

Oregon Trail Tour

[Click here to view a map of the Oregon Trail in Adams County](#)

THE OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAIL IN ADAMS COUNTY: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Send comments, suggestions, questions to Dr. Will Locke walocke@charter.net

The Way Was Through Adams County

Today one can travel from Independence, Missouri, on the Interstate system at 75 mph, 600 miles per day and arrive at the Willamette Valley in Oregon or the Central Valley in California in three days. This is about the time it took the plodding ox teams to pull the wagons diagonally across Adams County from near the Little Blue River in the southeast to the "Lone Grave" in the northwest at the overlook of the Platte River, a distance of approximately 30 miles. The original Oregon Trail, America's first interstate highway, crossed Adams County because it was on the most direct route between the bend of the Missouri River at Independence and South Pass at the southern end of the Wind River Mountains in southwestern Wyoming. It was also the smoothest because it followed the natural drainage systems of the Kansas, Little Blue, Thirty-Two Mile Creek, Platte, North Platte, and Sweetwater in order to reach the easiest crossing of the Continental Divide at South Pass.

The First People Showed the Way

The Pawnee hunters and scouts traveled on foot and then on horse along the gentle valleys and over the smooth divides of Adams County for hunting and trading. They must have known every spring, stream bend, pool, fishing hole, plum thicket, and buffalo wallow in the Little Blue watershed. The Pulitzer prize winning Kiowa writer, N. Scott Momaday, who has spoken at Hastings College on at least two occasions, describes the early 19th century as the flowering of the horse culture on the Great Plains. The first Euro-whites - the explorers and the mountain men - joined this horse culture golden age and rode the Indian trails up the Little Blue and Thirty-Two Mile Creek to the broad and braided Platte termed the "Coast of Nebraska" by John Charles Fremont.

President Jefferson Orders the Military Explorers

to Follow the Rivers

Even the far sighted and well read Jefferson poorly understood the vastness and the potential of the newly purchased Louisiana Territory. He well understood that the rivers "knew" the way and he sent military parties up the great rivers in search of routes across this greatly expanded "empire." For the most part, they followed Indian trails along the valleys and divides and in many cases they received substantial aid from the tribes. Jefferson presented Meriwether Lewis with orders to find the Northwest Passage via the Missouri River and with pages of questions about the tribes. Months into the journey (August 12, 1805) Lewis stood atop Lemhi Pass on the Montana/Idaho border where he had hoped to gaze west to a grassy plain bisected by the gentle Columbia rolling down to the Pacific and forlornly viewed and described range after range of snowcapped mountains. Thus ended the dream of a Northwest Passage accessed by the Missouri and the search for a transcontinental route continued.

As Captains Lewis and Clark hurried down the Missouri to a celebratory homecoming in St. Louis in the summer and fall of 1806, Lt. Zebulon Pike headed west from Bellefontaine (just north of St. Louis) with orders to find the sources of the Arkansas and the Red. A large Spanish expedition intended to stop both, but the Spaniards were too late for Lewis and Clark and too early for Pike. Pike met with the Republican Pawnees in the summer of 1806 on the Republican River between Guide Rock and Red Cloud which is just south of Adams County and with his small band convinced them to lower the Spanish flag in favor of the United States flag. He then headed southwest to the great bend on the Arkansas and followed the Spanish trail across the dusty plains to within sight of a "blue cloud" later to be named Pikes Peak.

Blocked by the Royal Gorge, he headed to the northwest and celebrated Christmas Day, 1806, near the source of the Arkansas surrounded by over a dozen 14,000' peaks. Indeed, there was no passage to the Northwest through these rugged ranges, but part of the Great Plains section of the Arkansas River valley did become the route of the Santa Fe Trail.

In the summer of 1804, William Clark pushed up the Platte and managed only six miles through the sand bars before turning around. But in 1820 Lt. Stephen Harriman Long found horse travel along the Platte to his liking, although on his map he labeled this land "The Great American Desert" and noted that it was uninhabitable. Today, should you choose to travel the Oregon Trail in Adams County and along the Platte River, you will observe world class agricultural practices including seed corn production, irrigation equipment production, meat animal research, 24 row planters using global positioning system (gps) technology, and 200 bushel corn in any year wet or dry.

The Platte River Becomes the Way

The Mountain Men, missionaries, and traders led the way in using the Platte River valley to breach the barriers of the "Great American Desert" and the Rocky Mountains. Franzwa (1972) suggests that Jedediah Smith and Robert Campbell used old Indian traces which later became the Oregon Trail on their way west in 1825. Franzwa continues, "Smith, Sublette, and Jackson probably used it with their wagons, on the way to the 1830 rendezvous." The following additional items in the chronology of the Platte River road are based on the work of Merrill Mattes in his classic *The Great Platte River Road*:

- 1812 - Robert Stuart and six men returned from the fur trading post in Astoria near the mouth of the Columbia through South Pass in Wyoming and then followed the North Platte and Platte Rivers.
- 1825 - William Ashley brought a pack train of supplies to the Green River trappers rendezvous at Great Salt Lake following Indian trails on the Platte River route.
- 1835 - Presbyterian missionaries, Marcus Whitman and others, used the Little Blue pathway to the Platte River/South Pass route to get to Oregon and the next year his wife followed.
- 1841 - The first emigrant party, the Bidwell-Bartelson party, left Westport Landing (Kansas City) bound for Oregon.
- Lt. John C. Fremont leaves Chouteau's Landing on his first exploring expedition. (His camp site on the Little Blue is noted in the following slide show).
- 1843 - A party of some 1000 people departed Independence under the leadership of Marcus Whitman. The Route from Independence to Adams County

