

**U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management**

Mormon Pioneer Trail

A Highway Guide to Wyoming



Mormon Pioneer Trail Highway Guide

The following is a highway traveler's guide to the Mormon Pioneer Trail across Wyoming. (This trail corridor also includes the Oregon, California and Pony Express trails.) Highlighted are a few of the hundreds of historic sites that line this 450-mile route between the state's eastern and western borders.

The sites selected for this brochure are significant to the Mormon emigration. Serious trail buffs may want to get off the pavement to explore the trail in depth and detail. Most towns along the way have a museum, a historical society, a Chamber or Commerce or a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) office that will be pleased to provide the information you need.

Please make use of all these resources...and enjoy your journey into the past!

Grattan Fight Site: This monument marks the location of one of the earliest conflicts between the American Indians and soldiers in Wyoming. The fight broke out when Brevet 2nd Lt. John L. Grattan and 28 soldiers attempted to arrest a Sioux Indian for killing a crippled cow belonging to a Mormon wagon train. An allegedly drunken interpreter, who had grievances against the Indians, apparently mistranslated an offer by Chief Conquering Bear to replace the cow with a sound pony of his own. Grattan ordered his men to fire and when the gun smoke cleared, Grattan, almost his entire command and the chief lay dead. This August 1854 incident led to years of intermittent hostility along the trail. An Oregon Trail crossing monument is located just beyond the Grattan marker. (3 miles west of Lingle on WYO-157.)

Fort Laramie National Historic Site: One of the most significant outposts on the trail was officially established as Fort William in 1834 by fur traders William Sublette and Robert Campbell. An adobe fort was built in 1841 by the American Fur Company and named Fort John. The U. S. Military purchased the Fort in 1849 as a base to protect and supply the growing emigration on the trail. Fort Laramie became a major link in the Pony Express, Overland Stage and transcontinental telegraph systems and served as an operations base for the Plains Indian Wars. Today, the site is operated by the National Park Service and is open year around with extended hours and living history programs during summer months. Many related historic sites are in the vicinity. (3 miles southwest of the Town of Fort Laramie. Follow signs off US-26.)

North Platte Valley Overlook: This rest area and viewpoint highlight several historic sites. (On US-26, 2.5 miles east of Guernsey.)

Register Cliff State Historic Site: About one-days wagon travel west of Fort Laramie, emigrants took the time to leave a record of their progress. The sandstone cliff is covered with the names of pioneers who passed this way on their journeys during the 1840s, 50s and 60s. Most names include a hometown, state and date. Some even left a message. (South of Guernsey. 2 miles past turn-off to Oregon Trail Ruts.)

Oregon Trail Ruts State Historic Site: The Signature Ruts of the trail system are located at a place where terrain forced the emigrant wagons to cross a sandstone outcrop. Thousands of wagon wheels wore ruts into the soft stone to a depth of five feet in some places. Visitors can still see places where the wheel hubs rubbed against the rut walls. (Follow signs from the central Guernsey intersection. Go south across North Platte River.)

Laramie Peak: This 10,272 foot peak was the first real mountain that most emigrants had ever seen. It would dominate their view for nearly two weeks as they rolled west on the road to Oregon, California and Utah. Pioneers used such landmarks to chart their course and mark their progress. The mountains were a welcome sight after the weeks spent crossing the featureless expanses of the eastern part of the Trail. (West and south of US-26 & I-25, between Ft. Laramie and Douglas.)

Ayres Natural Bridge: Although located about a mile south of the trail, the Natural Bridge was often visited by emigrants. It was, perhaps, Wyoming's first tourist attraction. An 1843 pioneer described it as, "...a natural bridge of solid rock, over a rapid torrent, the arch being regular as tho' shaped by art..." The stream, originally known as Bridge Creek, is now called LaPrele Creek and flows through a beautiful public park surrounding the Bridge. (11 miles west of Douglas on I-25 to Natural Bridge Exit, then 5 miles south.)

