

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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IDAHO'S HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE AMONG NORTHWESTERN STATES

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Idaho's exceptionally odd political boundaries unite an assortment of sections and peoples that normally would have been assigned to different commonwealths. As a result of that arrangement, Idaho's century of experience as a state represents a variety of northwestern cultural areas that reflects diverse geographical features--mountains and forests, plains and deserts, basin and plateau--typical of northwestern states as a whole. A cross-section that samples northwestern terrain from Canada to southwestern borderlands, Idaho offers a transition between eastern and western components of a region that (with Oregon) incorporates six additional states. Providing or controlling all routes of surface transportation and communication across that tier of states, Idaho continues a long-established tradition of bridging a cultural gap between neighboring areas. Rather than indicate some kind of unidentified (and perhaps unidentifiable) demarcation between internal cultural areas of a broad western region, Idaho brings them together. Well before gaining state admission in 1890, Idaho provided access from plains and intermountain communities to Pacific Northwest ocean ports along routes that cultural interchange had moved for thousands of years. Rather than serve as a boundary between traditional plateau, basin, and plains cultures, Idaho has proved a broad zone where cultural elements from all of those areas has been integrated.

Partly because Idaho's strange boundaries separated settlements that needed to work together to solve economic and political problems, bonds among several northwestern states have

been established in ways that otherwise might have been less conspicuous. Both Washington and Montana have sections that have been closely related to North Idaho, and Idaho's irrigation development has had substantial impact upon Wyoming's upper Snake River drainage. That kind of relationship among states has not been unusual, but Idaho's boundaries have accounted for a more varied and extensive opportunity for interaction among northwestern states. As a result of avoiding sharp lines of cultural separation in a large northwestern area of diverse geographical regions, Idaho has emphasized connections and interrelationships rather than division into unrelated segments.

Systems of transportation and communication that overcame northwestern geographical barriers have been instrumental in maintaining that long-established tradition which has substantial historic importance that goes far beyond Idaho's borders.

Idaho's admission as a state united more than a broad northwest region. On July 3, 1890, a solid band of states finally extended from Maine to California--from an Atlantic confederation of 1776 to a Pacific Coast destination explored by Lewis and Clark more than eight decades earlier. A vast expanse of colonies and territories finally emerged as a transcontinental union of states after four decades in which a detached group of Pacific coast states, beginning with California in 1850, had grown up as a separate western region. Thomas Jefferson's vision of an array of states stretching from his Virginia homeland to Oregon's west coast finally was realized.