The route from Independence, Missouri, usually started out following the Santa Fe Trail west southwest for several miles. At the first of many parting of the ways near Gardner, Kansas, it veered west along the south bank of the Kansas River and approximately where Topeka is today ferried or forded to the north side and headed northwest to find the Little Blue west of Marysville, Kansas, which provided a mostly smooth road into Adams County. The clear goal of the traveler for the Adams County section was to move from the Little Blue River valley with its good water and firewood over the dry divide to the Platte River valley with the least possible wear and tear on livestock and equipment. When St. Joseph became a major point of departure, the St. Joseph Road joined the Independence Road west of Marysville. In later years Nebraska City or Council Bluffs became the jumping off places and traffic through Adams County declined.

Challenges of the Trail

The route was not without problems for in May the streams were likely to be high and much valuable time was spent waiting for flood waters to recede so wagons could ford even the smaller creeks. Routes through "bottoms" often required the teams to pull through heavy mud or detour to higher ground. Ironically, by June the first hot south winds of summer were often blowing and baking the muddy trail into brick hard ruts and the low humidity dried out the running gear which caused all sorts of problems. In drier years the wagons would travel in parallel lines to avoid the choking dust. There was no wood in the upland and only a limited supply along the river and the creeks so cook fires were fueled by buffalo chips gathered on the bluestem prairie. Catherine Haun wrote in her journal regarding her 1849 journey across the plains (Schlissel, 1992), "Buffalo chips, when dry, were very useful to us as fuel. On the barren plains when we were without wood we carried empty bags and each pedestrian 'picked up chips' as he, or she, walked along." Violent storms also challenged and frightened the emigrants. Elizabeth Dixon Smith (Holmes, 1983) wrote about a violent hail storm she endured in July, 1847:

to day we the dredfulest hail storm that I ever witnessed which me and
 a young woman had like to have been caught in as we went out to visit
 the famous chimney rock fortunatealy we reached one of the foremost
 wagons just as the hail began to pelt us. It tore some of their wagon
 covers off broke some bows and made horses and oxon run away & made
 bad work they say a bout it is subject to tornadoes.

Merrill Mattes (1969) and others have called this route the world's longest graveyard. Persons were lost to accidents and disease especially Asiatic cholera which was at its peak during the Gold Rush years. Most were buried hastily in shallow graves with livestock and wagons trampling the soil to keep wolves from digging up the remains. Mattes estimates an average of ten graves per mile and, ". . . one death for every 17 who started." "Seeing the elephant" was the phrase often used by the emigrants when faced with the most severe challenges. In general the tribes were not a threat until much later when whites breached treaties, encroached on sacred hunting lands, and killed the buffalo (See trail images 29 & 30 that follow).

Still, the crossing from the Little Blue to the Platte Valley was pretty good going. The water was good except for the dry stretch from high in the Thirty-Two Mile Creek drainage to the Platte. Grass for the stock was good in the early years consisting primarily of the warm season grasses of big bluestem, switch grass, and Indian grass. This first part was the easy section because when they left the Platte southwest of Casper they faced mountains and deserts and almost at the end they had to choose between the dangerous Dalles on the Columbia or Barlow's rugged toll road around Mt. Hood. Why Did They Come?

Why did the pioneers brave the exhausting mud, the choking dust, the relentless wind, the bruising hail storms, the burning sun, and the numbing cold? Perhaps the best explanation is that it was a mix of thoughts and goals such as the grass is greener, thirst for adventure, desire for freedom and space, dreams of a new life in a new land, quick riches, and religion. Certainly economic hard times in general and the economic panic of 1837 specifically provided motivation for many. Rumors of opportunities in the promised land of Oregon were fueled by speculators and railroaders. From 1841 to 1866 Mattes (1969) estimates 350,000 traveled west on the Oregon-California Trail to see if they could turn dreams of a new life into reality.

Freighting, Stage Lines, and the Pony Express

Beginning in 1846, the federal government supplied military forts west of the Missouri and freighting companies flourished. The firm of Russell, Majors, and Waddell became the dominant carrier. Freighters and then stage lines followed the standard Oregon Trail route. An interesting but short lived chapter in trail history was inaugurated April 3, 1860, when the first Pony Express ride was launched from St. Joseph. The first of five operating divisions (Godfrey, 1994) was the St. Joseph to Ft. Kearny section. Joe Nardone, National Executive Director of the Pony Express Trails Association (personal interview June 2, 2008, and letter of July 1, 2008), states: "The 29 miles of original trail thru Adams County, from April 3, 1860 to November 20, 1861, used only one station site. That was thirty-Two Mile Creek Station." He goes on to explain the need for additional stations:

These Original Stations were too far apart for the near daily stagecoach service called for in the new contract. New stations were needed. These new stations I call Added Stations and Adams County would have two of these. They were Lone Tree to the east and Sand Hill to the west of Thirty-Two Mile Creek station. The Pony Express was officially discontinued with the completion of the overland telegraph line. It lasted 18 months, included 308 rides each way for a distance of 616,000 miles, and carried 35,000 pieces of mail. (Godfrey, 1994) (See image 17)

Epilogue

The Pawnee, besieged by the Sioux and ever increasing numbers of whites, struggled to maintain their traditional way of life. Steve Buss (1996) describes the intersection of the two cultures in these words:

Twice annually they left their Platte River villages and traveled to hunt bison. The route to their hunting grounds crossed Adams County from

the northeast to southwest. The Pawnee Trail, clearly marked by travois ruts and hundreds of pony tracks, intersected the Oregon Trail at the summit of the divide between the Little Blue and the Platte in western Adams County. This physical crossroads symbolized a cultural crossroads in the 1840s and 1850s: the Pawnee were nearing the end of their time in the region, while the Euro-Americans were on the verge of complete domination of plains culture.

