

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

OREGON TRAIL ROUTES IN AND AROUND BOISE

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A devastating sequence of nineteenth-century floods forced wagon traffic that reached river bottom lands to resort to a variety of routes after 1840. An 1862 deluge, far greater than any subsequent torrent, wiped out all earlier roads, so that none of them can be identified. After 1862, a city street and valley road system replaced all earlier routes. Until 1876, a major river channel forced all such traffic to cross into Boise, but after a new channel diverted most river water farther north, Oregon Trail emigrants had an option of following a river bottom route that let them cross at Canyon Hill in Caldwell. Otherwise, they still could come into Boise and follow a major stage and freight road northwest through Middleton. That road, with only minor realignment, survives as State Highway 44. Other traces of river-bottom routes have disappeared in plowed fields or urban development.

Although an important Indian and fur trade route descended from Bonneville Point to a fringe of riverbank cottonwood trees prior to 1840, a series of benches interrupted wagon traffic that attempted to reach upper valley water. As late as 1845, no one could find a way to get emigrants to water there, so water had to be hauled up a steep 40- to 60-foot bench to a point that ox teams could reach. Road improvements surmounted that problem prior to 1862, after which heavy gold rush traffic led to new upper valley grades to accommodate stages and freight wagons. These grades are still visible, and a number of connecting stretches of Oregon Trail tracks, with exceptionally deep ruts in places, survive in desert areas immediately adjacent to subdivisions and developed lands. Boise is fortunate to have unusually good displays of Oregon Trail ruts only a short distance from town.

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