The Oregon Trail

Independence, Missouri to Oregon City, Oregon
Independence Landing, Missouri

Many pioneers arrived by boat at Independence Landing on the Missouri River and began gathering supplies for their journey in the town of Independence, Missouri.
Famous mountain man, James “Jim” Bridger, or “Old Gabe” as some called him, was a great explorer and fur trapper of the west. He founded Ft. Bridger in southwestern Wyoming in 1843 to help pioneers on their journey. He could speak English, French, Spanish, and could track any trail. However, he could not read or write a word of any language. Bridger had once been shot in the back with two Indian arrows. One arrow was removed years later by Dr. Marcus Whitman.
Many towns have put up artwork, statues, or historical markers to commemorate the pioneers’ journey West.
Scott Spring, Kansas

Some wagon swales (ground depressions) were visible at this park beside Scott Spring.
Pioneer’s Grave, Kansas

“Here lies an early traveler, N.G. Lust. His life in quest of riches in the west.”
Alcove Spring - Blue Rapids, Kansas

Alcove Spring has never dried up, even in the most severe Kansas droughts.
Alcove Spring - Blue Rapids, Kansas

A pioneer scratched “Alcove Spring” into a large rock. Other names and dates are seen on nearby rocks.
This is the grave of Sarah Keyes, the first member of the Donner party to die along the journey in 1846. Most of her party later froze to death in the Sierra Mountains of California later that winter.
Rope Ferry replica, Kansas

HISTORY OF THIS SITE

IN THE 1800'S THIS SITE WAS 100 FEET SOUTH OF THE "BLUE EARTH" OR BIG BLUE RIVER. THE RIVER FLOWED ONE QUARTER MILE SOUTHEAST OF HERE BEFORE LOOPING BACK WEST. THIS HORSESHOE-SHAPED CHANNEL WAS CUT OFF IN THE 1920'S WHEN A NEW HIGHWAY AND BRIDGE WERE BUILT.

IN 1851 FRANCIS J. MARSHALL BUILT A GROUP OF CABINS NEAR HIS HOME ON A KNOLL 700 FEET NORTHWEST OF HERE. HIS GENERAL STORE WAS AN INDIAN TRADING POST AND THE FIRST CIVILIAN POST OFFICE IN KANSAS TERRITORY. HE BUILT A BLACKSMITH SHOP, STABLES AND CORRALS. THE CITY OF MARYSVILLE GREW FROM THIS BEGINNING NEAR THE INTERSECTION OF MANY HISTORIC TRAILS.

TRAFFIC OFTEN CROSSED A LOW WATER FORK NORTH OF THIS PARK BRINGING WESTBOUND TRAVELLERS THROUGH THIS VERY SPOT ON THE SOUTH BANK OF THE RIVER. MARSHALL'S ROPE FERRY OPERATED FURTHER UP RIVER. OFTEN HUNDREDS OF WAGONS WITH THOUSANDS OF PIONEERS CAMPED FOR DAYS WAITING THEIR TURN TO CROSS. PIONEER DEATH FROM ILLNESS WAS COMMON AND DiARIES TELL OF MANY GRAVES NEAR THE CROSSINGS.
Ft. Kearny, Nebraska

The interior of Ft. Kearny (CAR-nee) and a replica Blacksmith Shop and wagons.
Ft. Kearny, Nebraska

Ft. Kearny’s “Powder Magazine” was built into a hill. Ammunition and weapons were stored here.
A signed warned visitors to close the wagon wheel gate or nearby cows could get in and rub on the sod house, knocking it down.
Windlass Hill, Nebraska

Here, covered wagon travelers faced the most difficult terrain since their departure from Missouri. One man said:

“I cannot say at what angle we descend, but it is so great that some go so far as to say, ‘the road hangs a little past the perpendicular.’”
Oregon Trail Ruts on Windlass Hill
Ash Hollow, Nebraska

A nice resting spot for tired travelers after descending Windlass Hill.
Nathan Pattison, 23, and Rachel Pattison, 18, had only been married 2 months when Nathan wrote in his journal, “Rachel taken sick in the morning, died in the night.” She died of cholera. Nathan never remarried and died at 67 years old.
Courthouse and Jail Rocks, Nebraska

Courthouse and Jail Rocks are two of the most famous landmarks of westward migration. Nearby passed the Oregon-California Trail, the Mormon Trail, the Pony Express Trail, and the Sidney-Deadwood Trail. The rocks were vanguards of unforgettable scenic wonders that travelers would encounter further west, including Chimney Rocks’ curious spire and the rugged heights of Scott’s Bluffs. Hundreds of overland emigrants mentioned Courthouse Rock in their diaries. Often called a “castle” or “solitary tower,” the name Courthouse was first used in 1837. One 1845 traveler described the rock as “resembling the ruins of an old castle (which) rises abruptly from the plain... It is difficult to look upon it and not believe that art had something to do with its construction. The voyagers have called it the Courthouse: but it looks infinitely more like the Capitol.”

Courthouse and Jail Rocks, rising some 400 feet above the North Platte Valley, are erosional remnants composed of clay, sandstone, and volcanic ash. The rocks are listed in the National Register of Historic Places and in the Nebraska Natural Areas Register.

Nebraska State Historical Society
Chimney Rock, Nebraska

The chimney is eroding over time. Several feet were knocked off the top by lightning in 1995.
Scotts Bluff, Nebraska

Views from the summit of Scotts Bluff – named in memory of Hiram Scott, employee of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.

Scott was deserted by his companions and left to die in 1828. His bleached bones were found a year later. He had crawled 60 miles before dying.
Fort Laramie, Wyoming

“Old Bedlam,” the oldest military building in Wyoming, was built in 1849 and later restored. It housed unmarried officers who were stationed at Fort Laramie to protect the emigrants.