At first, the Euro-whites like the Pawnee before them just passed through Adams County. But as the number of travelers increased, freighting became big business, stage lines began running, and the Pony Express performed its 18 month run, it became necessary to develop a support system. Folks living and working in these stations learned that Adams County was not the Great American Desert and, encouraged by the Homestead Act of 1863, homesteading began. The Union Pacific Railroad was completed across Nebraska in 1869 which resulted in a dramatic decline of traffic on the trail, although some use continued for many years.

Adams County was organized in 1871 followed by the founding of the city of Hastings in 1874 and the chartering of Hastings College in 1882. In 1978 the Oregon Trail was designated a National Historic Trail. Monuments and memorials have been constructed including the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis, Rock Springs State Historical Park near Fairbury, Ft. Kearny State Historical Park, Chimney Rock National Historic Site, and Scotts Bluff National Monument.

In recent decades, Adams County has paid tribute to the importance the Oregon Trail in several ways. Adams County Historical Society sponsored an Oregon Trail tour on July 25, 1976. We celebrated the Sesquicentennial of the Oregon Trail with ACHS sponsored Oregon tours June 12 and 13, 1993, and we plan to conduct tours in June of 2009. Hastings Public Schools sponsored summer historic trails classes in the 1980s and 1990s where junior high students followed the trails to Wyoming in Journey to the Source of the Platte (directed by Will Locke with state poet William Kloefkorn and teachers Sandra Warner and Jerry Swingle). Hastings College Professor of Teacher Education, Dr. Will Locke, (with Kloefkorn, Warner, Swingle, and Richard Fruehling, M.D.) conducted graduate courses on the Oregon Trail (Platte River Trails) and other historic trails starting in 1987 and they continue to the present. All of these tours and classes have made the Lone Grave in northwest Adams County a destination of special importance. Grand Island family practice physician, Dr. Richard Fruehling, takes every class of University of Nebraska Medical School family practice interns to the Lone Grave for a lesson in Oregon Trail history.

A new Oregon-California Trails Association marker was dedicated at the Susan Haile grave site by the Adams County Historical Society on October 20, 2002. Randy Brown, chairman of the Graves and Sites Committee of OCTA, wrote an article for the occasion titled, "The Grave of Susan Haile." (Brown, 2002) (See images 30 & 31) The 1976 ACHS Oregon Trail tour guide said it well, "The Oregon Trail disappeared into the limbo of history leaving the trace of ruts still discernible in places and thousands of unknown graves a sacrifice to the building of the West." The intention of this overview and the pictorial trail guide that follows is to keep the pioneer trails legacy alive. As you view the images or as you stand at the Lone Grave, look for the clouds of dust and listen for the creak and clatter of harness and wagon.

THE OREGON TRAIL IN ADAMS COUNTY:

IMAGES AND COMMENTARY

Introduction: The first part of the route description directs you to the location from Hastings. The second part directs you as near the trail as possible beginning in the southeast part of the county and moving to the northwest. This route follows gravel roads most of the time and is marked by signs to be placed in 2009 or 2010 as part of the OCTA-Pony Express "Near Trail Tour" project.

Images 1,2,3: "Snow's Corner" Oregon Trail Stone Marker and Viewscapes of "Nine Mile Ridge."

Location: SW ¼, Section 35, Hanover Township. 1,860'. Lat. 40° 26.243', Long. 98° 18.931'. 9.5 mi. south of Highway 6

and Showboat Blvd. on the east side of Hastings, 1.5 mi. east on Nebraska 74, on north side of highway east of Nebraska 74 and Pawnee Avenue surrounded by cedars and evergreens.

Comment: The view in slide one is to the southeast. The trail has already climbed out of the valley of the Little Blue River and is moving northwest (toward the camera) on the very smooth divide between the Little Blue on the south and Pawnee Creek on the north. Sometimes this stretch is referred to as "Nine Mile Ridge." The next view is to the northwest as the trail continues on "Nine Mile Ridge." Emigrants could have stayed close to the Little Blue a few more miles before the stream veers sharply to the south and away from their northwesterly course to the Platte River Valley. The stone marker was erected by the State of Nebraska in 1912.

Image 4: WNW Viewscape of Little Blue/Pawnee Creek Divide or "Nine Mile Ridge".

Location: Section 33, Hanover Township. Trail crossing is one mi. north of N 74 on Showboat Blvd or 8.5 mi. south on Showboat. From the O.T. marker, travel 1 mi. north on Pawnee Ave., west 1.5 mi. on Pony Express Rd., and .25 south on showboat Ave. or from O.T. marker, travel 1.5 mi. west on 74, .75 north on Showboat Blvd.

Comment: This viewpoint illustrates the smooth route choice that inflicts the least amount of wear and tear on equipment and stock. Visualize bluestem prairie instead of corn and only a few trees along the creek. Woody vegetation was sparse because of prairie fires set by lightning and the Indians and consisted of a scattering of cottonwoods, cedars, willows, plum thickets, and an occasional ash or bur oak. At this point on the trail, the travelers were learning to keep a supply of buffalo chips ready for their cook fires.

