

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

LANDER ROAD

Number 899

1988

In 1857 Congress responded to the wishes of California and New York interests and authorized the construction of an alternate route west from South Pass. Officially called the Fort Kearney, South Pass, and Honey Lake Wagon Road, it soon became known as the Lander Road. The bill that provided for its construction was the result of a sectional compromise which came about after years of discussion and debate on the needs for an adequate transportation system to the Pacific. The final bill, passed by the House of Representatives, approved by the Senate without debate and signed by President Franklin Pierce, became law on February 17, 1857. It allotted \$300,000 for a central route (Lander Road), \$200,000 for a southern route (El Paso-Yuma), and \$50,000 for a Fort Defiance, New Mexico-Colorado River route.

Secretary of the Interior, Jacob Thompson, appointed Albert H. Campbell General Superintendent for the newly authorized roads. He divided the Fort Kearney, South Pass, and Honey Lake project into three construction divisions and appointed William M. F. Magraw as superintendent of the eastern and central portions. Frederick W. Lander, an engineer from the Department of the Interior, was chosen chief engineer.

During the field survey season of 1857, Lander reported traveling 3,000 miles on horseback in an attempt to locate the best feasible route. After examining sixteen passes and numerous possible routes, he selected a northern route to obtain better grazing, water, fuel, fish, and game for emigrant travelers. He also expected his wagon road to become the route of the eventual

Northern Pacific Railway. In October, Magraw and many of the workers joined forces with General Albert S. Johnston and his Utah Army at South Pass, while the remainder of the crew built a winter headquarters east of the present town of Lander, Wyoming.

Magraw's choice was a fortunate one as he was being investigated for the misuse of funds and probably would have been discharged.

In January of 1858, Lander became superintendent for the entire project with an annual salary of \$4,000.

By November of 1858, the basic construction of the route was completed. In his official report, Lander reported that 62,310 cubic yards of earth were excavated, one mile of rock removed, eleven miles of willows cleared and twenty-three miles of pine timber removed from the roadway. (35th Congress, 2nd Session, House Executive Document No. 108, p. 51) Lander spent the winter of 1858-59 writing an emigrant guide which he felt would encourage the use of his road. In the spring of 1859, he again took to the field with a budget of \$25,000 to improve the route.

He spent most of the season on the portion between South Pass and City of Rocks working on the road and negotiating with the various Indian tribes located along the route. He was allocated \$5,000 to help pacify any Indian opposition. He considered the Bannock to be the most troublesome, but thought that fifty good frontier men mounted on good horses could easily deal with them.

Lander returned to the field for the last time in 1860 with a budget of \$75,000, and devoted his time to the Honey Lake area. When the Civil War broke out, he served on the staff of General George B. McClellan and attained the rank of Brigadier General. He died on March 2, 1862, the result of wounds received during a cavalry charge at Blooming Gap.