

Basic Facts About the Oregon Trail



The Oregon Trail was a wagon road stretching 2170 miles from Missouri to Oregon's Willamette Valley. It was not a road in any modern sense, only parallel ruts leading across endless prairie, sagebrush desert, and mountains. From the 1840s through the 1880s, thousands trekked westward, carrying only a few belongings and supplies for the journey, and settling on the western frontier, forever changing the American West.

The first Europeans and Euro-Americans to see the far west were mountain men, trappers, overland explorers, and maritime explorers of the fur trade era. Maps and reports published information about landscapes and resources. Fur trading posts began to spring up throughout the interior. John Jacob Astor of the American Fur Company established Astoria on the west coast in 1811, and the next year sent Robert Stuart eastward with dispatches. Weaving together a series of Indian trails, Stuart found South Pass through the Rockies, a route with an elevation of 7000 feet and easy grades which allowed passage through this barrier. Stuart's route would ultimately become the Oregon Trail.

As frontiersmen and fur traders from Canada and the United States began to populate the west, the network of trading posts and small settlements set up a political debate between England and the US on claims to land in the Pacific Northwest in the 1830s and 1840s. Increasing American settlers would cement US claims to the territory, in the mind of political leaders, who encouraged westward migration. At the same time, the US was rocked by a depression. Unemployment was high, money was scarce, and epidemics of malaria and yellow fever spurred people, especially of the middle and lower classes, to look for better opportunities. A missionary to Oregon, Jason Lee, toured the eastern states in 1838 extolling the virtues of the West, and Oregon in particular. Missionaries Marcus and Narcissa Whitman sent back letters from their mission in the interior of Oregon Country, furthering the interest in a promising new life for farmers and tradesman in the West.

In 1840, Joel Walker successfully brought his wife and five children westward over the route to Oregon. In 1841, the Bidwell–Bartleson party of over 60 people gathered at Independence, Missouri, the last settlement on the western frontier, to make the trek west to California. Poorly organized and supplied, they encountered hardships; about half the party changed plans and went to Oregon. In 1842, Elijah White led an organized wagon train of 100 people with an experienced guide. Two thousand miles later, across prairies, towering mountains and parched deserts unfamiliar to eastern farmers, they completed the trek. About half settled in Oregon, while the other half moved further south to California. They proved the journey could be successful, and kindled the hopes of thousands. In 1843, almost 900 people made the trip, bringing along cattle for new farms. In 1844, 400 people, and in the next two years, more than 5000 people completed the trek. Mormons, seeking refuge from religious persecution, followed part of the trail to new settlements around Salt Lake, and in the late 1840s, an explosion of fortune seekers responded to word of the California gold strikes. In April of 1849, more than 20,000 people left for Oregon and California.

Throughout the 1840s, politicians in the east advocated for settlement in the west, negotiated treaties solidifying claims, and established land grants for settlers. In July 1843, the Provisional Government of Oregon, made up of mostly American settlers, provided a means to claim up to 640 acres, a full square mile. Oregon became a US territory in 1848. The Donation Land Law of 1850 formalized the land law granting a single man 320 acres, with an additional 320 acres to his wife if he was married. Land claim options changed frequently over the next few years until national establishment of the Homestead Act in 1862. The promise of free land inspired many to take on and complete the difficult journey.

In addition to the plodding pace and agonizing labor of traveling 2200 miles a step at a time, the trip could kill. In summer, water sources dried up, oxen perished and families endured thirst. Others experienced starvation when they brought insufficient food supplies and found it impossible to live off the land. The route of the Oregon Trail was littered with cast off belongings as families struggled to lighten the load and save the health of their draft animals.

The most dreaded danger was cholera. It could spread rapidly among wagon trains. The mysterious nature of cholera made it even more frightening; a strong healthy person could develop a slight fever in the morning, be unconscious at noon, and dead in the evening. Combined with accidents, drowning at dangerous river crossings, and other illnesses, at least 20,000 people died along the Oregon Trail. Most trailside graves are unknown, as burials were quick and the wagon trains moved on.

Indians living along the route watched the growing number of emigrants with curiosity, suspicion, and the anxiety of unexpected and unwanted change to their way of life. Wise leaders of both sides made an effort to avoid trouble, and for the most part succeeded. Many Indians traded with wagon groups providing crucial food and supplies to emigrants, and offered guide services through difficult or dangerous crossings at rivers.

Each part of the journey had its challenges, but always the need to keep moving and complete the journey before supplies were exhausted, poor health killed, or winter weather closed mountain passages. Between 1841 and 1884, when a network of railroads connected the east coast to the Pacific Northwest, an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 people traveled overland. Some were born along the way, some were buried. Some settled permanently, and some traveled back east. Certainly no one who made the 4–6 month journey was ever the same. For many, it was the most incredible and defining event of their lives. Their legacy of courage and determination is a legendary part of the American experience.

As the frontier west gave way to settlement the Oregon Trail might have been forgotten, save for pioneers who formed historical societies, and especially the work of 1852 pioneer Ezra Meeker, an advocate of trail preservation. He retraced the journey back and forth across the continent starting in 1906, placing markers. In 1978, Congress designated it as the Oregon National Historic Trail, part of the National Trails System.

While only about 300 miles of actual trail ruts still remain, the route is preserved with over 125 historic sites, auto tour routes, and markers. The trail is managed by the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, US Forest Service, state agencies, and private organizations and land owners who want the history and memory of this remarkable American event preserved.