

Historic Trails and Roads



- Free Emigrant Road
- Elliott Wagon Train
- Oregon Trail
- Cutoff to Barlow Road
- Meek Cutoff 1845

Other Interpretive Opportunities

- Lane, Benton, & Linn County Historical Societies
- Malheur National Wildlife Refuge
- BLM's Huntington Road Interpretive Trail
- Shaw Historical Library in Klamath Falls
- Oakridge Pioneer Museum
- Circle II in Sunriver
- Pleasant Hill Cemetery (Elliott's Grave)

For More Information Contact:

Deschutes National Forest

Crescent Ranger District
139471 Hwy. 97 N, Crescent, OR
541-433-3200; www.fs.usda.gov/deschutes

Willamette National Forest

Middle Fork Ranger District
46375 Hwy. 58, Westfir, OR
541-782-2283; www.fs.usda.gov/willamette

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Dedicated to the memory of Carol Winkler, former Middle Fork District Archaeologist.

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FREE EMIGRANT ROAD

An Oregon Historic Trail



Commemorative Artwork by Eugene Vocational School 1950; Greenwaters Park, Oakridge, Oregon.



for the greatest good

DISCOVER THE FREE EMIGRANT ROAD

The Free Emigrant Road (Road) played a brief but crucial role in Oregon's history. This shortcut from the Oregon Trail to the southern Willamette Valley led emigrants over the rugged, snow-capped Cascade Mountains. The way was treacherous and the path undeveloped – but the call of land claims and a better life spurred on travelers. Use the map inside to retrace settlers' journeys today by exploring the Road's history and points of interest.

Road Creation and Construction

In March 1852, citizens and merchants commissioned a toll-free road directly to existing settlements to stimulate growth. By that August, seven "road viewers" left to find a route across the mountains to reach the 1845 Meek Cutoff from the Oregon Trail.

Roads in those days were a far cry from those constructed today. Using livestock and men with cross-cut saws, axes, and iron bars, workers began to rough out the route in June 1853. Eventually, road clearing reached a point near present day La Pine. The work party turned back in early October, about a week before the first wagons reached the Deschutes River.



The First Crossing

On the promise it would be completed, Elijah Elliott, a settler returning to Fort Boise to gather his family, agreed to act as a guide and advocate for the new, yet untested route. By early October, Elliott reached the Deschutes with his family and roughly 1000 men, women, and children traveling in 250 wagons.

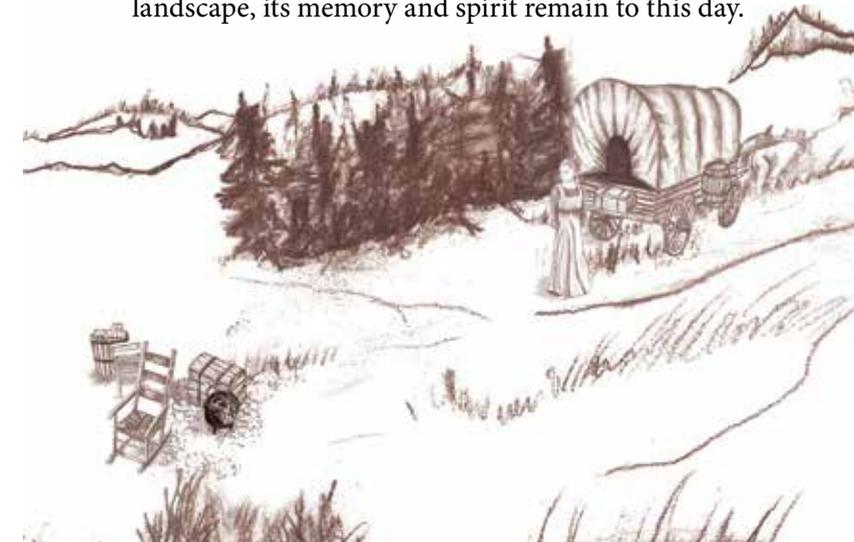
The group, already weak from crossing eastern Oregon, found their situation worsened when they entered the rocky, timbered foothills of the Cascades. In many places, considerable effort was needed to clear the roughed out path so the wagons could pass. The emigrants were forced to discard household goods, tools and even wagons to lighten their load and hasten their journey.

With few supplies left, the travelers stopped in the vicinity of Big Pine Openings. When word reached the Willamette Valley, relief parties set out to aid the beleaguered settlers. This is how they became known as the "Lost Wagon Train."

Short but Successful

Despite hardships experienced by the early wagon trains, the ultimate success of Elliott fulfilled the original promise of the Free Emigrant Road by doubling the population of the southern Willamette Valley during the 1850s. Over time, the Road's primary function shifted. Envisioned as a route to the west, it now began to see travelers flowing to the east, including freighters fueled by Valley commerce, military expeditions, and even east-bound settlers.

The discovery of gold in eastern Oregon prompted the development of the Oregon Central Military Wagon Road in 1865 and 1866. Parts of the military road overlay the route of the Free Emigrant Road (FER). Although much of the original FER is covered over by modern roads or otherwise faded into the landscape, its memory and spirit remain to this day.



Modern Day Trail Blazers

The legacy of the Free Emigrant Road endures today, thanks in part to the efforts of modern day explorers from both sides of the Cascades, many of whose ancestors were the original pioneers.

Cooperative efforts among local descendants, the Oakridge Museum, and the U.S. Forest Service led to the re-discovery of the ephemeral route between Crescent and Oakridge. Other researchers deciphered clues in their ancestors' diaries to verify the course of an advance party who went ahead of the main Elliott group through what is now the Three Sisters Wilderness.



Passport in Time Volunteers, 2002

A Lasting Legacy

The Free Emigrant Road is a symbol of the hope that propelled settlers toward a better life in Oregon. The courage and fortitude they demonstrated allowed them to achieve their dreams. Echoes of those surviving the journey linger today; their names are attached to landmarks, seen on street signs, and found within local communities. The immigrant experience contributes to the Road's designation as an Oregon Historic Trail and represents its true legacy.

Other Names for the Free Emigrant Road

- Lost Wagon Train
- Elliott and Macy Wagon Roads
- Elliott Wagon Train of 1853
- Elliott Expedition Cutoff



Please Help Preserve This Important Resource

- Leave historic relics in place and contact the nearest Forest Service office
- Avoid altering the roadbed
- Minimize disturbance to vegetation
- Pack out your garbage
- Report theft or vandalism



Big Pine Opening

Forest Road 21

Points of interest along Forest Road 21 include Big Pine Openings, Sacandaga Campground, and Indigo Springs. Willamette Valley rescuers of the 1853 wagon train first encountered starving settlers in the vicinity of Big Pine Openings. Intact segments of the Oregon Central Military Wagon Road, successor to the Free Emigrant Road, can be viewed and hiked to the east, at Sacandaga Campground and Indigo Springs.

Crescent Cutoff Road FER Sign



Crescent Area

The FER passes southwest through the Crescent area, crossing the Cascades near Diamond Peak. Find local interpretive signs at Windy-Oldenberg Trailhead at Crescent Lake and along the Crescent Cutoff Road near Crescent Creek Campground.

Oakridge Area

Eight monuments commemorate the route of the FER emigrants. Take a tour of the area and locate them all! For a map, visit www.fs.usda.gov/goto/willamette/fer



LEGEND

- 58 97 Highway
 - 21 Forest Service Road
 - Points of Interest
 - Free Emigrant Road
 - River
 - Forest Boundaries
 - ▲ USFS Ranger Station
- 0 5 10 20 30 miles