

## The Name “Boise”

Number 32

1971

A French word meaning "wooded," Boise came into use early in the nineteenth century among French-Canadian fur hunters as a name for the Boise River. French trappers who started to use the name Boise apparently were translating an earlier English designation for the stream. At least by August 16, 1812, Robert Stuart called it "The Wooded River" while going through that part of the country. Other British fur traders continued to refer to the Boise as Wood River, although they often identified it as Reid's (or Reed's) River, for John Reid who had established an unsuccessful post there in 1813; local Bannock Indians wiped out the enterprise early in 1814. Perhaps the various fur hunters simply were translating--or thought they were translating--an Indian name for the stream in calling the river the Wood or the Boise, depending upon whether they spoke English or French. (At least two Indian names, each supposed to refer to trees or woods, have been suggested; neither are Shoshoni nor Bannock words, although one of them--Copcopaala--suggests a possible Nez Perce or Shapatin derivation.) Use of the name Boissie (or Boisier) in Peter Skene Ogden's Journal (October 19, 22, 1825) indicates that French-Canadian members of Ogden's party had applied the French form of the name to the river at least the year before, if not several years earlier. (Donald Mackenzie had brought French-Canadian trappers into the Boise region in 1818, and annually the Snake Brigades that he instituted continued to operate for fourteen seasons or more after that time. Alexander Ross had led the Snake expedition into the Boise country in 1824; Ogden and his successor, John Work, brought the same Snake expedition trappers to the Boise region several more times by 1832. By the time that B. L. E. Bonneville, a United States Army officer on leave to lead a party into the Oregon country, reached the Boise on April 26, 1833, the question was unresolved as to whether the English form (Wood River) or the French form (Boise River) would prevail. Legend has it that Bonneville exclaimed Les Boise (the trees) upon reaching a point at which he could see the cottonwoods along the Boise River. Although evidence is lacking to support this story, such an exclamation is perfectly plausible--and since he was French, he may have had considerable influence in getting the French, rather than the English form adopted generally. Washington Irving published an account eventually known as The Adventures of Captain Bonneville: this widely-read work popularized the name Boise for the river. Francois Payette, the French-Canadian postmaster at Fort Boise for many years, used the French form both for his post and for the river. Emigrants who came by Fort Boise on the Oregon Trail learned the French name, Boise, from Payette, and continued to use it when the country was settled.

Idaho State Historical Society • Idaho State Archives • 2205 Old Penitentiary Road • Boise, ID 83712  
Phone: (208) 334-2620 • Fax: (208) 334-2626 • For more information, visit  
[www.history.idaho.gov](http://www.history.idaho.gov)

The ISHS reference series was produced over many years by a number of individuals, some of whom devoted more time to their topics than others. Reference series entries are not updated. The series is designed to be a starting point for research.