



Oregon!

The very word evoked visions of paradise. Towering trees. Lush valleys with rich soil. Land of unlimited opportunity. Between 1840 and 1869 these visions lured over 500,000 pioneers west to fulfill their dreams and a nation's destiny. Their 2,000-mile route is known today as the Oregon Trail.



WILLIAM HENRY JACKSON (1843–1942)
Jackson sketched hundreds of scenes while working as a freight wagon bullwhacker on the Oregon Trail in 1866; these became the primary source for his paintings. Jackson was the first to photograph western wonders like Yellowstone in 1871. Drawing on his early encounters with American Indians and settlers, he painted six Trail scenes (below) in his 80s, revisiting each site to ensure their accuracy.

NPS / SCOTTS BLUFF NM

Before 1700
American Indians live throughout the continent centuries before Europeans arrive. Though of different tribes and languages, they establish extensive trading networks.



Jack's hunting sketch (1877) adopts an American Indian narrative style.

NPS / SCOTTS BLUFF NM

1750–1800
Plains Indians obtain guns and horses. Guns enable better hunting and defense; horses provide mobility. White explorers and fur traders follow American Indian trails west.

1800–30
The Louisiana Purchase doubles US territory. Lewis and Clark's expedition opens up the American West. The Monroe Doctrine keeps European powers from intervening in US affairs.



1836–37
Banks fail. Economic depression sweeps the US. Easterners consider a new life in the West. The Whitmans (right) and Spaldings attend the Rendezvous in Wyoming then head to Oregon territory.



NPS

Dearest mother, . . . For two or three days past I have felt weak, restless and scarcely able to sit on my horse. . . . But see how I have been diverted by the scenery, and carried out of myself in conversation about home and friends. . . . The last revival enjoyed. . . . I forget that I am weary and want rest.
—Narcissa Whitman, August 29, 1836

1843
Nearly 1,000 emigrants complete the trip to Oregon. American settlers there organize a provisional government for self-rule, separate from British or US control.

Out in Oregon I can get me a square mile of land. And a quarter section for each of you all. Dad burn me, I am done with the country. Winters it's frost and snow to freeze a body; summers the overflow from Old Muddy drowns half my acres; taxes take the yield of them that's left.
—Peter Burnett, emigrant, 1843

The men had a great deal of anxiety and all the care of their families, but the mothers had the families directly in their hands. . . . It strikes me as I think of it now that Mothers on the road had to undergo more trial and suffering than anybody else.
—Martha Ann Morrison Minto, emigrated at age 13 in 1844

1845–48
US thirst for expansion and economic opportunity spurs thousands to hit the Trail. Gold is found in California.

1849–50
Cholera kills thousands of overlanders. The Donation Land Act of 1850 promotes homesteading in Oregon.

1851–61
About a third who cross the plains in 1852 are women. Oregon gains statehood in 1859. The Pony Express delivers fast, up-to-date news and unites the East and West coasts.

1862–69
American Indians rise up as white settlement leads to the loss of traditional homeland and broken treaties. The completed transcontinental railroad signals the end of covered wagon travel.

This country was once covered with buffalo. . . . Since the white man has made a road across our land, and has killed off our game, we are hungry. . . . Our women and children cry for food and we have no food give them.
—Chief Washakie, Eastern Shoshone, 1855
NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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The Gateway West

Long before it was a wagon road, the Oregon Trail was part of an ancient network of Indian footpaths and animal trails that crisscrossed the West. In the early 1800s British, French, and American fur trappers followed those paths as they hunted for beaver, whose fur was in demand for stylish hats in Europe.

In 1812 fur trader Robert Stuart with six others followed an Indian trail in today's Wyoming. They discovered a wide, level pass, 7,550 feet high, across the Continental Divide. South Pass made overland travel for ox-drawn wagons possible and became an important gateway to the West.

There we saw the far famed south pass, but did not see it until we had passed it for I was all the time looking for some narrow place that would almost take your breath away to get through but was disappointed. —Amelia Hadley, 1851

Freight wagons beat a track along South Pass and the Platte River in the 1820s–30s. These fur brigades carried supplies from St. Louis, MO, to the fur trappers' annual Rendezvous in the Green River country of today's Wyoming and Utah. Returning caravans hauled

pressed beaver pelts to Missouri. This "fur trace" (wheel tracks along the Platte River and through the Rockies) began the Oregon Trail. Christian missionaries seeking to convert American Indians accompanied caravans for safe passage. Missionaries Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and Henry and Eliza Spalding joined the 1836 fur brigade to Wyoming then headed to Oregon Country. Narcissa and Eliza were the first white women to cross the continent on what became the Oregon Trail.

As the 1830s ended, so did the beaver supply. The last mule cart and missionary brigade went up the trace to the final Rendezvous in April 1840. From here Joel and Mary Walker and their four children headed to Fort Hall, a trading post on the Snake River in today's Idaho. They sold their two wagons and continued west with a fur company pack train bound for Fort Vancouver. In mid-September the Walkers arrived in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Mary gave birth four months later. These journeys proved families and individuals could make the overland trip, opening the Oregon Trail for more pioneers.

UPPER CROSSING OF SOUTH PLATTE RIVER, NEBRASKA After crossing the river, emigrants faced their first major grade.

California Hill, a climb of 240 feet in about 1½ miles. Trail ruts are plainly visible on the hill today.

SCOTTS BLUFF, NEBRASKA American Indians named this landmark Me-a-pa-te, or "hill that is hard to go around." Travelers could see this 800-foot bluff towering over the prairie several days before reaching it.

