For some years non-treaty Nez Perce continued to live in the Wallowas and other locations within traditional homelands. But conflict with newcomers increased, particularly in the Wallowa region, home of Hinmatóowyalahtq'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 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 ‘Elelímyete’qenin ‘m (Wrapped in the Wind - Chief Looking Glass) and his band into conflict. The village had sought to avoid any involvement in it whatsoever. Swept into a fight they did not seek, nearly 750 Nez Perce desperately fled for their lives. Only 250 were warriors and 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.

This Trail is a Sacred Trust for all Americans

“We the surviving Nez Perce, want to leave our hearts, memories, hallowed presence as a never ending revelation to the story of the events of 1877. These trails will live in our hearts.”

Frank B. Andrews, Nez Perce Descendant

Congress enacted the National Trails System in 1968 to establish a framework for a nationwide system of scenic, recreational and historic trails. The Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail was authorized in 1986. Commemorating the 1877 war and flight, the trail extends about 1,170 miles from the vicinity of Wallowa Lake, Oregon to Bear Paw Battlefield near Chinook, Montana.
Fort Vancouver, Washington

In July of 1877 Tim’íne ‘ilp’ílpnim (Chief Redheart's) band and other Nez Perce returned from a buffalo hunt in Montana to discover their homeland embroiled in conflict. Determined not to join the war, they believed General Howard when he promised them safe conduct to the reservation. Instead their horses were seized, their hair cut, and they were forcibly taken, all 33 men, women, and children, to Fort Vancouver. There they were held as Prisoners of War until April, 1878, when they finally returned to Idaho.

Fort Walsh, Canada

Between September 30 and October 5, 1877, nearly 300 Nez Perce men, women, and children managed to escape the Bear Paw battle and make their way the last forty miles to Canada. Along the way some of the people stopped at Cee, Assiniboine, Gros Ventre, and Metis villages strung along the Milk River. At some camps the Nez Perce found refuge, at others, death.

For a time some Nez Perce found refuge with the Lakota who had also fled to Canada. The Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876. The North West Mounted Police at Fort Walsh assured them they would be welcome as long as they remained peaceful and stayed in Canada.

In summer 1878 the U.S. government sent a delegation to persuade the Nez Perce refugees to return to American soil and rejoin Joseph’s people. Some, like Piyoop’o yaayiyinim (Chief White Bird’s) followers, chose to remain in Canada, while others opted to return on their own.

Ee Yak ish Pah (Yeeq’ispe) The Hot Country

The Nez Perce National Historic Trail ends at the Bear Paw Battlefield, but the story does not end there. Colonel Nelson A. Miles had begun implementing the terms of Chief Joseph’s surrender when the army’s senior commander, General William T. Sherman, announced an alarming change of plans. Rather than returning to Idaho as Miles promised, the Nez Perce were ordered to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. From there they were sent on to Baxter Springs, then the Quapaw Reservation and Ponca Agency in Oklahoma.

The conditions were so dire that most Nez Perce babies born in Indian Territory died and were buried there.

In 1885 these remaining people boarded a train at Arkansas City to start the bitterest journey west, some to reservations at Lapow or Umatalt and others who chose to go with Chief Joseph to the Colville reservation. Their hearts were heavy with the memories of those they had lost along the trail and those they were leaving behind in this country of exile.

A worse spot to put a camp of four hundred human beings, mostly women and children could not have been selected; in fact it would seem as if this spot had been selected for the express purpose of putting an end to Chief Joseph and his band.... One half were sick.... All were filled with the poisonous malodors of the camp.