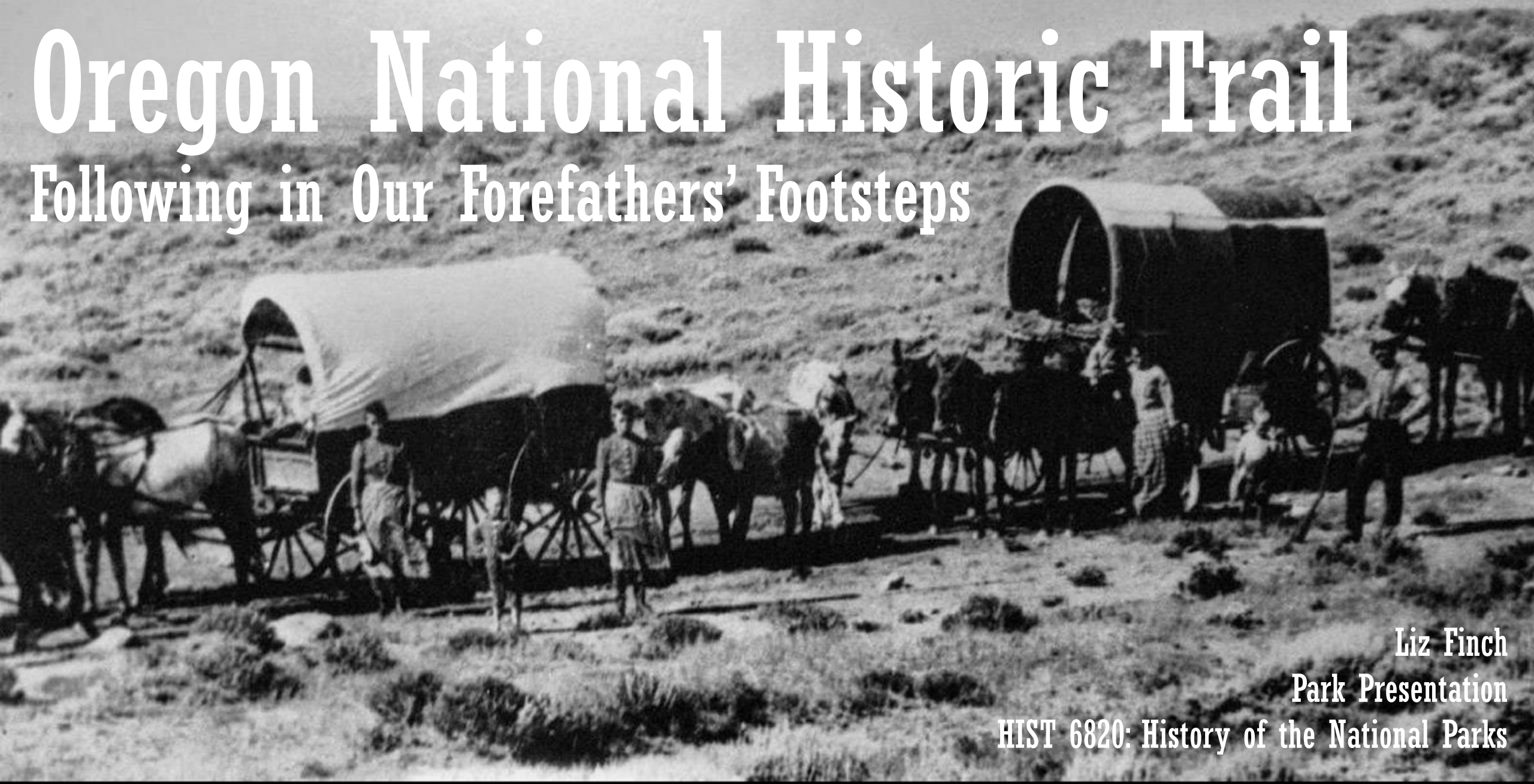
Oregon National Historic Trail

Following in Our Forefathers' Footsteps



Liz Finch
Park Presentation
HIST 6820: History of the National Parks

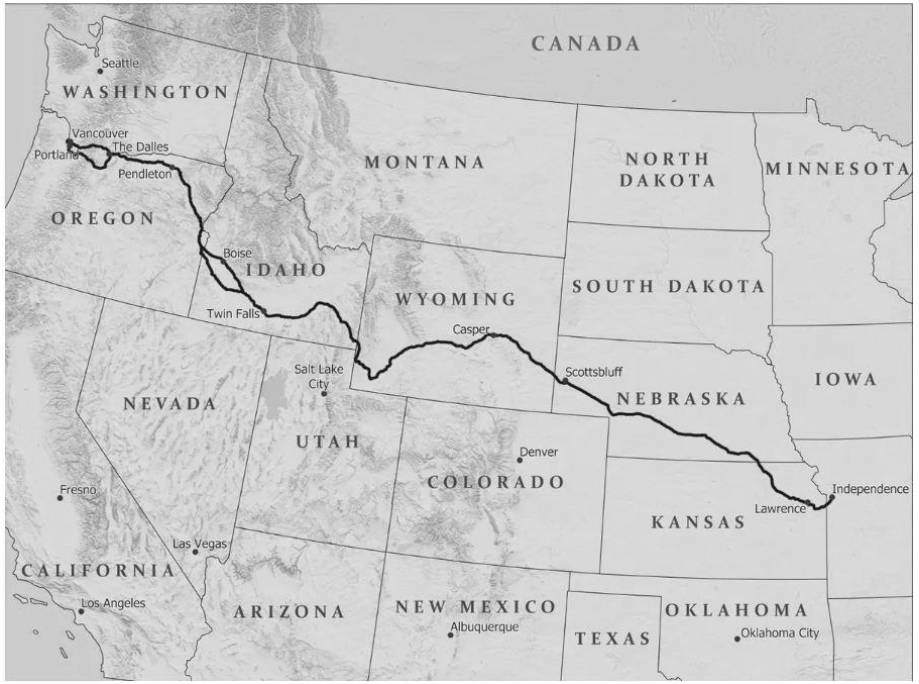
Image Credit: National Oregon/California Trail Center of Montpelier, Idaho

Pathway to a Better Life

There's no story behind the Oregon National Historic Trail without the story of those who created the 2,170-mile pathway across the West in the early 19th century. Between 1840 and 1880, more than 400,000 people traveled from the jumping-off point of Independence, Missouri, to the Willamette Valley in Oregon (though there were variations in starting points, and some settlers veered south to California and took various routes overland as the years wore on). Their wagon wheels carved a route that would continue to be followed by generations seeking a better life until the railway system made such a grueling transcontinental trip no longer necessary.

And for many, the trip – no matter how grueling – was necessary. Americans were facing the oncoming Civil War, as well as disease outbreaks in the overcrowded cities of the East, and an economic depression. But Westward there was land available to settle, as well as wide open spaces and healthier climates. There was even more fortune to be had in 1848 with the discovery of nuggets of the precious metal in Sacramento.

The religious movement known as the Second Great Awakening also inspired people to head West with the goal of establishing faith-based communities. Underpinning it all was the belief in Manifest Destiny, "the idea that the United States is destined—by God, its advocates believed—to expand its dominion and spread democracy and capitalism across the entire North American continent."



Oregon National Historical Trail Map

Image Credit: National Park Service

Preparing for the Journey

Readying for the journey was no easy task, as emigrants could only take as many of their possessions as could fit in a covered wagon. Additionally, as the trip could take five months or longer, the wagon had to have room for every possible supply they might need along the trip, which meant hundreds of pounds of staples like flour, sugar, bacon, salt, and coffee.

They added to their food supply with game shot along the trail, which necessitated firearms and plenty of ammunition. Guns were also required to provide protection from anyone they might meet along the way who intended to either steal from them or do them bodily harm.

The latter included, of course, the various indigenous tribes that lived along the route – about whom most in the East and the Midwest had heard terrifying tales. In truth, most indigenous peoples the settlers encountered wished them no harm. Often, they provided a helping hand or guidance as to the safest routes.