Images 5 & 6: Lone Tree Stage and Pony Express Station.

Location: Section SW ¼, Section 28, Hanover Township. 1,865'. Lat. 40° 27.109', Long. 98° 21.214'. 8.5 mi. south on Showboat Blvd., .5 mi. west on Pony Express Rd.

From image 4 location, travel .5 mi. north on Showboat Blvd, .5 west on Pony Express Rd.

Comment: This station was named after a single giant cottonwood tree located north of the trail and visible for miles from almost any direction. The appearance of a solitary large tree, broke the monotony of the treeless plain. Aubrey Haines (1981) reports that it was an Oregon Trail landmark, but it was blown down in 1865. The station (a two room log house) was destroyed and its stock taken during the August, 1864 Indian raid. Joe Nardone (2008) labels Lone Tree as an "added station." The granite marker was erected by ACHS in 1973 with granite from the old Hastings post office foundation. Perhaps the giant cottonwood in the center of image 6 and just above the irrigation motor could be a descendent of the "Lone Tree."

Image 7: Location of Fremont's Campsite June 25, 1842. No marker.

Location: NW ¼ Section 32, Hanover Township. 1,800'. Lat. 40° 26.754', Long. 98° 20.660'. 8.5 mi. south on Showboat Blvd., Approx. 1.2 mi. west on Pony Express Rd. From Lone Tree marker, travel .7 mi. west on Pony Express Rd.

Comment: For the approximate location of the campsite, look left/south past a grove of pine trees toward tall cottonwoods near the Little Blue (image 7). Maps show the campsite right on the north bank of the river, but the channel has most likely changed somewhat. John C. Fremont was mapping the Oregon Trail when he camped here June 25, 1842. He led many explorations and was known as "The Great Pathfinder." He led a party to the source of the Green River above Pinedale, Wyoming, which is the farthest source of the Colorado River. The source mountain in the Wind River Range was later named Fremont Peak. He also led a disastrous winter expedition near the headwaters of the Rio Grande in search of a railroad route to the mining territory in the San Juan mountains. He was elected as one of California's first two senators in 1850 and ran unsuccessfully for president in 1856. He ran again in 1860, but withdrew in favor of Abraham Lincoln.

Image 8: Simonton-Smith Freight Train Gravesite OCTA Marker.

Location: NW ¼, Section 24, Ayr Township. 1,880'. Lat. 40° 28.855', Long. 98° 23.685'. 6 mi. south on US 281, .4 east on Saddlehorn Rd. From the Fremont campsite location, travel .2 mi. west on Pony Express Rd., 1 mi. north on Elm Ave., .5 west on Sundown Rd., 1 north on Wabash Ave., .6 west on Saddlehorn Rd.

Comment: A freight train consisting of eight wagons loaded with hardware for Denver, was attacked Sunday morning, August 7, 1864, by a party of Cheyenne and Arapahoe Indians. Five men were killed instantly, a sixth was mortally wounded, and the wagons were burned. (Brown, 2007) The bodies and smoking wagons were found by two young couples out for a Sunday morning ride from Thirty-Two Mile Creek station and on Monday morning Overland Stage Line employees from the station arrived. The wounded teamster was able to give a few details of the attack before he died. The men were buried beside the trails 140 yards south of the OCTA marker. This is the only known burial site of white men who met death in Adams County due to hostile Indian activity. The Nova-Color OCTA marker was installed in 1996 on the south side of the road at the edge of a broad and deep ditch. Franzwa's Maps of the Oregon Trail shows ruts southeast of the markers, but with the installation of a center pivot irrigation system several years ago, they are no longer visible. The next image shows the flat marker indicating the burial site.

Image 9: Simonton-Smith Freight Train Gravesite Flat Marker Placed by Boy Scouts.

Location: NW ¼, Section 24, Ayr Township. 1,890'. Lat. 40° 28.781', Long. 98° 23.686'. It is located approximately 140 yards south of the OCTA marker near the boundary between a corn field and a pasture. In the event you get permission to enter this privately owned field, be aware that you will need to make your way through sometimes muddy terrain and tall weeds and grass.

Comment: Hastings Boy Scouts under the direction of Hastings Museum curator, A. M. Brooking, installed the ground level marker in May 17, 1931, with 300 in attendance. The concrete slab measures 48" x 52" and a brass plate approximately 15" in diameter is inlaid.

Image 10: Substation Ruts East Side US 281.

Location: SW ¼, Section 13, Ayr Township, junction of US 281 and Saddlehorn Rd. 1,894'. Lat. 40° 28.870', 98° 24.050'. 6 mi. south on US 281. From Simonton-Smith marker, travel .4 mi. east to Hwy 6.

Comment: The substation is built over the rut swales that are heading generally northwest. One swale just north of the substation fence is fairly easy to see. Until recently additional swales could be seen yards to the north in a pasture. Since a farm pond was drained and the pasture was plowed, these swales are no longer visible.

Images 11 & 12: Oregon Trail Marker on West Side of US 281/Viewscape to Northwest.

Location: SE ¼, Section 14, junction of US 281 and Saddlehorn Rd. 1,878'. Lat. 40° 28.867', 98° 24.125'. 6 mi. south on US 281.

