

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### INDIAN POST OFFICE

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In traditional Nez Perce religious experience, summits of high ridges and peaks of spectacular mountains held exceptional value. When explorers and fur hunters enquired about such sites and their significance in Nez Perce culture, they got varied responses that often were misunderstood. Nez Perce informants who took their beliefs seriously could not discuss or explain such sites that had personal religious significance, so they improvised as best they could when questions came up regarding them. Travelers who recorded whatever explanations they happened to receive often reported strange accounts. Their reports varied with whatever inspired their informants who tried to think of something plausible that would satisfy their interrogators. Often their Nez Perce associates saved themselves from unnecessary questions by passing off such sites as of no great interest anyway. Indian Post Office, which had superlative significance for many Lolo Trail travelers, sometimes received such treatment. But Lewis and Clark arrived early enough to get a more favorable reception there.

When Lewis and Clark came by in 1806, they passed an early portion of that complex located farther west. Their 1806 site, at elevation 6,574 feet about a mile south of Indian Grave Peak, had a rock monument like those of Indian Post Office. (In effect, sometime since 1806, Indian Post Office was moved to--or largely replaced by--a new higher location. Or Lewis conceivably may have gotten confused when he prepared his journal--an unlikely possibility.) In any event, when Lewis and Clark reached an Indian Post Office monument, their Nez Perce guides

insisted upon pausing for an appropriate, solemn ceremony. Sewall Truax, who developed an improved, more direct Lolo Trail grade in 1866 and 1867 followed a superior part of their ridge route past Indian Post Office, which had rock cairns associated with important Nez Perce religious beliefs. Not anything like a post office as understood by trappers or army explorers, those cairns were given other explanations unrelated to their religious function, leading to subsequent confusion that scarcely could be avoided in such a significant area. General Oliver O. Howard's 1877 Nez Perce military campaign followed Truax' route, and an improved Lolo motorway of 1934 came that way too. Out of deference to traditional Nez Perce spiritual beliefs, Indian Post Office merits respect and preservation. But a variety of explanations unconnected with its religious significance have interest only as examples of confusion arising from a misunderstanding of important Nez Perce traditions.

**(This information has not been edited.)**