

Location of Fort Boise, 1834-1855

(Fur Trade)

Number 29

Within a short time after a flood destroyed most of Hudson's Bay Company Fort Boise in 1853, the site became hard to find. Probably the great 1862 flood--which was unequaled, so far as is known, in the century or more since then--obliterated the ruins still further. The site, located on the east bank of Snake River at the mouth of the Boise River, in an area where the channels of both rivers have shifted repeatedly, might easily have been lost entirely. But Jonathan Keeney, who operated a ferry near there from 1863, took special interest in the fort and the Oregon Trail crossing there: Keeney, in fact, had been one of the pioneers over the Oregon Trail. He and his associates liked to show later travelers the site, and much that is known now of the progressive erosion of the fort grounds comes from this interest.

Precise information regarding the location of the ferry and fort comes mainly from the Idaho-Oregon boundary survey of 1867 and the public lands survey of the area into sections in 1868. (Both ferry and fort are in Section 26, T6N, R6W.) The boundary survey commenced at a point in Snake River at the mouth of the Owyhee River, and ran due south to Nevada. Since the surveyors, in undertaking to determine the latitude of their initial point, hardly could take observations out in the middle of the river, they set up their base at the Fort Boise site, only a few feet short of 3/4 of a mile north of the mouth of the Owyhee. Their records provide rather exact latitudes (accurate within the limits of their equipment) of the fort ($43^{\circ} 49' 23.4''$) and their initial point ($43^{\circ} 48' 41.1''$), and a very accurate measurement of the distance between the latitudes--the fort site and the mouth of the Owyhee.

In the accompanying drawing based upon an aerial photo showing the confluence of the Boise and the Owyhee with Snake River, the Idaho section lines as they were surveyed in 1868 have been sketched in. (Roads which run along the section lines are visible in the photo, and are used as a base for the sketch.) An exact distance in latitude from the south boundary of Section 35 (approximately 1-1/8 mile south of Fort Boise) to a half-mile post immediately south of the boundary's initial point is available in the surveyor's field notes. From Fort Boise to the half-mile marker is 104 chains, according to the 1867 survey. (A chain is a surveyor's unit 66 feet long; 80 chains equal one mile.) Assuming that Section 35, located between Fort Boise and the boundary marker is about one mile (80 chains) wide, Fort Boise is about 11 chains north of the line

between sections 26 and 35, since the boundary marker is about 12.9 chains south of Section 35. This puts Fort Boise very close to the point where in 1868 the channel of the river turned abruptly to the northeast. (The west boundaries of sections 25, 26, and 35 shown on the sketch indicate the east bank of the river as surveyed in 1868.) Thus by 1868 the river had a major channel which turned northeast just about at the fort. The floods of 1853 and 1862 may well have affected the river bank seriously at that point. Since 1868 the river has cut back about 120 feet (as determined by a 1962 re-survey) on the west boundary of Section 26, and that erosion continued northward past the 1868 ferry location to the point at the approximate location of the fort. The 1868 channel from that point on has been abandoned by the river for the most part, although before that happened, it cut still farther eastward into the bank. By 1883 when W. A. Goulder visited the ferry, he noted in the Idaho Statesman that Snake River had "swallowed up several acres, including a portion of the site of the old fort. . . ."

Recent computations of latitude (1927 North American datum) of an old reclamation standpipe which stood only a short distance north of Fort Boise show that the 1867 surveyors calculated their position about 1/8 of a mile too far north. Fortunately, the location of the fort can be ascertained by its relation to section lines which can be located on the map and on the ground.

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