Comment: The trail angled northwest across this steep drainage and must have been a hard pull after rains. This quarter section has been cultivated for decades and swales are not visible. D. W. Kingley, Jr. and Will Locke flew the trail in June in 1985 looking for faded color in the crops due to soil compaction from the trail traffic, but no crop color contrasts were observed. In steeper areas that had been left in native pasture swales were clearly evident. This marker was erected by the Niobrara Chapter of the DAR in 1912.

Images 13 & 14: Elm Creek Stage Station Marker

Location: NE ¼, Section 15, Ayr Township. 1,905'. Lat. 40° 29.329', 98° 25.262'. 5 mi. south on US 281, 1 mi west on Oregon Trail Rd., .6 mi. south on Marian Rd. From the O.T. marker in slide 11, travel one mile west on Saddlehorn Rd. and .4 mi. north on Marian Rd.

Comment: Drive on north on Marian Road past the Brickton marker to the Elm Creek marker. At the stage station marker look west across the small valley of Thirty-Two Mile Creek to the pasture and you will see several parallel swales climbing west out of the valley. Low angle light of early morning or late afternoon places these swales in shadow and they are easier to see. Light snows will make the swales stand out and during a thaw following deeper snows, snow will linger in the swales and one can see them clearly enough to count. Binoculars would be helpful as the "swales" are a half mile distant. This area must have been one of the tougher pulls of the Little Blue/Platte Valley trail segment. The first problem was the steep descent down into the valley. The brake mechanisms on the wagons were not very effective and the weight of the wagons would have pushed hard on the oxen. They could have run a pole through the rear wheels to provide additional braking action. Crossing the creek would have required the first wagon travelers of the season to dig ramps on both banks and perhaps to double team. Re-digging the ramps would be required after periods of high water. Once the pull out of the little valley was accomplished, the going was smooth until the crossing of the West Branch of Thirty-Two Mile Creek. Elm Creek Station was built by the Holladay Stage Line as a replacement for the Lone Tree Station which was burned during the Indian Raid of 1864. The marker was erected by ACHS in 1973. The granite stone came from the foundation of the old Hastings Post Office.

Images 15 & 16: Swales on South Side of West Branch of Thirty-Two Mile Creek (Before and After Plow).

Location: NW ¼, Section 5, Ayr Township. 1,927'. Lat. 40° 31.091', Long. 98° 28.685'. 3 mi. south of US 6 on Adams Central Ave., 1 mi. west on Oakridge Rd., .2 south on Osage Ave. From the Elm Creek marker (slides 12 & 13), travel .4 north on Marian Rd., 1 west on Oregon Trail Rd., 1 north on Persimmon Ave., 2 west on Assumption Rd., .5 north on Osage Ave.

Comment: Look east of the gravel road and swales can be seen on the low hill descending to a crossing of the creek. During the fall of 2007, these few acres of pasture were plowed and the swales will become more and more difficult to see. Note the before and after photos.

Image 17: Thirty-Two Mile Creek Stage and Pony Express Station. Clark's Ranch. Dinner Station.

Location: NE ¼, Section 6, Ayr Township. 1924'. Lat. 40° 31.328', Long. 98° 28.829'. 3 mi. south of US 6 on Adams Central Ave., 1 mi. west on Oak Ridge Rd., .2 mi. south on Osage Ave. From rut swales (slide 14), travel .2 mi. north on Osage Ave.

Comment: This location is almost exactly in the center of Adams County and the Thirty-Two Mile Creek Station name indicates the distance to Ft. Kearny. Russell, Majors, and Waddell formed the Leavenworth and Pikes Peak Express company in 1859 and most likely constructed the Thirty-Two Mile Station that year. Samuel Word kept a diary of his 1863 trip across the plains and the following words are from May 28: "We are now 32 miles from Fort Kearny. Am most anxious to reach Kearny for I expect to hear from home. Have just returned from a ranch close by, where immigrants and settlers to the number of 100 are congregated engaged in a genuine old-fashioned back woods dance. . . . The ranche was about 12 by 14 feet square covered with sod. . . . The house had what it would hold, the rest stood outside. . . many of the men were drunk from rifle whisky sold them by the proprietor of the ranche. His grocery was in one corner of the room. I left them dancing." (Word in Renschler, 1997)

Ted Stutheit (1987) of Nebraska Game and Parks offers the following description: ". . . consisted of one long, low sod building. In 1860 became a Pony Express Station (Nebraska Pony Express Station No. 10). In 1861 it was a 'Home' station for the Overland Stage where hot meals were served to travelers."

The original cement marker was erected in 1935 by A. M. Brooking, Hastings Museum curator, and Hastings Boy Scouts from Troop 200. The Adams County Historical Society reset the bronze plaque from the original marker into a new marker using granite from the old Hastings Post Office foundation. This site is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Image 18: Oregon Trail Marker on Juniata Road

Location: Section 36, Juniata Township. 1964'. Lat. 40° 32.149', Long. 98° 30.380'. 4.5 mi. west on Hwy 6, 2.3 mi. south on Juniata Ave. From Thirty-Two Mile Creek Station, travel .2 north on Osage Ave., 1.3 west on Oak Ridge Rd., .7 north on Juniata Ave.

Comment: This section of the trail falls between branches of Thirty-Two Mile Creek and is very smooth. The inscription on the granite stone reads, "Oregon Trail Marked by the State of Nebraska 1912." Scout troop 192 helped erect this marker.

Images 19 & 20: US 6 Oregon Trail Historical Marker and Pony Express Marker.

