Clarence King Biography

Clarence King

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Biography

Clarence King (1842-1901), American geologist and mining engineer, was the first director of the U.S. Geological Survey.

Clarence King was born January 6, 1842, in Newport, R.I., into a family that traced its origins to colonial times. He attended the Hopkins Grammar School in Hartford, Conn., until his mother moved to New Haven following his father's death. In 1859 he entered the Sheffield Scientific School of Yale University, where he broadened his early interest and education in science.

In 1862, the year after graduation, King headed west with a friend. They finally arrived in Virginia City, Mont.; this was the time of the Comstock Lode boom. Through a chance meeting with an assistant on the California Geological Survey, both men landed jobs with the survey. The next 3 years, during which he worked with highly trained geologists, were invaluable to King. His reminiscences of the California Geological Survey were later recorded in *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1872).

Returning east, King convinced the U.S. Congress to finance a survey of the mountainous region from eastern Colorado to the California boundary, an area along the 40th parallel, approximately 100 miles wide. Nominally under an Army general, King operated as a civilian scientist in directing the topographical engineers. His party engaged in fieldwork between 1867 and 1873. During the next 4 years King supervised preparation of the report, comprising seven large folio volumes, that became one of the most important scientific publications to that date. He contributed the still valuable volume *Systematic Geology;* his colleague J. D. Hague wrote *Mining Industry;* and Arnold Hague and S. F. Emmons prepared the summary *Descriptive Geology*. In 1872 King's knowledge of the 40th-parallel area and his clever detective work uncovered a hoax--the reported discovery of huge diamond fields in northwestern Colorado.

Congress decided in 1878 to combine the numerous surveys sponsored by the government into the U.S. Geological Survey, and King was appointed director. Three years later he resigned to enter the cattle business and become a mining entrepreneur. Although he sold his cattle holdings to advantage, he never had material success. His life ended in tragedy; he suffered repeated failures in mining promotions, physical and mental illness, and a lonely death on December 24, 1901, in Phoenix, Arizona from tuberculosis.