

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

PIERRE'S HOLE BATTLEGROUND

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A major Idaho Indian battle, in which a Nez Perce, Flathead, and fur hunter force drove a Blackfoot Gros Ventre band, occurred in Pierre's Hole, July 18, 1832. Suspicious of their traditional enemies, an Iroquois trapper (Antoine Goddin) and a Flathead warrior set off that fight by shooting a Blackfoot leader who came to meet them as a peace emissary. (Goddin's father, who had explored Lost River more than a decade before, had been a casualty of an earlier Blackfoot conflict, and Flathead and Blackfoot hostilities were traditional.) Blackfoot rejection of white trappers went back to their eighteenth-century resistance to North West Company expansion from Montreal and to their troubles with Meriwether Lewis in 1806. Fort Henry had been established west of Pierre's Hole as a winter haven for trapper refugees from Blackfoot bands against British fur traders (who normally avoided Indian wars) as well as mountain men based out of Saint Louis. That long sequence of conflict reached a climax in 1832.

Taking refuge behind aspen logs their women piled up to form a square emergency fort in an abandoned beaver pond, a resolute force of about sixty Blackfoot warriors faced two different camps of trappers, led by Milton Sublette and Nathaniel J. Wyeth. Obtaining large reinforcements of Indians and trappers who were gathered in their annual summer rendezvous eight miles away, Sublette's band advanced from their protected ravine to try to surround their Blackfoot adversaries. Although Thomas Fitzpatrick and William Sublette took considerable risk after they took charge of any mountain men inclined to join an

organized attack, they could not capture any Blackfoot whom they surrounded. (More than sixty Blackfoot women and children had already escaped to a safer position farther back along their route into Pierre's Hole.) Then a mistaken impression that Blackfoot reinforcements had attacked their main camp led many mountain men to go investigate that possibility. Nez Perce and Flathead participants vetoed a proposal to burn out their adversaries' camp, as Finnan MacDonald had done in his 1823 Lemhi battle with another Blackfoot band, so no further action was practical before dark. When they prepared to resume operations on July 19, Fitzpatrick's scouts found an empty Blackfoot fortification. Four trappers, six Nez Perce, and nine Blackfeet were lost in that battle, and Lawyer (a prominent Nez Perce leader) never did recover from a severe injury he received then, although he lived forty-four years longer. Another Nez Perce leader was known as Rotten Belly after that, because of an infection received in that clash.

Fought a short distance northwest of Victor, this battle attracted a great deal of attention. Travelers through Pierre's Hole used to go out of their way to visit Fitzpatrick's battleground, and Nez Perce participants remembered it for a generation or more. An aspen grove still grows where Blackfoot defenders dug trenches and built their low fortification along Trail Creek in Pierre's Hole in 1832. An abandoned Indian trail, which fell into disuse after 1900, still indicates how Blackfoot travelers, as well as trappers and other Indian bands, approached Pierre's Hole and Fitzpatrick's siege area. Although Teton Valley has been farmed for a century, some of Trail Creek's aspen and cottonwood groves remain to show how Pierre's Hole looked in 1832.