To pull the wagon, the emigrants needed a team of oxen or mules; other livestock might be taken along to feed the families during the journey, or to start a ranch once the travelers reached their destinations. Finally, horses and some pets rounded out the traveling parties. One report from the 1850s mentioned a pet cat who "saved its pioneer owners from starvation on the trail. It provided them with a freshly killed rabbit every morning."

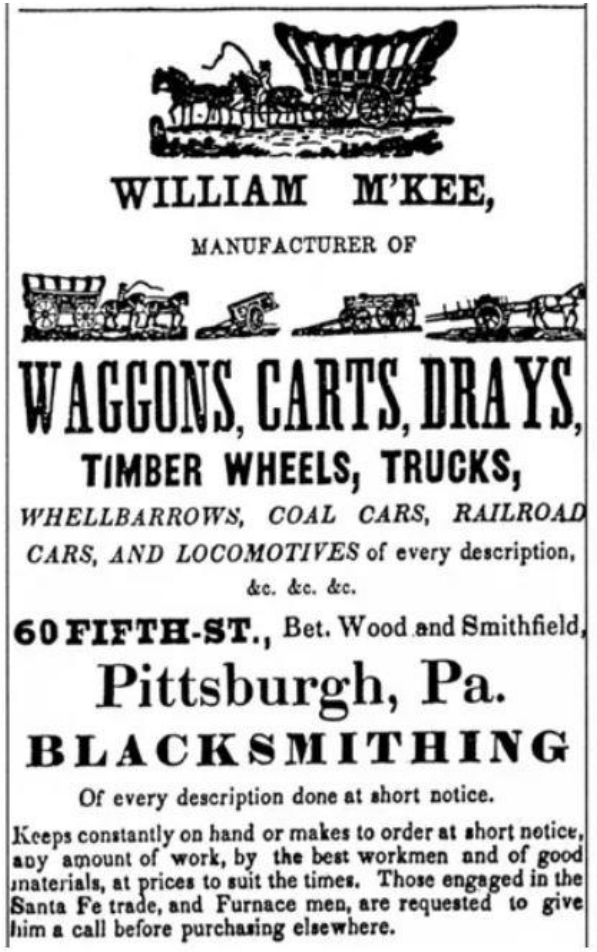


Image Credit: National Oregon/California Trail Center of Montpelier, Idaho

Trail Journals

We know so much about what travel on the Oregon Trail was like thanks to many firsthand accounts. According to author Emily Grosvenor, “about one in every 200 travelers kept a journal: young girls, missionaries, pioneer wives, community leaders, adventuring single men. They wrote everything from great, expansive, narrative-rich entries to bare-bones lists of what happened on which day.”

In 1866, 22-year-old Delila Brintha Wait kept a diary chronicling her family’s three-month journey from Lawrence, Kansas, to Baker County, Oregon. Although the diary contains many valuable “ordinary” details about daily life on the Oregon Trail, it also contains details from some of the more harrowing parts of the experience. One passage recounts how the travelers camped

> . . . between a dry slough on the Little Blue River in southeastern Nebraska awoke to the startling news that the creek was rising fast and we had better get out onto higher ground. . . The shocked travelers watched the water rise all night and were prepared to haul the women into the tree if the water got deep enough to float the wagons. . . Although the women never had to climb the tree, the flood was so severe that the train was unable to move to dry ground until midday of June 14. (Dielman, n.d.)

Image from HistoryCollection.com

People of the Oregon Trail

A family on the Oregon Trail around 1850.
Scholastic/Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo.

Robert Stuart (1785-1848)

Scottish-born Robert Stuart, a Canadian and American fur trader, pioneered the Oregon Trail going the wrong way when he traveled from Fort Astoria to the East in 1812. Stuart was a partner in the Pacific Fur Company, started by John Jacob Astor in 1810, when he was chosen to carry important business updates to the financier in New York City.

