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SLATERVILLE AND THE FOUNDING OF LEWISTON

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When the Oregon Steam Navigation Company began to send steamboats up the Snake and the Clearwater to accommodate the gold rush to the Nez Perce mines in the spring of 1861, an important service community promised to develop at the OSN terminal. An initial voyage of the Colonel Wright managed to ascend Big Eddy of the Clearwater in order to reach a suitable site at later Lenore, immediately above that obstacle to navigation, May 6, 1861. Seth Slater (generally known as S. S. Slater) established Slaterville there to serve as the original river port for Pierce and Oro Fino City around forty miles away. Slaterville had about fifty inhabitants, but only five tents--two of them dwellings. Two others housed stores of provisions; the remaining one sheltered a modest sized (eight feet square) saloon. Occupying a location just above an ancient Nez Perce village site that went back several thousand years, with larger, permanent houses, Slaterville started in an appropriate setting for Idaho's original port. When a steamboat came in (and that happened only once after Slaterville sprang up as a center of commerce), Nez Perce Indians and a large number of whites flooded in to engage in trade and to supply a host of miners headed toward Pierce. In less than a month, a rival supply center was projected at the forks of the Clearwater (where Lewis and Clark had built their canoes to paddle down to the Columbia only fifty-six years before), but neither of these potential Clearwater river ports had much of a future. When the Colonel Wright snapped a tow line in Big Eddy on a second trip that almost reached Slaterville a week later, another, better located, river port was founded May 13 at the junction of the Snake and the Clearwater. In spite of some expectation that the new port also would be known as Slaterville, that site emerged as Lewiston. Although the Colonel Wright did not attempt to get through Big Eddy to Slaterville anymore, a new steamer, the Okanagan, docked in Slaterville June 1. Because high water did not last too much longer that spring, no more trips were attempted up the Clearwater, and on a second trip, the Okanagan stopped in Lewiston, June 8. S. S. Slater shifted his operating base to Lewiston, and with the 1862 gold rush directed to Florence rather than to Pierce, OSN steamboats had no great incentive to try to resume service to Slaterville during the next mining season. But Lewiston continued to prosper as a river port for the Idaho mines.

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