Location: North side of US 6, 8.5 miles west of Hastings. 2005'. Lat. 40° 34.089', Long. 98° 33.541'. From the Juniata Rd. marker, travel 1.3 mi. north on Juniata Ave., 2.5 mi. west on Idlewilde Rd., 1 mi. north on Roseland Rd., .3 west on Hwy. 6.

Comment: The trail moves from southeast to northwest on gentle ground between two branches of Thirty-Two Mile Creek. Soon the travelers will descend to Muddy Station on the West Branch of Thirty-Two Mile Creek. The inscription on the historical marker reads:

The most traveled of the overland routes passed this point on its way to the great Platte valley highway to the west. The Oregon Trail started from Independence, followed the Kansas River west, and then the Little Blue north into Nebraska. It crossed the divide to reach the Platte near Fort Kearny.

In the 1830s trappers and missionaries recognized the Platte valley as a natural roadway. The first wagon train followed the 2,000 mile trail to Oregon in 1842.

An estimated quarter of a million travelers used this route in the twenty-five years after those first wagons. Moving slowly, only 10 to 20 miles a day, for the three-month trip, thousands of hooves, shoes and wheels pounded a wide trail into the prairie.

Oregon was an early goal. The '49ers went through to California. Settlers, stage coaches, freight wagons, Pony Express riders and military expeditions all used this prairie highway.

With completion of the Union Pacific Railroad this route fell into disuse, but the Oregon Trail has earned a permanent place in our history.

This marker was erected in May, 1963, by Nebraska Historical Markers Council and the Nebraska Roads Department. The National Pony Express Centennial marker, a granite stone with bronze plaques, was dedicated in May, 1966, by the Adams County Historical Society. In mid February of 2006, thieves pried off one of the bronze plaques and a few days later, with the investigation underway, the second plaque disappeared. Plans are underway by ACHS to replace the missing markers.

Image 21: Viewscape of Muddy Station area on West Branch of Thirty-Two Mile Creek.

Location: Very little is known about this site and its exact location. Franzwa locates it in the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of section 17, Juniata Township. Nine miles west of Hastings on US 6, north one mile on Prosser Ave. .2 to .5 mile west on DLD Rd., on the south side of the road. From the O.T. and Pony Express markers on Hwy. 6 (Images 19 & 20) return east .3 mi. to the intersection of Hwy. 6 and Roseland Ave., north 1 mi. to DLD Rd., 1.3 mi. west on DLD Rd., south side of road.

Comment: There is no marker. An early settler in the area, Thomas Whiting, reported old building foundations, apparently a stable, and another building against the bank of the creek. These washed out many years ago. I have walked the bottom lands adjoining both sides of the creek and I find no markers or foundations. Long time landowner/farmers have not found any remnants of the station.

Image 22: Viewscape of West Running Divide Ridge.

Location: Drive west on the DLD Rd. crossing Bladen Ave., Overland Ave., and Wanda Ave. One of the highest points in the county (2,090') is located on the DLD Rd., section 12, house on north side of road. Lat. 40° Long. 98° 36.806'.

Comment: The travelers left the West Branch of Thirty-Two Mile Creek and climbed to a west running divide ridge. The wagons climbed out of the little valley approximately in alignment with the center pivot and then moved almost straight west 2.5 miles along this gentle ridge to Summit Station. The views were (and are in the absence of trees and buildings) excellent in every direction, but it was a waterless stretch.

Images 23, 24, 25: Summit/Sand Hill/Summit Springs Station. Two Markers.

Location: NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 11, Wanda Township. 2,090'. Lat. 40° 40.939', Long. 98° 36.806'. North .5 mile from DLD Rd. on Holstein Ave. From Muddy Station area (slide 18), travel 3.5 west on DLD Rd., .6 north on Hostein Ave.

Comment: This area was possibly the driest and windiest section of the pull from the Little Blue to the Platte Valley. Summit Station may have been established in 1860 for use as a Pony Express Station. Joe Nardone (2008) refers to it as an "added station". The station was abandoned after the Indian raids and never rebuilt. Frank Root in *The Overland Stage to California* (in Renschler, 1997) wrote:

The distance between thirty-two Mile Creek and the Platte is twenty-five miles. Summit the first station, was twelve miles. It was one of the most lonesome places in Nebraska, located on the divide between the Little Blue and the Platte . . . From its vicinity the waters flow south into the Little Blue and northeast into the west branch of the Big Blue. The surroundings for some distance on either side of the station represented a region of sand-hills with numerous deep ravines or gullies cut by heavy rains or waterspouts and dressed smoothly by the strong winds that have been blowing through them almost ceaselessly for untold centuries. Very little in the way of vegetation was noticeable at Summit or in the vicinity. It was a rather dismal looking spot. . . Necessity compelled the stage men to choose this location however, for the distance from Thirty-two Mile Creek to the Platte, twenty-five miles, was over a somewhat rough and hilly road, and it was too much of a pull for one team.

Because of land leveling for irrigation, the area today appears to be fairly smooth although the pull out of the little valley of the West Branch of Thirty-two Mile Creek would have been hard work.

Summit Station was first marked in 1935 by Hastings Boy Scouts under the direction of A. M. Brooking, Hastings Museum curator. The original marker was cement with a circular bronze plaque. In the 1973 the Adams County Historical Society erected a new marker at the site made from granite from the old Hastings Post Office foundation.

Image 26: Oregon Trail Marker One Mile South of Kenesaw Cemetery.