Stuart and six other men traveled West to East over what would eventually become the Oregon Trail. On their journey, a Shoshone guide told them about a short route over the central Rockies (before disappearing with Stuart's horse) that would become known as the South Pass. While Stuart and his party were the first European-American party to cross the pass, the fact that it was passable by wagons made it key to the mass migration to follow.

Although he never returned to the Pacific Northwest, Stuart did pen a travel diary about his journey from Astoria to St. Louis, Missouri. Author Washington Irving later used this narrative to write *Astoria*, though Stuart's own words were finally published in 1935 as *The Discovery of the Oregon Trail, Robert Stuart's Narratives of His Overland Trip Eastward from Astoria 1812-1813.*

Jedediah Strong Smith (1799-1821)

Jedediah Smith was 23 years old when he arrived in St. Louis in 1822 and found work as a hunter and trapper for William H. Ashley and Andrew Henry's fur company. His first trip to the Rocky Mountains launched a storied career as a mountain man, explorer, and cartographer, during which he survived being mauled by a grizzly bear. He also emerged from a numerous battles with indigenous peoples, though he befriended many tribes as well. That includes the Crow, who in 1824 helped Smith find the same South Pass through the mountains that Robert Stuart used on his journey to cut a significant amount of time off the trip across the country.

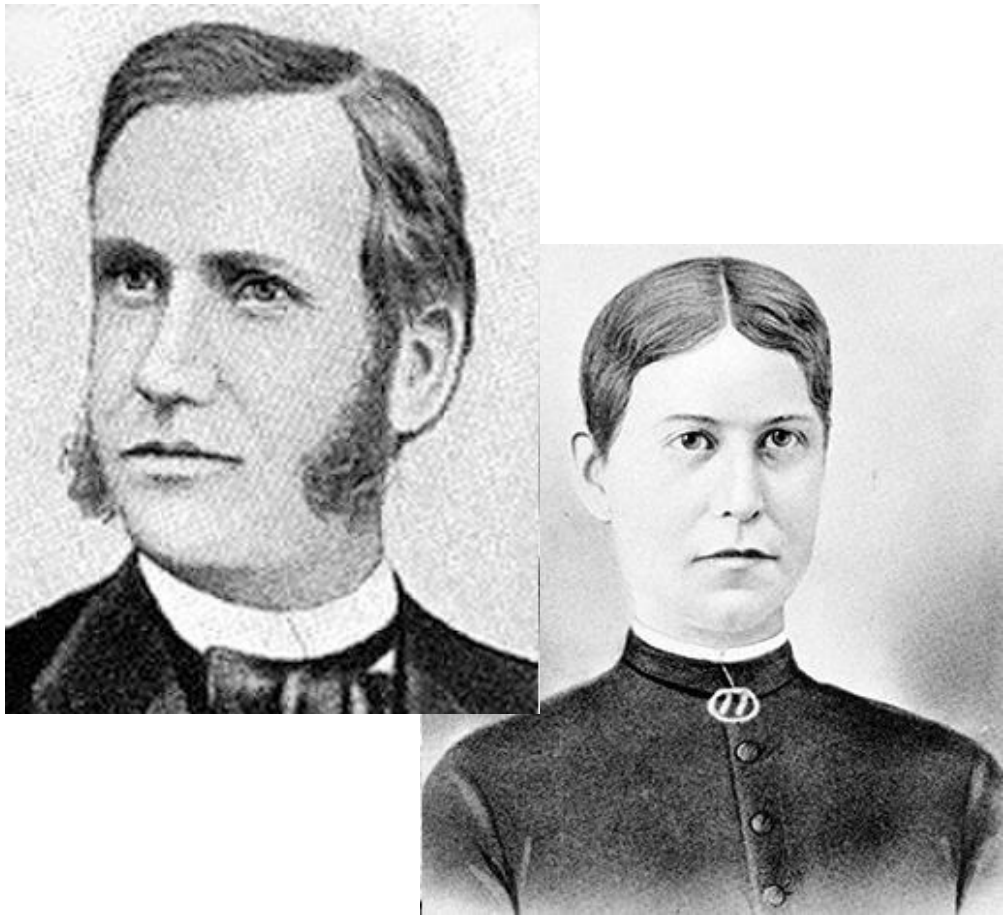
Smith would use this route many times on his travels around Wyoming, Oregon, and Mexican California. Additionally, he wrote Ashley and others about it, describing how critical the pass was to make the East-West journey. Per historian and writer Barton Barbour, Smith's reports had a tremendous impact on the country. They "spurred the growth of the Far Western fur trade, influenced expansionist views of politicians such as Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton, and greatly boosted the United States' interest in securing the Oregon Country" (Barbour).

