

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

FORT BOISE (RIVERSIDE) FERRY  
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The crossing of the Snake River near the mouth of the Boise River presented a problem to all travelers along the Oregon Trail. The construction of Fort Boise near the ferry site by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1834 encouraged westward-bound emigrants to cross the Snake near the vicinity of the fort. Emigrants often found the offerings of the fort a welcome relief and their last chance to replenish some of their staples before continuing on the last leg of their journey. In order to supplement their incomes, some of the fort's staff would often aid the emigrants in their attempts to cross the river. In 1836, Indians living near the fort took the Whitman party across on crude rafts constructed of willows and rushes. In the 1840's and early 1850's, the fort offered a variety of canoes for rent. Some emigrants, however, utilized their wagons as boats and crossed themselves. On September 23, 1843, William T. Newby noted,

We went up to the fort & fasend our waggeons to gether as we did at the upper crawssing & drove over. This ford is better than the upper one, tho it is a bout 8 or 10 inches deeper than the upper one. Thos we went strate a craws, it was a bout 600 yards wide. We got all over & in camped on the bank. ("William T. Newby's Diary of the Emigration of 1843." Oregon Historical Quarterly [September, 1939], 40:219-242.)

On October 4, 1843, Theodore Talbot wrote,

At this place, we again and for the last time cross Snake River. We immediately commenced crossing our baggage and carts in the two canoes belonging to the Fort. We finished our transportation early in the afternoon and having swam over our Cavallade went into camp on the river bank opposite to the Fort. (The Journal of Theodore Talbot, 1843 and 1849-52, edited by Charles H. Carey [Portland Metropolitan Press, 1931].)

Robert Haldahe Renshaw, on August 14, 1851:

"traveled till one or two o'clock on good road to

Fort Boise. We hired a canoe and took our loads over. The ford was good, but tolerably deep and nearly dead water. We all got over safely." (Robert Haldahe Renshaw Diary, OHS.)

In 1852, H. P. Isaac and Orlando Humason established a ferry at the crossing to take advantage of the emigrant trade. As noted in the following emigrant-diary entries, they did not seem to have any set rate for their service.

"Travel eight miles to Fort Boise, cross Snake River in the evening; pay \$2.50 per wagon" (The Journal of James Akin, Jr. [Fairfield, Washington: Ye Galleon Press, 1971] [September 1, 1852, entry].)

"to day we traveled about 16 miles crossed Snake river paid 3 dollars per waggon ferriage." (William Cornell Diary, September 8, 1852, OHS.)

"Today we drove down to the fort, about four miles. Crossed the ferry; paid \$3 a wagon, and spent the rest of the day opposite Fort Boise." (Cecilia Emily McMillen Adams Diary, September 20, 1852, OHS.)

"It was night when we arrived and James did not cross until morning when we both ran our wagons on the boat and in a few minutes were safely on the other side, for which we paid \$16. This money was made by the ferryman in half an hour. This is the way to wring hard-earned money from the starving poor." (Memorandum of Thoughts, Reflections, and Transactions as Transcribed by Basil Nelson Longworth on His Journey from Washington Township, Guernsey County, Ohio, to Oregon in the Summer of 1853. [Fairfield, Washington: Ye Galleon Press, 1972] [August 22, 1853, entry].)

"Down the river all day, 16 miles from camp to Snake River ferry, arrived here about camping time, put our wagon boxes in the water as they charge eight dollars for each wagon. [next day] This morning bright and early we commenced ferrying ourselves across and by sunset had everything across without an accident, gave a man six dollars to drive our stock across." (Mrs. E. J. Goltra Diary, August 23 and 24, 1853, OHS.)

"Went Eight miles to Fort Boise we crossed the River in a Ferry boat kept for to cross Emigrants Price Per wagon five dolls." (George N. Taylor Diary, August 29, 1853, OHS.)

In 1854 the fort and ferry were abandoned because of troubles with the Indians. The next commercial ferry at this point began its operation in 1863, when Johnathan Keeney built a ferry and applied for a franchise. The second session of the Idaho territorial legislature granted Keeney, J. B. McLaughlin, and John Duval a ten-year franchise to run a ferry across Snake River at Old Fort Boise on December 14, 1864. They authorized the following toll charges:

One wagon and one span of animals, and one ton of freight,  
\$2.50

Each additional ton of freight, \$1.00

Each additional span of animals, .50¢

Each pack animal, loaded, .50¢

Man and horse, .75¢

Loose animals, .25¢

Footman, .25¢

Sheep and hogs, per head, .05¢

(Idaho Session Laws, 1864, pp. 457-458.)