Location: NW ¼ of Section 10, Wanda Township. 2,078'. Lat. 40° 35.760', Long. 98° 38.893'. The Franzwa atlas and other maps show the main trail crossing the intersection of Smith Way (Hwy. 1A) and 12th Street approximately .3 miles north of the marker. From Summit Station, travel .4 north on Holstein Ave., .5 west on 12th St., .2 south on Smith Way (Hwy. 1A).

Comment: Just west of Kenesaw the trail jogged sharply west and then north to avoid a lagoon that is hardly visible today. John Klusman, while taking a break from planting in May, 2008, explained that the land had been leveled and drained in such a way that the lagoon that had previously been so prominent was no longer visible. The writer jogged this section of the trail in the late 1970s and recalls a large lagoon that obviously would have caused the wagons to detour. The goal was to get to Ft. Kearny with as little wear and tear on stock and equipment as possible; they were not going to get bogged down in a lagoon to save a mile. This marker was erected by the State of Nebraska in 1914.

Images 27-31: Viewscapes of Susan Haile Grave Site Area.

Location: SE ¼ of Section 18, Kenesaw Township. 2,057'. Lat. 40° 39.302', Lat. 98° 42.807'. 5.5 mi. northwest of Kenesaw on blacktop .6 mi. east on graveled 70th Street. From O.T. marker south of Kenesaw, travel .2 north, .5 west on 12th St., 1 mi. north on Constitution Ave., 1 mi. west on Kenesaw Blvd., 3 mi. north on Winchester Ave.

Comment: The view in image 27 presents a panorama of the Platte Valley. The Susan Haile grave is obscured by the plum thicket. In view # 28, imagine the wagons moving from left to right down the sandy hill. The rut swales were visible in this area until the 1970s when a center pivot was installed. The last half mile or so the travelers would have seen the Platte River for the first time. Most travelers would have reached this point in late May or June when the river was normally running high from Rocky Mountain snow melt. They would have been amazed at the width of the river with its many braided channels and islands. Cottonwoods and willows, etc. grew on the islands, but little if any tree growth would have been present in the valley and the south or near bank. They would have looked to the east northeast for dust clouds and white topped wagons signaling emigrants who were traveling the Nebraska City Cutoff. The two roads joined to the northwest in the broad valley of the Platte. The arrival at this viewpoint of the Platte River was welcomed because a) they had navigated the dry stretch of the Thirty-Two Mile Creek/Platte River Divide and water was near at hand, b) they could anticipate smooth traveling in the Platte Valley all the way to the South Platte Crossing, and after 1846 c) they could find supplies, repairs, and hopefully mail at Ft. Kearny.

Image 32: Close-up of Susan Haile Grave Stone.

Location: SE ¼ of Section 18, Kenesaw Township. 2,057'. Lat. 40° 39.302', Lat. 98° 42.807'. 5.5 mi. northwest of Kenesaw on blacktop (Smith Way, Lochland Rd., Denman Ave.). .6 mi. east on graveled 70th Street. From O.T. marker south of Kenesaw, travel .2 north on Smith Way (Hwy. 1A), .5 west on 12th St., 1 mi. north on Constitution Ave., 1 mi. west on Kenesaw Blvd, 3 mi. north on Winchester Ave., 1.5 west on 70th St.

Comment: The following lines rely extensively on the wonderful article by Randy Brown in the Spring, 2007, issue of Overland Journal, titled The Grave of Susan C. Haile. When I first visited this area in the late 1960s with Boy Scouts, it was generally known as the "Lone Grave." Randy Brown writes, "Most assuredly, however, when Susan Haile died in 1852 hers was not a lone grave. This was in the midst of the 'cholera corridor'," Most likely there were dozens even hundreds of graves along the Thirty-two Mile Creek/Platte River Valley stretch, but we know only the Susan Haile grave location. We know of the Haile grave because of the existence of a headstone. Intriguing legends and questions accompany the Haile story. Who was she? How did she die? How was a gravestone transported to the spot?

Often extended family units or clans moved from Virginia and Pennsylvania to Tennessee and Kentucky and then again to Missouri. The Seawells, Susan's grandparents followed this pattern and eventually settled in Missouri. Susan and R. C. Haile were married in 1836 when she was almost 19. Randy Brown searched for accounts of the journey but concludes, "Unfortunately, there is no contemporary account of the journey. They probably left the Missouri River in the Kansas City area, or they could well have headed northwest . . . to St. Joseph, one of the major outfitting towns of the time. . . . All that is known of the journey is that when they reached the Platte River in south-central Nebraska, Susan C. Haile died." The legend of the "Lone Grave" began when settlers in the late 1860s discovered the engraved stone marker.

The legends explaining her death are interesting and can be found in many sources. According to the legend, they secured water from the government well approximately six miles southeast of the grave (see images 23, 24, 25). It has been suggested that this water had been poisoned by Indians and thus caused the death of Susan Haile. Scholars take issue with this explanation for several reasons: 1) the Pawnees who traveled in the area were not warlike or hostile, 2) the Pawnees would have used the water themselves, and 3) the Pawnees did not have a poison effective in a well. 1852 was the height of the cholera epidemic on the trail. It is more likely that Susan Haile drank contaminated water that infected her with cholera, a violent intestinal disorder that led to rapid dehydration and then death sometimes in less than a day.