Deer Creek Station: In 1857 a major trading post, consisting of a stage coach station, a store, a blacksmith shop and a post office, was established at the point where the trails crossed Deer Creek just above



Ft. Laramie



Trail Ruts at Guernsey

the creek's junction with the North Platte River. This was a very popular emigrant camping and resting place and an important stop on the stage line to Salt Lake City. The Station served the Pony Express and the telegraph before being burned by Indians in 1866. (In the Town of Glenrock. Interpretive sign and actual location.)

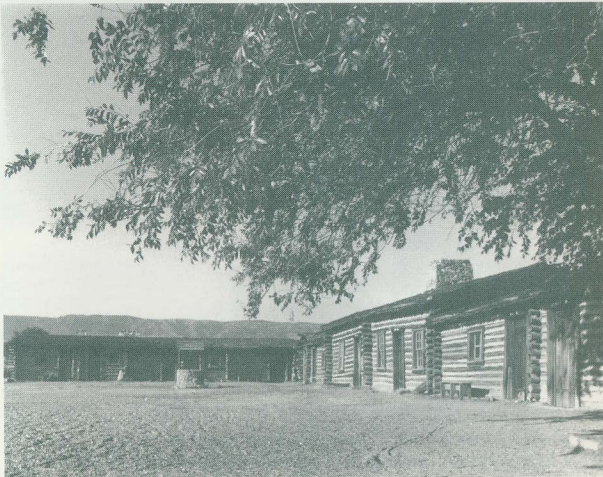
Fort Caspar: This military post evolved from a previous site known as Mormon Ferry Post. Brigham Young established the first ferry service on the North Platte River near this location in June 1847 for the benefit of all trail travelers. When Louis Guinard spanned the North Platte with a 1,000-foot log bridge in 1859, the post became known as Platte Bridge Station. This site was one of the last opportunities the pioneers had to cross the river they had followed from central Nebraska. The army occupied the post from 1862-67. It was renamed in honor of First Lieutenant Caspar Collins who was killed while protecting a supply train from Indian attack just north of the bridge. The present fort is constructed on the original site. It is the centerpiece of a City of Casper park complex. (Fort Caspar Road, west outskirts of Casper.)

Bessemer Bend: The distinctive Red Buttes stand above Bessemer Bend, the last fording site of the North Platte River on the Trail. This river, which the emigrants had followed for hundreds of miles, now turned to the south and became impassable. Toll ferries and bridges downstream of the Bend were established after 1847, but emigrants, including the handcart companies of 1856, who did not want to pay the tolls, used Bessemer Bend as a low-water crossing. There is a BLM interpretive site at the crossing. (6 miles south of Casper on WYO-220; take the Bessemer Bend Road west to bridge.)

The Oregon Trail Road: Travelers willing to drive on improved dirt roads can follow the Oregon Trail Road as an alternative to State Highway 220. This road follows the actual trail ruts for 41.5 miles and includes such historic sites as Emigrant Gap (mile 8.5), Avenue of Rock (mile 19), Willow Spring (mile 27.5) and Prospect Hill (mile 29), the site of another BLM interpretive site. Take the Poison Spider Road west from Mills. Turn south on County Road 319 after 12 miles. Road re-joins WYO-220 just north of Independence Rock. Try this in dry weather only. Inquire at Fort Caspar, the Casper Chamber of Commerce Information Center or BLM offices for advice and directions. The route is not well marked!

Independence Rock: Named for a fur trader's Fourth of July celebration, this huge rock became the most famous and anticipated of all trail landmarks. Here the trail met the cool, clean and clear Sweetwater River that would lead it to South Pass. The emigrants paused to inscribe their names on the "Great Register of the Desert" while they rested themselves and their livestock. They observed the national Independence Day (no matter the actual date) and congratulated themselves on reaching the perceived mid-point in their journey. Described by most as "...looking like a great beached whale...", the Rock is now the site of a modern Highway Rest Area and State Interpretive Site. (55 miles southwest of Casper on WYO-220.)