The trio ran the following advertisement in the Idaho Tri-Weekly Statesman on August 6, 1864:

Boise Ferry, on Snake River, at old Fort Boise. The traveling public are invited to take notice that the above ferry is now completed and furnished with good new boats and careful attendants. This ferry is located at the most eligible crossing on Snake River for travel from Humbolt, Scott Valley, Cal., Umpqua, Willamette Valley, Dalles and Umatilla, Oregon, and Walla Walla, Washington Territory, to and from Boise City and Valley, South Boise and Idaho City, Idaho Territory, of which all must be convinced who once try the route. Being furnished with buoy lines, and the largest boats, it is believed to be the safest ferry on Snake River. (p. 2, C. 3.)

In addition to the emigrants, the ferry was now crossing the many miners and merchants heading to the newly discovered gold fields in Idaho Territory. By 1867, Keeney was the sole proprietor, and on May 14, 1867, he received a one-year renewal of his license from the Ada County Commissioners. He was also authorized to charge the following tolls:

For each footman, .25¢

For each man and horse, \$1.00

For each pack animal, .50¢

For each loose animal, horse, or mule, .25¢

For each hog or sheep, .06¢

For each cattle other than work, .25¢

For each wagon with span of mules, horses, or yoke of cattle, \$2.00

For each additional span of horses, mules, or oxen, .50¢

For each wagon containing 3,000 lbs. And not exceeding 4,000 lbs., \$3.50

Additional 1,000 lbs., .50¢

(Ada County Commissioners' Journal, 1865-1868, p. 247.)

In 1868, Keeney took on two new partners, Isaac Graham and George H. Holbrook. The men put in a new boat and offered meals and lodging on the Idaho side. They also advertised good warm stables and plenty of hay and grain to be had on both sides of the river at reasonable rates. (Idaho Tri-Weekly Statesman, October 17, 1868, p. 3, c. 2.) By 1870, Keeney was once again the sole owner, but due to ill health he offered his ferry and farm for sale or lease. (Ibid., August 11, 1870, p. 3, c. 3.)

The Idaho Democrat on February 25, 1871, announced that W. L. Flippin, a former Auditor and Recorder of Ada County, had rented the farm and ferry (p. 3, c. 2). Keeney was back in charge in 1873, and on October 6, 1873, the Ada County Commissioners granted him a one-year license. They also authorized the following toll rates:

Wagon and two horses, mules or oxen, \$1.50

Each additional span, .75¢

Horse and rider, .75¢

Footman, .50¢

Horse and carriage, \$2.00

Pack animal, .50¢

Loose animals, .12 1/2¢

Sheep or hogs, .10¢

(Ada County Commissioners' Records, 1868-1877, pp. 487-488.)

Between October 1865 and September 1870, Keeney and his various partners reported \$7,797.68 in gross ferry receipts to the Internal Revenue Assessor. (IRA, microcopy 763.)

In 1877, Keeney sold the ferry to Samuel McDowell for \$2,000. (Book I of Land Patents, Canyon County, p. 415, as cited in Huntley, p. 191.) On January 9, 1878, the Ada County Commissioners granted McDowell a one-year license to run the ferry known as Keeney's ferry. Upon the payment of an additional \$15, they released him from any penalty for not taking out a license in Ada County for the ferry in 1877. They also authorized the following toll charges:

One wagon and span of horses or cattle, .75¢

Each additional span or wagon, .37 1/2¢

Buggy and one horse, .50¢

Man and horse, .37 1/2¢

Loaded pack animal, .12 1/2¢  
 Loose animals, .05¢  
 Footman, .25¢  
 Sheep or hogs, .02 1/2¢  
 (Ada County Commissioners' Records, Book A, pp. 22-23.)

In March 1882, McDowell sold the operation and land owned by him on both sides of the river to Loring A. Sevey and Albert Fouch for \$5,475. (Idaho Tri-Weekly Statesman, March 16, 1882, p. 3, c. 1.) During the next year, Sevey became the sole proprietor when he purchased the one-half interest of Fouch for \$3,000. Sevey continued to run the ferry until selling the enterprise to Abner Packard in October of 1885 for \$500. A year later Packard sold out to Andrew Lackey for \$700. In 1899, William S. Geary purchased the ferry for \$3,000. Geary ran the ferry until April 1890, at which time he sold the property to Thomas J. Huff for \$3,600. (Huntley, pp. 191-192.)

The Caldwell Tribune on May 7, 1892, ran the following advertisement:

"Riverside Ferry, the best crossing on Snake River. Situated on the old emigrant road, at the mouth of the Boise river. Best and nearest road to Baker City or any other point west. Rates reasonable and boat always ready. T. J. Huff, Proprietor. (P. 8, c. 4).

The erection of bridges across the Snake River at Nyssa and Payette in the early twentieth century caused the ferry to be abandoned.

By Larry R. Jones