The next part of the legend suggests that the grieving husband returned to St. Joseph and purchased a granite marker which he brought back to the gravesite in a wheel-barrow. Catherine Renschler and Randy Brown have read many sources and conclude that it is most unlikely that R. C. Haile pushed a stone 250 miles across the prairie in a wheel-barrow. But Brown asserts, "Part of the legend may be true. Richard Haile marked his wife's grave with a headboard and could have returned to the settlements to get a proper marble headstone. . . .The wheelbarrow aspect, however, is undoubtedly an embellishment added in later years by local people."

Bill Sole (1972) wrote about the "Lone Grave" for the Adams County Centennial Year Publication in 1972. The first marker was, he writes, ". . .chipped to pieces by travelers and relic hunters." In 1900 children of Waterhouse Sunday School raised funds for a new marker and this one fell victim to souvenir hunters as well. The present stone was dedicated July 30, 1933, by members of the Hastings Outdoor Club.

Following communication with the descendants of Susan Haile and extensive research by Randy Brown and the Oregon California Trails Association, a new OCTA Plaque was installed and the Adams County Historical Society organized a program in Kenesaw followed by a dedication of the OCTA plaque at the grave site.

Image 33: Viewscape of Multiple Parallel Swales West of Susan Haile Grave Site.

Location: SW ¼ of Section 18, Kenesaw Township. 2070'. Lat. 40° 39.294', Long., 98° 42.930'. 5.5 mi. northwest of Kenesaw on blacktop (Smith Way, Lochland Rd., Denman Ave. .4 mi. east on graveled 70th Street. From grave site proceed west on 70th St. 100 yards or so.

Comment: The Oregon California Trails Association (OCTA) placed a carsonite (flexible like fiberglass) marker (four feet tall and five inches wide) at the fence line on the north side of the road to indicate the swales. In low light (early morning or late afternoon) the shadows highlight the swales or troughs heading northwest through the sandy hill and down to the level valley floor. Prevailing winds (northwest in the winter and southeast in the summer have contributed to the depth of the swales). Junior high students accompanying the writer on the Hastings Public Schools "Journey to the Source of the Platte" counted as many as eight parallel swales.

Images 34, 35, 36: State Marker, Pony Express Marker on Denman Avenue.

Location: SW ¼ of Section 18, Kenesaw Township. 2,043'. Lat. 40° 39.329', Long. 98° 43.453'. 5.5 mi. northwest of Kenesaw on blacktop (Smith Way, Lochland Rd., Denman Ave.) just north of intersection of Denman Ave. and 70th Street. From the grave site, travel .5 mi. west on 70th St. and .2 north on the blacktop (Denman Ave.).

Comment: The Nebraska Historical Marker explaining the Susan Haile story was erected by the Kenesaw Centennial Committee and the Nebraska State Historical Society. The smaller marker is inscribed, "In Search of Pony Express Station Marker. Sand Hill." It was dedicated June 8, 2002, by James Stretesky, Adams County Bank, Dorlene and Vern Hunt, Family of Leonard Osler, Pony Express Trails Association, and Joe Nardone, Historian.

References

Brown, Randy (2002). The Grave of Susan Haile. Historical News VOL. 35, No. 5. Adams County Historical Society.

Brown, Randy (2007). The Grave of Susan C. Haile. Overland Journal, Spring, 2007. The Oregon-California Trails Association.

Buss, Steve (1996). The Other Trail: Adams County's Pawnee Heritage. Historical News VOL 29, No. 1. Adams County Historical Society.

Creigh, Dorothy Weyer (1972). Adams County: The Story 1872-1972. Adams County-Hastings Centennial Commission, Hastings, Nebraska.

Franzwa, Gregory M. (1990). Maps of the Oregon Trail. The Patrice Press, St. Louis.

Franzwa, Gregory M. (1972). The Oregon Trail Revisited. The Patrice Press, St. Louis.

Godfrey, Anthony (1994). Pony Express National Historic Trail: Historic Resource Study. United States Department of the Interior/National Park Service.

Haines, Aubrey L. (1981). Historic Sites Along the Oregon Trail. The Patrice Press, Gerald, MO.

Holmes, Kenneth L., ed. (1983). Covered Wagon Women: Diaries & Letters from the Western Trails 1840-1849 Volume 1. University of Nebraska Press.

Mattes, Merrill J. (1969). The Great Platte River Road: The Covered Wagon Mainline Via Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie. The Nebraska State Historical Society.

Nardone, Joe. Interview June 2, 2008.

Nardone, Joe. Unpublished letter July 1, 2008.

O'Donnell (1995). Adams County, Nebraska: A Pictorial History. Adams County Historical Society.

The Pony Express. Article written by former board member, Charles Osborne and reprinted in Historical News VOL 26, No. 2, 1993. Adams County Historical Society.

Renschler, Catherine (). Unpublished accounts of historic trails events and markers in Adams County. Adams County Historical Society.

Schlissel, Lillian (1982). Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey. Schocken Books. New York.

Sole, Bill (1972). Adams County: The First One Hundred Years. Huls Publishing Co. Hastings, NE.

White, William (1997). The Oregon, California, and Mormon Trails by Air: A Pilot's Guide to the Immigrant Trails. Western Airtrails. North Logan, Utah.

Special thanks to Catherine Renschler, executive director of ACHS, who helped in a major way with the research and the writing and Elizabeth Spilinek, president of ACHS who helped with website application and design. Conversations with Randy Brown, OCTA Trail-Marking Committee Chair, and Joe Nardone, National Executive Director of the Pony Express Trails Association, have been both interesting and helpful. In these matters we stand on the shoulders of those who have walked the trails before such as Charles Osborne, Bill Sole, and Bill Belz.

[back to top](#)