Marcus & Narcissa Whitman

(1802-1847) (1808-1847)

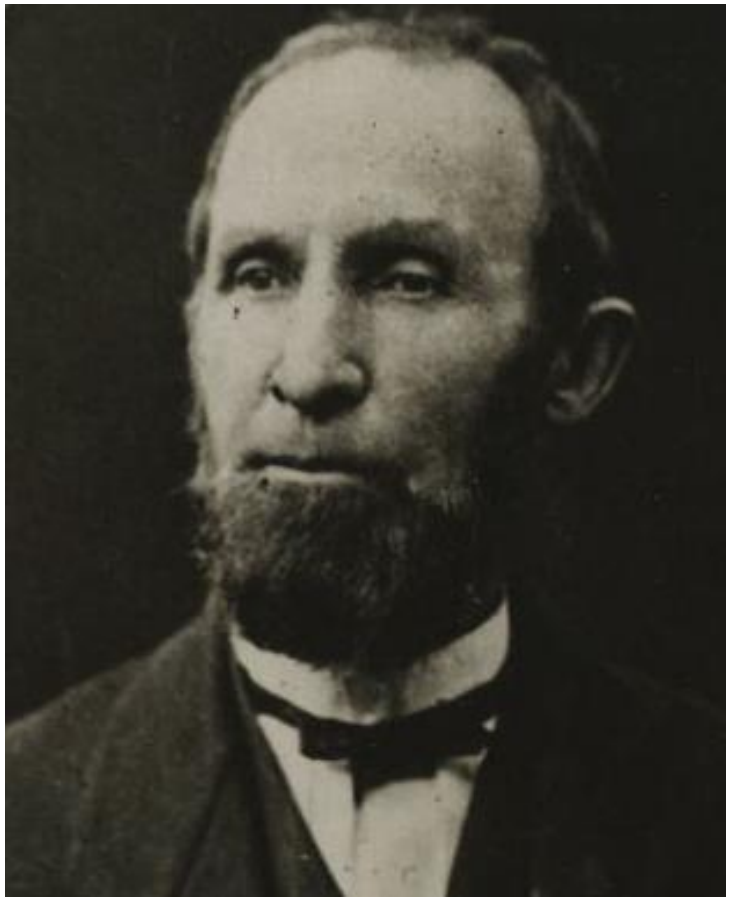
Doctor and Protestant missionary Marcus Whitman and his wife, Narcissa, began some of the earliest efforts to spread Christianity to American Indians on the frontier. They established a missionary post near Fort Vancouver, Washington, shortly after 1835 and began ministering amid the Cayuse Indians. In 1842, the Whitmans expanded their work beyond converting the Cayuse to Christianity and began assisting many of the white settlers that were increasingly flooding into the region.

The Cayuse were growing uneasy as more and more settlers arrived, and the local population suffered a significant blow after a measles epidemic in 1847 killed many of them. While Marcus attempted to use his medical knowledge to help the sick, the Cayuse instead turned on the Whitmans, believing them to be the source of the tribe's severe misfortunes. Marcus, Narcissa, and several other mission staff were killed in the subsequent clash, while many more – including numerous children – were taken hostage. The conflict was the spark of a seven-year war between the Cayuse people and the federal government, which hastened the movement of the Cayuses and other plateau tribes onto reservations.



Marcus and Narcissa Whitman as identified in Oliver Nixon's first edition of "How Marcus Whitman Saved Oregon."

