

NEZ PERCE (NEE-ME-POO) NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL



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The Trail is sacred ground; please respect the resources during your travels.

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Since aiding the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1805, whites knew the Nez Perce Indians as friends. The Nez Perce (in their language, Niimiipuu, meaning “the people”) lived in bands, welcoming traders and missionaries to a land framed by the rivers, mountains, prairies, and valleys of present day southeastern Washington, northeastern Oregon, and north central Idaho. They moved throughout the region including parts of what are now Montana, and Wyoming to fish, hunt, and trade.

Fifty years after the Corps of Discovery, Washington Territorial Governor Isaac Ingalls Stevens met in council with Nez Perce leaders. The resulting 1855 Treaty with the U.S. Government guaranteed the tribes rights to their ancestral homeland in perpetuity, and set aside a Nez Perce reservation of some 5,000 square miles.

In 1860, encroaching prospectors struck gold in Idaho. Thousands of miners, merchants and settlers overran Nez Perce land, seized resources and committed depredations against tribal members. In 1863 the federal government responded with new treaty talks. This time, the U.S. wanted most of the Nez Perce reservation – including their treasured Wallowa region of northeastern Oregon and the Payette Lake region.

Many chiefs refused and angrily departed. Amid uncertainty, pressure, and promises, the remaining chiefs reluctantly agreed to a reservation 90 percent smaller than that of 1855. Without authority they ceded lands of Nez Perce who left the council, in a document thereafter called “the Thief Treaty.”

Non-Indians distinguished those who signed as “treaty” Nez Perce; those who had not were the “non-treaty.”

The 1863 Treaty divided the tribe and foreshadowed a war whose repercussions are still felt.



Hinmatóowyahtq'it's (Chief Joseph)

For some years non-treaty Nez Perce continued to live in the Wallows and other locations within traditional homelands. But conflict with newcomers increased, particularly in the Wallowa region, home of Hinmatóowyahtq'itnim (Thunder Rolling over the Mountains - Chief Joseph) and his band. Settlers petitioned the government to relocate the Nez Perce to the reduced 1863

Treaty reservation in Idaho, and in 1877, the U.S. Army was commanded to do so.

In May 1877, General Oliver Otis Howard and the non-treaty Nez Perce chiefs held a council at Fort Lapwai, in Lapwai, Idaho. Howard summarily ordered them to bring their families and livestock to Lapwai in 30



Along the Nez Perce National Historic Trail on the Chief Joseph Scenic Byway, Wyoming.

days – or the army would make them comply, by force. The chiefs argued the time was inadequate to gather the people and their horses and cattle, and asked for an extension, which Howard brusquely refused.

Years of high-handedness and mistreatment, and the prospect of losing their homelands, provoked several young warriors to vengeance. Riding from camp at Tolo Lake, Idaho they avenged past murders of relatives by killing some white settlers.

The Nez Perce flight began June 15, 1877 and intensified on June 17 after they defeated a cavalry force at the Battle of White Bird Canyon. Two weeks later, an unprovoked army attack brought 'Elélimyeteqenin'm (Wrapped in the Wind - Chief Looking Glass) and his band into conflict; the village had sought to avoid any



Photo by Mathew Brady Courtesy Library of Congress
General Howard

involvement in it whatsoever. In July of 1877, Tim'ine 'ilp'ilpnim (Chief Redheart's) band and other Nez Perce returned from a buffalo hunt in Montana to discover their homeland embroiled in conflict. All 33 men, women and children were transported to Fort Vancouver, WA, where they were held at the military stockade until April 1878, when they were finally returned to Idaho.

Swept into a fight they did not seek, nearly 750 Nez Perce, including allies from Upper Palouse bands, desperately fled for their lives. Only 250 were warriors: the rest were women, children, elderly, and sick. Leading a herd of 2,000 horses, they fought masterfully in some 20 battles and skirmishes with the U.S. Army, and repelled a devastating army attack on their sleeping village at the Big Hole on August 9.



Big Hole National Battlefield, Montana
The Nez Perce eluded more than 2,000 soldiers, civilian volunteers, and scouts from other Indian tribes, on a circuitous route through four states. They sought safety among Crow allies on the eastern Montana plains; when this failed, their last hope was sanctuary in Canada. After fleeing more than 1,100 miles they were trapped at Snake Creek at the base of the Bears Paw Mountains in Montana, and forced to submit to Colonel Nelson Appleton Miles on October 5, 1877 –

only 40 miles from Canada. Piyoop'yoos xaxxáyx (Chief White Bird) led a group of nearly 300 Nez Perce to safety in Canada, where they joined Chief Sitting Bull.



General Sherman
Courtesy Nez Perce National Historical Park

General William Tecumseh Sherman called the Nez Perce saga “the most extraordinary of Indian wars.” Today, their route is designated the Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail by act of Congress.

This historic route was used in its entirety only once; however, component trails and roads making up the Trail saw generations of travel prior to and after the 1877 conflict. Some became linked to modern road systems, while other stretches were abandoned for more direct routes better suited to automobiles. In places the original Nez Perce Trail can be experienced on the landscape today.



Trailhead, Hells Canyon, Oregon



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National Park Service
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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
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