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REFERENCE SERIES

EMIGRANT ROADS NORTH OF SNAKE RIVER

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Although most Oregon Trail emigrant traffic followed a road south of Snake River past Salmon Falls, a number of north side options were available west of American Falls. Crossings could be made near American Falls, Bonanza Bar (just west of Massacre Rocks), Starrh's Ferry below later Burley, and Payne's Ferry above Thousand Springs, among other places. A network of eighteenth-century Indian trails identified these possibilities when a series of fur trade expeditions explored that country after 1810. Fur hunters on their way to Astoria, Oregon, examined both sides of Snake River below Caldron Linn in 1811, and Hudson's Bay Company trappers established a regular supply route to Fort Hall along a north side trail after they took over management of that post in 1838. When emigrant traffic came by Fort Hall after 1840, Hudson's Bay Company Chief Trader Richard Grant pointed out that wagons could not be taken over his north side trail, but allowed that an alternative road might be found.

So early Oregon Trail wagon masters stayed south of Snake River past Salmon Falls. In 1847, though, Bishop A. M. Blanchet's missionary party gained time by taking their horses across Snake River near Bonanza Bar and going past Shoshone Falls (then known as Canadian Falls, because only Canadian trappers came that way) to later Glenn's Ferry. There they rejoined their three wagons that they had sent ahead over a south side Oregon Trail road.

In 1852, an Oregon Trail alternate crossed Snake River on a ferry above Thousand Springs and ran along a western north side route employed on a still larger scale by Kelton Road traffic two decades later. North side wagon drivers benefitted from avoiding overgrazed areas along heavily traveled roads where they wasted a lot of time and effort driving their oxen on side trips to obtain forage. Finally a wagon route was worked out through a difficult stretch north of Twin Falls and Shoshone Falls. There, several miles of rough lava in an extensive Bonneville flood channel had to be crossed. Ferries at Shoshone Falls and west of later Burley helped traffic gain access to this north side route. Emigrant road traces, including ruts through lava outcrops, still survive along that route, which had heavier use after 1880 when new north-south traffic patterns helped increase east-west emigrant use of that area. Wagons continued to roll across all of those roads for several more decades.

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