Eljah White (1806-1879)



In 1836, Elijah White completed his medical degree and promptly turned to the work of helping aid the Christian evangelists working in Oregon County. Together with his wife and children, he traveled by ship from New York to Hawaii to Astoria and began working at the Willamette Mission the next year. Over the next half-dozen years, he used his political connections to be named a subagent of Indian affairs west of the Rockies.

He also urged other missionaries to come to the coast, leading both the first large wagon train along the Oregon Trail (featuring 114 people and 19 wagons) in 1842 and the largest in 1843 comprised of 1,000 people, more than 100 wagons, and a herd of 5,000 oxen and cattle.

Migration on the Oregon Trail in very large convoys of wagons continued with the Mormon Brigades (1847-1848) and the discovery of gold in California and Colorado and silver in Nevada, though cholera, the Indian Wars, and the Civil War had impacts on the numbers from year to year.

Tabitha Moffat Brown (1780-1858)

Tabitha Moffat Brown was a 63-year-old widow when she was persuaded by her 77-year-old brother-in-law Captain John Brown to cross the country and establish a new life in Oregon. In 1846, three generation of the Brown family loaded their belongings into five wagons and headed West, but they encountered many challenges on the way. At Fort Hall, Idaho, they were told about a shortcut that would cut many miles off the trip. That appealed to the Brown party, much like a similar offer did to the Donner-Reed Party around the same time, and they paid a guide to take them.

Unfortunately, there was no shortcut. The guide disappeared with their money, and they were forced to backtrack. Later, they lost almost all their cattle and many of their possessions in an icy river. Also like the Donner-Reeds, the Browns were traveling too late in the season and ran into nasty winter weather. Luckily, they survived and made it to the coast, where Tabitha Moffat Brown assisted in the founding of Tualatin Academy for orphan children (later renamed Pacific University). She was honored by the Oregon Legislature in 1987 as the "Mother of Oregon."

Image Credit: Pacific University Archives

George Bush (1779-1863)

The free-born son of a Black father and an Irish mother, George Bush was a prosperous farmer who joined an emigrant party to Oregon with his white wife and five sons in 1844. While he hoped to escape racist hostilities, as the wagon train neared its destination the parties received word about the recently enacted “lash law” meant to drive Blacks out of Oregon.

Bush and others in the wagon train turned north instead, into safe territory controlled by Hudson’s Bay Company, and eventually settled in the Puget Sound area. While they were able to start a profitable farm, the Bush family only remained safe from the constraints of the lash law until 1846 when the United States took over the Puget Sound region as well. Then, in 1850, Congress passed the Donation Land Act which allowed for legal claims to Oregon land by white settlers and “American half-breed Indians,” but not Blacks.

In a testament to George Bush’s kindness, his friends and neighbors helped him legally retain control of his farm until a special 1855 Congressional act validated his claim in the eyes of the United States. Sixteen years after starting off on their journey Westward, the Bush family operated a modern, mechanized farm of 880 acres near Tumwater, Washington. The area today is still known as Bush Prairie.

Image Courtesy of the Henderson House Museum

The Indigenous Peoples

Despite the worst fears of the emigrants, most indigenous peoples were not bloodthirsty, savage, or interested in destroying every wagon train that rolled across the prairie and over the mountains. While there were certainly some cases of Indian/pioneer violence, particularly as more whites settled West of the Mississippi River, those were the exception rather than the rule. Per the National Oregon/California Trail Center (NOCTC) of Montpelier, Idaho, “historical studies indicate between 1840-1860 that Indians killed 362 emigrants, but that emigrants killed 426 Indians. Of the emigrants killed by Indians, about 90% were killed west of South Pass.”

In fact, most tribes regularly wanted to trade with the pioneers, swapping buffalo robes for food and other supplies, and offered helpful information to cross the rugged terrain. The Shoshone, a dominant tribe in the southeastern Idaho area of the Oregon Trail, were quite friendly to whites. “No record or any attacks or altercations against western travelers by the Shoshone have been documented along (the Thomas Fork Crossing to Soda Springs) section of the trail,” says the NOCTC. “Credit goes to Lewis and Clark for reuniting a Shoshone chief with his sister, their interpreter and guide, Sacajawea. The Shoshone assisted mountain men and Mormons alike. Chief Washakie was a friend of Jim Bridger, and he helped whites with safe passage and boasted that he had never killed a white person.”