INDEPENDENCE ROCK, WYOMING Thousands of pioneers chiseled their names into this rock that looked like a huge whale from a distance.

THREE ISLAND CROSSING, IDAHO Travelers faced a tough decision here: risk crossing the swift, deep Snake River or endure a hot, rocky route along the river's south bank.

PIONEERS' DIARIES Tell the horrors of failed crossings—wagons, livestock, and people swept away. A safe crossing meant clean water and more grass for livestock.

RELATIONS DETERIORATED By the late 1850s. American Indians killed travelers, and emigrants killed American Indians. In the Oregon Territory farming, mining, and logging destroyed salmon runs and village sites. American Indian resistance all along the Trail persisted into the 1880s. By then American Indians had suffered military defeats, settlers had claimed their most productive lands, treaties were made and broken, and most tribes were forced onto reservations. In just a few decades these lands were changed forever.

Why Go West?

Economic depressions in 1837 and 1841 led US farmers and businessmen to look for new opportunities. Politicians urged people to go West, where a stronger American presence might help wrest the disputed Pacific Northwest from British control. Missionaries described the land's fertility and promoted its development potential. A growing spirit of national pride and the idea of Manifest Destiny—that God intended the United States to stretch from coast to coast—made it seem a citizen's patriotic duty to go West. When the fur trade crashed, unemployed trappers looked for new work as trail guides.

In early 1841 the first emigrant wagon train of about 80 men, women, and children left Independence, MO. Thomas Fitzpatrick guided them up Little Blue River across northeastern Kansas, following the old fur trace along the Platte River. The wagons rumbled by Chimney Rock and Scotts Bluff. On Sweetwater River they passed Independence Rock and the cleft called Devil's Gate, finally starting up a long, wide, gentle grade—South Pass. The emigrants were on the Pacific side before they realized they had just crossed the Continental Divide.

THE TRAVELERS SEPARATED at Soda Springs. The core, the Bidwell-Bartleson Party, headed to California while the rest followed Fitzpatrick to Fort Hall. The Oregon-bound travelers hired a new guide to pilot them along the Snake River and over the Blue Mountains. American Indians guided them down the Columbia River to Willamette Valley. This route became the Oregon Trail corridor.

BY 1845 Americans outnumbered British in Oregon Country. Under the Oregon Treaty of 1846 the United Kingdom surrendered its territorial claim and withdrew to Canada.

In 1850 Congress passed the Donation Land Act, offering hundreds of acres of free Oregon land to single white men, married white couples, and settlers who were of mixed white and American Indian heritage. This was one of the first laws to allow a married woman in the US to hold land "in her own right." Travel (and weddings) boomed as settlers rushed to stake claims before the law expired in 1853. At first American Indians helped emigrants, but they soon realized the "free land" was their ancestral territory. By the mid- to late 1800s settlers lay claim to most tribal lands.

Perilous Passage

For emigrants the lure of opportunity and land outweighed personal sacrifices and the risks of long-distance wagon travel. Even with backbreaking toil and the possibility of death from accident, violence, or disease, traffic on the Trail grew. Ten years after the Walkers followed the old fur trace, a well-beaten road sprawled across the prairie. Traffic moved in all directions as discouraged pioneers turned around, successful settlers returned East to persuade family and friends to join them in Oregon, and supply wagons rumbled to and from military forts.

The twisting highway followed streams, wound around hills, and avoided deep sand. On steep slopes travelers lugged wagons up with ropes and stuck poles in wheel spokes to brake them on the way down. At dangerous river crossings they floated wagons on makeshift ferries. Worst was The Dalles, a fearsome stretch of Columbia River rapids where many pioneers floating on rafts perished close to their final destination. In 1846 the Barlow Toll Road provided a safer route as one of many cutoffs developed between jumping-off places in Missouri and the Trail's end at Oregon City, OR.

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A Legacy Endures

This remarkable story began drawing to a close in 1869 with completion of the transcontinental railroad. People still used parts of the old wagon road for local trips. The better stretches of the trail became paved roads and highways. Over the years, other traces of the Oregon Trail were plowed under, built over, or faded away.

In 1906, 76-year-old Ezra Meeker, who crossed the plains to Oregon in 1852, set out in a covered wagon to retrace the old Trail from west to east. He meant to mark the route before it was gone, publicize the Trail's history, and encourage protection of the remaining wagon ruts. Meeker met with two US presidents, testified before Congress, and made several publicity trips along the route before his death in 1928.

In 1978 Congress authorized the old wagon road as Oregon National Historic Trail, recognizing its importance in American history. Today, the Trail is administered by the National Park Service, who works with federal, state, tribal, local, and private land managers and owners to protect the Trail's legacy, provide public access, and tell its many stories of loss and gain.



Eliza Emily Dibble, age 10, made this Double Nine Patch quilt in Oregon, 1856.

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Plan Your Visit Along the Trail corridor today, you can visit hundreds of historic sites, landmarks, and scenic overlooks and see about 300 miles of wagon traces (ruts). An auto route follows the Trail between Independence, MO, and Oregon City, OR. For information about services in communities or Trail sites, contact area chambers of commerce and state divisions of tourism.

For more information about the Trail and exploring Trail sites, contact:
National Park Service
National Trails Intermountain Region
PO Box 728
Santa Fe, NM 87504-0728
www.nps.gov/oreg
ntir_information@nps.gov

Oregon-California Trail Association www.octa-trails.org
Bureau of Land Management www.blm.gov/learn/interpretive-centers
US Forest Service www.fs.fed.us

