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CITY OF ROCKS AND GRANITE PASS

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INDIAN HISTORY

Prior to 1860, Pocatello's Northern Shoshoni band ranged through a broad expanse of country from upper Goose Creek and an upper Humboldt-Thousand Springs area to Raft River, with City of Rocks a central feature in their territory. More possessive than many other Northern Shoshoni, they tended to exclude anyone else from utilizing that region. Referred to at times as wild wheateaters, Pocatello's people also harvested pine nuts around City of Rocks. That crop, isolated from other pine nut areas farther south, gave Pocatello's band a distinctive culture. Pocatello's Northern Shoshoni also went northwest to fish at Salmon Falls and east to Wind River where they sometimes spent a winter with Washakie's Eastern Shoshoni. After two decades of emigrant wagon traffic, with severe overgrazing and other disturbing features, Pocatello grew concerned enough to have his warriors attack an Oregon Trail emigrant party above Massacre Rocks, August 9-10, 1862, and a California Trail group just before they reached City of Rocks, August 12. These and other incidents led to military retaliation at Bear River, January 29, 1863, where some of Pocatello's people were camped with a substantial band of Cache Valley Shoshoni. By 1868, Pocatello decided that his band would be better off settled on Fort Hall Reservation, and he arranged for a Bannock Creek home. After that, City of Rocks no longer had an Indian population.

EMIGRANT ROADS

Nineteenth-century emigrant wagons--because of special restrictions on routes suitable for their use--made City of Rocks a notable western landmark shortly after 1840. Wagon travel had become a feature of emigrant life long before that time, but summer-long trips of two thousand wilderness miles or so imposed novel problems that lacked easy solutions. Aside from South Africa, where long-distance overland migration began only four years prior to Oregon and California trail development, few precedents were available. Santa Fe Trail commercial traffic had shown that wagons could go west through desert lands. Red River ox carts had served western Canadian plains, and supply wagons had pioneered Oregon and California trail routes to Rocky Mountain rendezvous sites. Based upon trappers' and traders' experience, emigrants could discern several critical requirements for a successful wagon route:

- (1) A natural road with a minimum of geographical obstacles

- (cliffs, rocky canyons, major stream crossings, or excessively steep grades) was essential.
- (2) Water sources, ideally not more than several miles apart to allow for noon and overnight stops, were necessary, although at times wagons could travel more than twenty miles between springs.
  - (3) Grazing for oxen, horses, and other livestock had to be available at practically every campground.
  - (4) As direct a route as possible was needed, because even a few additional miles (at a rate of ten or twelve a day) would lengthen emigrant trips unduly.

An acceptable California Trail route ran past City of Rocks to Granite Pass, and on that account, many thousands of gold seekers and other emigrants became acquainted with that interesting geological example of eroded granite.

#### GRANITE PASS

In 1840 about 500 prospective emigrants agreed to assemble west of Independence, Missouri, to go to California as soon as spring travel became possible a year later. Of that entire band, only John Bidwell showed up. But others appeared, however, and a modest group set out with a small party of trappers and missionaries on a long journey west. At Soda Springs, half of them decided to try Oregon instead. John Bidwell's crew of 33 California pioneers descended along Bear River from Soda Springs and finally reached their destination by way of a Humboldt River route. They had severe difficulties getting past Salt Lake, so in 1842, Joseph B. Chiles returned to Missouri in search of a practical road. Chiles' return expedition had to find a more direct Humboldt connection to Snake River and Fort Hall. So they headed toward upper Goose Creek. There, for many miles of travel, they could see Granite Pass, which provided convenient access to Raft River along their most direct approach to Fort Hall. No really practical California Trail route was available south of Granite Pass, and Goose Creek did not provide as convenient a road to Fort Hall. Even when an alternate route via Salt Lake was discovered by Mormons returning from California to Utah in 1848, Granite Pass had to be utilized.

Located in territory eventually designated as southern Idaho, Granite Pass came into immediate use when Chiles brought California emigrants along his superior route in 1843. (That season, Chiles sent his regular California Trail party west from Raft River with Joseph R. Walker as a guide, while he took a small group of California emigrants to Fort Boise to search for a new northern route to Sacramento Valley. Walker had led a band of Captain B. L. E. Bonneville's fur hunters to California a decade earlier, and knew of a practical though circuitous route through Walker Pass to California's central valley.) When used for early emigrant wagons, Granite Pass was in Mexico, but less than a mile from Oregon. After 1850, that area became part of Utah territory. But in 1872, when Daniel Major's Idaho--Utah boundary survey finally was accepted as an official demarcation, Granite Pass wound up in Idaho. Major and his surveyors had a difficult time holding to an accurate 42nd-parallel course, and when crossing Granite

Pass they should have run their boundary slightly more than three-quarters of a mile farther north--at least when their line is compared with 1927 North American datum for that area.

