



Oregon Trail

The Oregon Trail became one of the key migration routes that pioneers crossed on their way to the vast west. Spanning over half the continent the trail proceeded over 2,170 miles west through territories that would later become Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho, and Oregon. The long journey through endless plains, rolling hills, and mountain passes, began in Independence, Missouri and ended at the Columbia River in Oregon.

The route of the Oregon Trail began to be scouted as early as 1823 by fur traders and explorers. By the 1830s, it was used regularly by mountain men, traders, missionaries, and military expeditions.

At the same time, small groups of individuals and the occasional family attempted to follow the trail, with some succeeding in arriving at Fort Vancouver, Washington.

On May 16, 1842 the first organized wagon train on the Oregon Trail set out from Elm Grove, Missouri, with more than 100 pioneers. On May 22, 1843, what is known as the Great Migration, with up to a 1,000 settlers, live stock and more, in a massive wagon train, departed to follow the same route from Independence Missouri, arriving in the Willamette Valley. Hundreds of thousands more would follow, especially after gold was discovered in California in 1849.



While the first few parties organized and departed from Elm Grove, Missouri, the Oregon Trail's generally designated starting point was Independence or Westport, Missouri. The trail ended at Oregon City, Oregon, which was the proposed capital of the Oregon Territory at the time. However, many settlers branched off or grew exhausted short of this goal and settled at convenient or promising locations along the way.

At many places along the trail, alternate routes called "cutoffs" were established, either to shorten the trail, or to get around difficult terrain. The Lander and Sublette cutoffs provided shorter routes through the mountains than the main route, bypassing Fort Bridger, Wyoming. In later years, the Salt Lake cutoff provided a route to Salt Lake City.

Oregon Trail was too long and arduous for the standard Conestoga wagons used in the eastern U.S. for most freight transport. These big wagons had a reputation for killing their oxen teams approximately two thirds along the trail and leaving their unfortunate owners stranded in desolate, isolated territory. The only solution was to abandon all belongings and traipse onward with the supplies and tools that could be carried or dragged. In one case in 1846, the Donner Party, en route to California, was stranded in the Sierra Nevada in November and had to resort to cannibalism to survive.



This led to the rapid development of the prairie schooner. Though this wagon looked similar, it was approximately half the size of the big Conestogas and also manufactured in quantity by the Conestoga Brothers. It was designed for the conditions and was a marvel of engineering in its time.

Pioneers on the Oregon Trail followed various rivers and used landmarks along the trail to guide their way and gauge their progress. Within Nebraska, the Oregon Trail followed the Platte River and then the North Platte River into Wyoming. Along this part of the journey, the Great Plains started giving way to bluffs and hills that were the precursor of the Rocky Mountains. After crossing the Rockies through South Pass, the trail followed the Snake River to the Columbia River. From there, emigrants had the option of either rafting down the Columbia to Fort Vancouver, or taking the Barlow Road to the Willamette Valley and other destinations in what are now the states of Washington and Oregon.

Many rock formations became famous landmarks that Oregon Trail pioneers used to navigate, as well as leave messages for pioneers following behind them.



The first landmarks the pioneers encountered were in Western Nebraska, such as Court House Rock, Chimney Rock, and Scotts Bluff (where wagon ruts can still be seen to this day). Further west, in Wyoming, you can still read the names of pioneers carved into a landmark bluff called Register Cliff.

A number of other trails followed the Oregon Trail for part of its length. These include the Mormon Trail from Illinois to Utah, and the California Trail to the gold fields of California.

Other migration paths for early settlers prior to the establishment of the transcontinental railroads involved taking passage on a ship rounding the Cape Horn of South America or to the Isthmus (now Panama) between North and South America. There, an arduous mule trek through hazardous swamps and rain forests awaited the traveler. A ship was typically then taken to San Francisco, California.

The trail was still in use during the Civil War, but traffic declined after 1869 when the transcontinental railroad was completed.

However, in its more than 25 years of regular use, the trail carried an estimated 300,000 emigrants to the vast west, a trip that took about five months to complete. The trail continued to be used into the 1890s, when modern highways began to take its place, eventually paralleling large portions of the trail. Today, U.S. Highway 26 follows the Oregon Trail for much of its length.