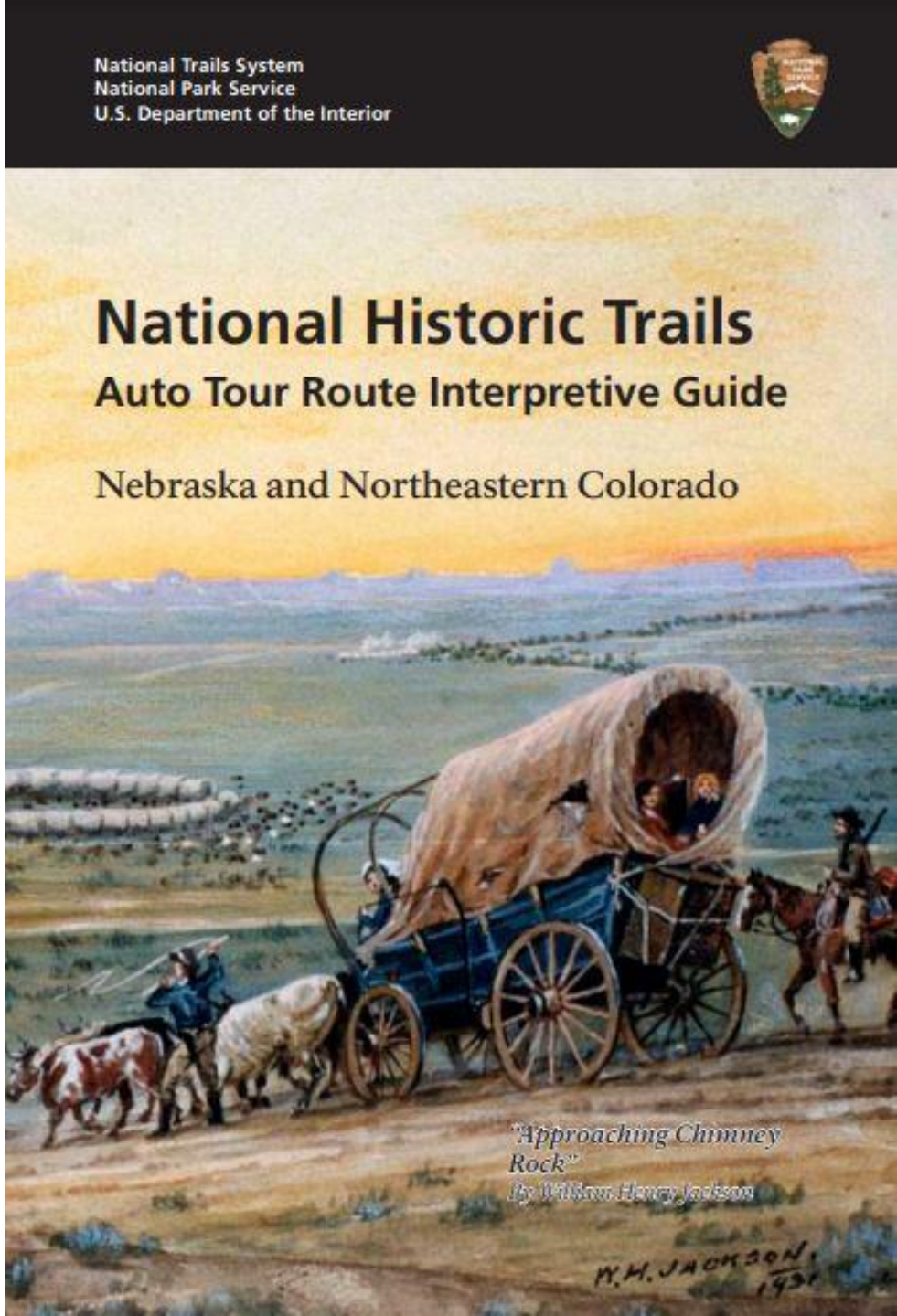
Image Credit: National Oregon/California Trail Center of Montpelier, Idaho

Visiting the Trail

A visit to the Oregon National Historic Trail (ONHT) isn't the same as visiting a trail at most other National Park Service sites. To begin with, the trail is 2,170 miles long and crosses six states: Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho, and Oregon.