#### CITY OF ROCKS

After 1842 regular California Trail emigrants came by City of Rocks, and in 1846, Oregon-bound wagons using Jesse Applegate's route began to pass that way too. California gold rush traffic routed through Fort Hall or over Hudspeth's Cutoff came close enough that many emigrants stopped to paint their names on particularly appealing rocks. Salt Lake traffic rejoined Chiles' original California Trail route a short distance beyond. Two conspicuous spires were visible there, so all California emigrants had a chance to observe at least some marvelous granite formations in that area.

Few emigrants ever had seen anything quite like upper Raft River's granite spectacle. Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly, who came by on July 19, 1849, reported:

The road here lies between high & immense rocky mountains, with not a particle of herbage or vegetation upon them, but being white & smooth upon their surface. Just opposite to where we encamped was one which struck us as particularly curious. It was a perfect face upon the highest cliff around . . . . The road continued between these & around these rocky piles, church domes, spires, pyramids, &cs., & in fact, with a little fancying you can see [anything] from the capitol at Washington to a lowly thatched cottage.

Then on August 4, August Burbank saw a religious significance there:

Passed on through what I called pyramid pass. The Grey Granite Rocks stand in pyramid, mountain & dome forms, here & there towering aloft. The road winds along between them. Emigrants names are written with tar-keel & on these curious structures. Here was truly manifested in a temporial point, the figures used in the Scriptures like unto the Shadow of a great rock in a weary land. The Shadow was cool--inviting and brought to mind the Spiritus 1 illustration--of the figure--the Scenery was grand & the concave rocks at the narrow pass was quite a curiosity.

Still later, J. Goldsborough Bruff described castles and all sorts of formations, August 29:

An entire range on our left, of volcanic hills, for about 15 miles: and on our right, similar formations for about 10 ms. when we entered a very extraordinary valley, called the "City of Castles." A couple of miles long, and probably ½ mile broad, A light grey decrepitating granite, (probably altered by fire) in blocks of every size, from that of a barrel to the dimensions of a large dwelling house; groups, Masses on Masses, and Cliffs; and worn, by the action of ages of elementary affluences, into strange and romantic forms.--The travellers had marked several

large blocks, as their fancy dictated the resemblance to houses, castles, &c.--On one was marked (with tar) "NAPOLEON'S CASTLE," another "CITY HOTEL," &c. We nooned among these curious monuments of nature. I dined hastily, on bread & water, and while others rested, I explored and sketched some of these queer rocks. A group, on left of the trail, resembled gigantic fungi, petrified, other clusters were worn in cells and caverns; and one, which contrasted with the size and height of the adjacent rocks, seemed no larger than a big chest, was, to my astonishment, when close to it, quite large, hollow, with an arch'd entrance, and capable of containing a dozen persons. This, from its peculiar shape, I named the "Sarcophagus Rock."

By August 12, 1849, James F. Wilkins identified that granite assemblage as "The City of Rocks," a name that soon gained general acceptance. Some travelers continued to supply their own names to features there, as did Cyrus C. Loveland, August 7, 1850:

Then went through a Novelty Pass, distance of three miles, to Echo Gap. This pass through the mountains is called Novelty Pass from the great mountains of singularly shaped rock on either side of the road. There is a very large rock on the left, close to the road, that I named Templ or Recorder's Rock. Here, upon its base, is recorded many an emigrant's name. This rock may be one hundred and twenty feet high and runs up nearly perpendicularly.

A little farther and on the right is another with a small prong sticking up on its top that appears a little like a cupola. I might give names to many of these monuments of Nature but they are too numerous.

Echo Gap is fifteen or twenty feet wide, with perpendicular rocks on each side from fifty to one hundred and fifty feet high, and receives its name from having the loudest echo that I have ever heard. One mile after leaving Echo Gap brings us to where the Salt Lake Road comes in.

Thousands of emigrants signed their names there, according to Richard August Keen, who came by on June 22, 1852, but unlike basalt registers that also were common in that region, that of Keen's "Castle Rock Hotel" has not survived so well.

Although Granite Pass provided a satisfactory route for Idaho's heaviest traveled early emigrant wagon road, later traffic was not bound by such strict route constraints. Boise-to-Kelton stage and freight traffic continued to come that way until after 1880, but Granite Pass fell into disuse. Even after railroads altered freight and stage routes, emigrant wagons continued to roll west--and in all other directions--until well after 1900. But automobile highways avoided Granite Pass, City of Rocks, and other tourist attractions of that area. Important Utah mines adjacent to Granite Pass kept a road open there, but Idaho's California Trail ruts remain visible through much of that area. City of Rocks now is identified as a National Historic Landmark, and Granite Pass has been listed in the National Register of Historic Places--a compilation maintained by a National Park Service agency to recognize important historic sites. But aside

from local ranchers and occasional venturesome tourists, few people ever see these interesting attractions any more.

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