

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### PACKER JOHN'S CABIN

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Late in 1862, John Welch set out from Lewiston over the Boise Trail headed for the new Boise Basin with supplies. When he reached Little Salmon Meadows, deep snow blocked his way. Unable to reach Long Valley and to continue his trip, he and his packers had to build an 18 x 24-foot cabin for protection that winter. Something like half way between Lewiston and the Boise region, Packer John's Cabin became an interesting landmark on the long trail connecting North Idaho with the rest of the territory.

In 1863, when the time came to nominate candidates to represent the newly created territory of Idaho in Congress, the Democrats decided to hold their territorial convention at Cottonwood House, later identified by leading Democrats as Packer John's Cabin. When the delegates assembled on October 12, they found that through a mix-up in arrangements, some members understood the meeting had been called for a later date. So the convention adjourned to Lewiston, where proceedings were completed on October 15. In 1864, the Democratic party held a territorial convention at Packer John's Cabin, July 12, to ratify the actions of a previous territorial convention in Boise on July 4. This effort to conciliate North Idaho did not accomplish too much, since the two northern counties, Shoshone and Nez Perce, did not bother to attend. But Idaho County, in which the convention met, gave North Idaho some representation. Then, after North Idaho complained following a Union territorial convention at Centerville, a new territorial convention assembled at Packer John's cabin, August 27, and the party finally wound up with a new congressional candidate, representing the Radical

Republicans rather than the conservatives. Years later, W. A. Goulder described this meeting in the wilderness:

The delegates came to this spot on horseback and with pack animals, there being in those days no other mode of travel through that section of the wilderness.

The old cabin afforded just sufficient room for the few delegates to assemble around the little old dining table of the venerable owner of the premises, who, fortunately for himself, was absent.

The horses grazed peacefully in the limitless pasture that surrounded the temporary meeting place of assembled wisdom and statesmanship. What remained of the first day, the convention, receiving and adopting the report of the committee on credentials, and cooking and eating supper. To this may be added the task of selecting and engaging sleeping apartments under the trees, which proved sufficient in number to accommodate all the distinguished guests there assembled.

After the gold rush of 1862-1864, traffic on the Boise Trail declined substantially, and Packer John's Cabin stood abandoned.

In 1899, Norman B. Willey noted that after years of disuse the cabin had become a ruin. But it continued to attract interest. In 1891, Emma Edwards came by and painted a couple of pictures of that relic of pioneer days. Toward the end of the century, Packer John's Cabin was the subject of a number of photographs. The site became popular as a picnic ground.

On September 15, 1903, W. A. Goulder wrote Lem York that this historic cabin had "recently been torn down and removed by some vandal, under the pretense that it endangered the stock on the ranges." This report evidently was incorrect, however, because of it, a preservation movement led to legislative action in 1909. A \$500 appropriation to the State Historical Society

provided funds for acquisition of this "old cabin as a state relic." A ten-acre site was to be purchased as well, and the building was to be preserved.

In September, 1909, John Hailey went up to Salmon Meadows, acquired the cabin for the Historical Society, and executed a lease for two acres because the owner was unprepared to sell the ten acres. So Hailey spent \$25 to fence the leased ground. Then he invested another \$60 to have "the cabin taken down and rebuilt, new logs put in place of those that were decaying and a new floor and a new roof." Finally in December, 1910, he acquired the necessary ten acres for \$250. Out of his \$500 appropriation, he covered the expenses of his trip as well, and had \$126.85 left over. The cabin was in good shape, although in the process of reconstruction it emerged with a new design quite different from the original. Another hundred dollar appropriation went into fencing the ten-acre site the next summer. In an interesting early example of adaptive use, the reconstructed cabin made "a nice summer resort, cool and shady, surrounded by trees, with a fine stream of water running across the land near the cabin (Goose Creek) which furnishes good fishing. A. B. Lucas personally maintained the cabin and park, prized by the people of Salmon Meadows "very highly as a summer resort." In those years, the park thus "was kept up without any expense to the state."

That system did not really work in the long run, and finally Packer John's Cabin became a state park by legislative designation, March 6, 1951. After Ponderosa State Park was created as a separate entity, Packer John's Cabin site eventually was attached to that larger operation. The reconstructed cabin still stands as an interesting example of historic preservation in Idaho.

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