Additionally, not all of it is NPS land. While some areas are open to the public for hiking, biking, horseback riding, or car travel, much of the land is private property.

The NPS.gov site dedicated to the ONHT has numerous interactive maps to help people plan visits to the various museums, interpretive centers, and histories sites along the route. Downloadable Auto Tour Route (ATR) interpretive guides are also available featuring overviews of local trail history and directions to suggested points of interest.



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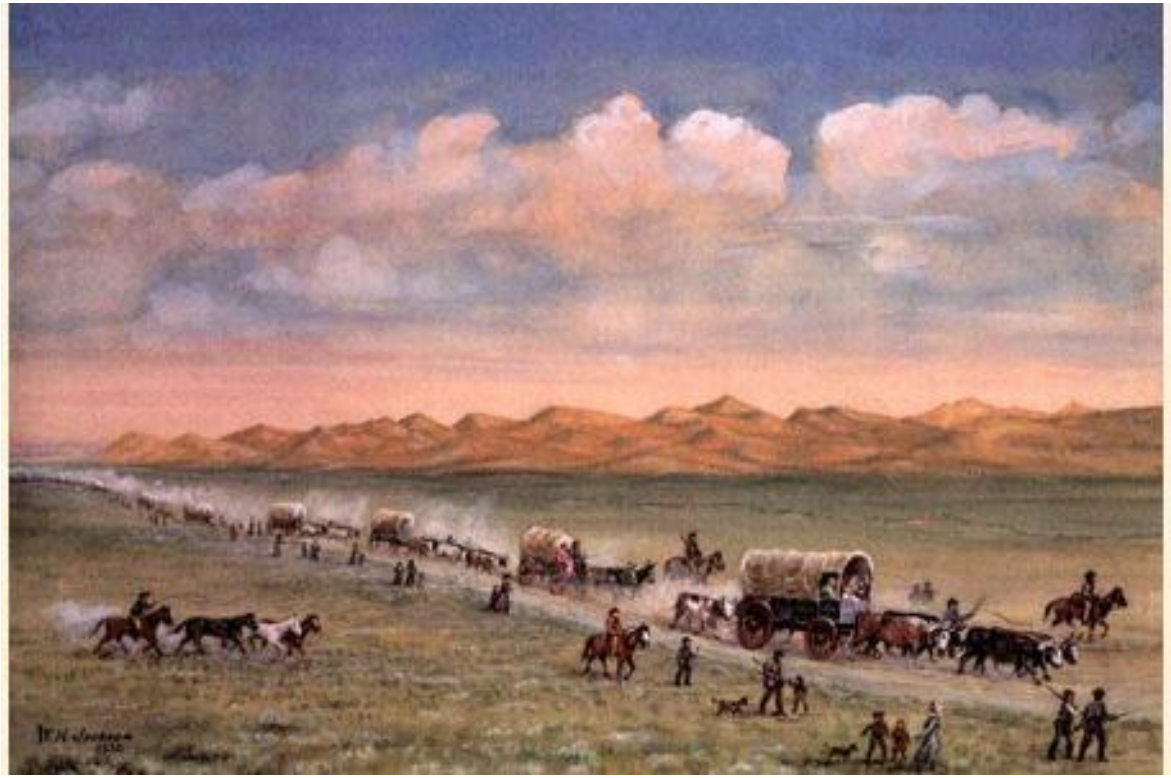

Oregon Trail pioneers pass through the sandhills, by William Henry Jackson.
Image from Legends of America.com

Slide 12

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