These ruins are the cavalry quarters for the soldiers who patrolled by horseback. Fort Laramie began as a log fort in 1834, built by William Sublette. It then became a fur trading post in 1836 until the army took over in the 1840s.
Deep Rut Hill - Guernsey, Wyoming

These wagon ruts were formed when wagons followed single file through this area, wearing away the soft rock.
Register Cliff - Guernsey, Wyoming

Many pioneers carved their names on Register Cliff as they passed by.

The swallows had built mud nests in the cracks of the cliff. There were many insects buzzing around for them to eat.
Signatures on Register Cliff

H. Boles
1859

S. H. Patrick
June 6, 1859

G. O. Willard
Boston 1855

R. N. Nesbit
August 2, 1855
Signatures on Register Cliff

Three generations of the Unthank family passed by the cliff. A.H. Unthank is buried 50 miles down the trail where he died of cholera.
Independence Rock was usually reached around the 4th of July. Emigrants would picnic, celebrate, and carve their names here. The rock takes up over 24 acres of land!
Independence Rock, Wyoming

William Sublette named Independence Rock on July 4, 1830.

Nicknamed “The Register of the Desert.”

Ezra Meeker traveled the Oregon Trail as a child, then returned as an adult to help save the trail. He carved and painted the words above, “Old Oregon Trail.”
Devil’s Gate, Wyoming

The Sweetwater River cut this path through the rock at Devil’s Gate.

The “gate” is 400 feet wide at the top, but only 30 feet wide at the bottom.
Split Rock, Wyoming

Split Rock is named for the notch at the top that resembles a gun sight.
The Continental Divide

This sign told about South Pass, where pioneers were able to easily cross the Continental Divide.

Many pronghorn antelope can be seen in Wyoming.
Parting of the Ways, Wyoming

This marker tells of the “Parting of the Ways,” where travelers chose to go to California or Oregon. Some say that those who could read, went right to Oregon. Those who could not, went left to California.
In 1843, mountain man Jim Bridger and Louis Vasquez established Fort Bridger in southwestern Wyoming. This model shows what it looked like back then. It had a small blacksmith shop and other supplies they sold at high prices.
This replica shows Fort Bridger today. Bridger sold it to the Mormons in 1858. The military took over the fort from 1858-1890.
Soda Springs, Idaho

Hooper Spring (left) and Octagon Spring (below) are two springs that bubble with naturally carbonated water from the ground. Pioneers enjoyed a tasty drink by sweetening it with sugar!
Ft. Hall along the Snake River was a welcome sight to many travelers.
Fort Hall, Idaho

Just outside Ft. Hall is a small zoo of animals. Pioneers would have seen wild buffalo, elk, and deer in that area during the time of the Oregon Trail journeys.
Massacre Rocks, Idaho

In 1862, a band of Shoshone Indians resisted the wagon train traffic though their territory and killed several pioneers. Future emigrants regarded this small canyon along the Snake River as their most dangerous exposure to Indians. They named it Massacre Rocks.
Register Rock, near the Snake River canyon, was one more place for pioneers to carve their names into rocks.
Near Register Rock

When his wagon train passed by around 1866, 7 year old J.J. Hansen carved a preacher and an Indian on this rock. In Oregon, he became a sculptor when he grew up. Hansen returned in 1906 to sign and date his carving again.
Three Island Crossing
Glenns Ferry, Idaho

You can still see the wagon ruts where the pioneers came down to the Snake River to cross. Three small islands in the river provided a safer crossing. To stay on the south side of the river was a harder route for travelers.
Three Island Crossing

These oxen, horses, and wagon teams were practicing for a yearly reenactment of the pioneers fording the river at Three Island Crossing. Even today, river crossings can be dangerous.
Blue Mountain Crossing, Oregon

The wooded Blue Mountains were the last mountain crossing pioneers had to endure. You can still see a wagon swale (above right) from the Oregon Trail.
By Land or By Water?

Soon, pioneers had to make a choice. Continue overland and go around Mt. Hood on the difficult Barlow Road, or raft down the dangerous Columbia River with all of their belongings.
About two out of three pioneer families trying to reach Oregon City chose to take the Barlow Road, even though they had to pay a toll to travel it.

The toll was $5 per wagon and 10¢ per animal.
The most difficult part of the Barlow Road was descending Laurel Hill.

The tree stump in the center-right is probably what is left of a “snag” tree. Pioneers used to secure ropes to these trees like pulleys in order to lower the wagon down the hill slowly. This view only shows from the middle of the hill up to the top.
Rock Wall

This wall of rocks was made by emigrants after crossing the Salmon River. As they came out of the riverbed, they tossed the rocks aside so the path was clear for the oxen and wagon. These rocks gradually built up into a rock wall.
Graves of Barlow Road

Pioneer Woman’s Grave

Baby Morgan’s Grave

A grave marked with a wagon tongue.

A small pioneer cemetery.
West Tollgate

This is a replica of the last tollgate along the Barlow Road. The tollgate keeper would live in a house by the gate and collect the tolls as the wagons came by.
Phillip Foster was the first provisional governor of Oregon. He was a partner of Sam Barlow and helped fund and build the Barlow Road.

This lilac was brought to Oregon by Mrs. Foster when she and her husband sailed around Cape Horn to reach the northwest territory. The lilac has continued to grow since 1843.
Oregon City, Oregon

A plaque in stone marks the official End of the Oregon Trail at Abernethy Green in Oregon City. These large covered wagons are 3 learning centers you can visit.
The End

Maybe one day you, too, can explore the Oregon Trail!