is more than any river in the world.

The level and fertile region of the Mississippi Valley is prolonged towards the southwest, around the Gulf of Mexico, and far into the interior of Texas, where it finally passes into the elevated, barren plateau of the Llano Estacado.

From such facts as those above mentioned it may with propriety be inferred, that there is a great uniformity of character over the vast area enclosed between the Appalachians and the Rocky Mountains; so far as its availability for settlement and cultivation are concerned, the most important differences seem to result from the unequal distribution of rainfall upon it. Between the Appalachians and the Mississippi, and for some distance west of this river, the annual precipitation is ample for the purposes of agriculture, and, in consequence, this region is pre-eminently the agricultural portion of our territory; its gently undulating surface is abundantly wooded, and hardly anywhere too rough for cultivation, while a very large portion of it is covered by a soil of unaccorded fertility.

But as we leave the Mississippi and the Missouri behind us, travelling westward, we gradually enter a region of diminished rainfall; the trees decrease in number, and finally become exclusively limited to the banks of the streams, while the general surface of the country is covered by a heavy growth of nutritious grasses; and this continues until the base of the mountains is reached, when moisture from the melting snows on the higher summits is sufficient to nourish and support a forest vegetation. This pastoral, rather than agricultural region of our territory extends from about the 50th meridian west until we have risen so high on the slope of the Cordillera that the elavated and mountainous character of the country forbids all cultivation.

We have, viewing our territory in the most general way possible, four great divisions of its surface:—1st. The eastern sea-board, and the Appalachian ranges which press so closely upon it; this is the commercial and manufacturing region. 2d. The Great Central Valley, or the region of the plains. 3d. The mining region, or the Cordillera. 4th. The highland region, or the vast deposits of coal and iron, the excellence of its harbor, the level and fertile region of the Mississippi Valley is prolonged towards the southwest, around the Gulf of Mexico, and far into the interior of Texas, where it finally passes into the elevated, barren plateau of the Llano Estacado.

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