Devil's Gate: This remarkable cleft in the east end of the Sweetwater Rocks drew diary comments from many pioneers. Many walked and waded in the Sweetwater River through the gorge while their wagons followed the trail through the pass to the east, a route now followed by an access road to the historic Sun Ranch. A BLM interpretive site is located just south of the Gate giving details of the long and colorful history of the area. (6 miles southwest of Independence Rock on WYO-220.)



Ft. Caspar

Martin's Cove: A Mormon handcart company under the leadership of Edward Martin sought shelter from an early winter blizzard in a small cove in the flank of the Sweetwater Rocks about two miles west of Devil's Gate. The Martin Handcart Company, the last handcart expedition to attempt the Trail in 1856, forded the North Platte River near Red Buttes on October 19 and fought snow, wind and sub-zero temperatures to reach this place in early November. Rescuers sent from Salt Lake City found the company, "...in perishing condition." The camp grounds became grave yards as the Martin Company buried their dead. Perhaps as many as 145 of the 576 members of the company froze or starved to death. (Access from the Sun Ranch at Devils Gate. Hiking is required with special consideration for handicapped access. Interpretation provided by the BLM and LDS Church.)



Independence Rock

Split Rock: As the dominant landmark of the Sweetwater Valley, the unmistakable "gun sight" notch in the summit of Split Rock aimed the emigration directly at Great South Pass, still more than 75 miles to the west. A BLM interpretive site is at this location. A second highway turn-out a few miles west offers a better (although reverse) view of the "split" and also a look at the Old Castle, a smaller landmark south of the Trail and highway. (8 and 11.5 miles west of Muddy Gap Jct. on US-287.)

Ice Slough: While resting near this marshy spring, 49er J. Goldsborough Bruff wrote, "...by digging a couple of feet, ice is obtained. The surface is dug up all around by travelers — as much from curiosity as to obtain so desirable a luxury in a march so dry and thirsty..." The tundra-like turf that covers the marsh once provided enough insulation to preserve frozen sub-surface water well into the hottest summer months. For the pioneers, it was a minor miracle. (9.5 miles west of Jeffrey City on US-287.)

Sweetwater River: The trail crossed the Sweetwater River for the sixth time about three miles southwest of the bridge on us-287. From this point, the Trail takes a southwesterly course directly toward Great South Pass at the southern end of the Wind River Mountains, the range that dominates the skyline to the west. US-287 turns to the northwest and leaves the trail corridor as it crosses Beaver Rim to drop into the Wind River valley. Sweetwater Station and a highway rest area offer visitor services and information at this point. (18.5 miles west of Jeffrey City on US-287.)

Hudson-Atlantic City Road: This graveled road turns south from US-287 five miles west of Sweetwater Station and generally parallels the trail as it approaches South Pass. Although this road stays some distance north of the actual trail, it does offer good overlooks to such historic locations as Rocky Ridge, Lewiston Lakes and the gash of Sweetwater Canyon. On the west end, the road connects with the South Pass - Atlantic City Historic Mining district near WYO-28. It is an interesting fair weather choice for travelers wishing to stay closer to the trail. Contact with the Lander BLM office or Chamber of Commerce is advised before starting out.

Willie Handcart Company Marker: A mass grave and plaque commemorate the fate of the Willie Handcart Company. Poorly supplied and traveling far too late in the season, the company was trapped by a winter storm as it approached South Pass in mid-October 1856. Before help arrived from Salt Lake City, about 67 of the 404-member party had starved or frozen to death. In terms of numbers of deaths, the combined Willie and Martin handcart companies disasters were the greatest ever suffered by any group traveling the trail. (AT Rock Creek on the Lewiston road about 8 miles southeast of Atlantic City. Access via dirt roads. Make local inquiry for directions and road conditions.)

South Pass City State Historic Site: While not specific to the Mormon Trail, it is historically significant. The South Pass gold rush started in 1867, and South Pass became the largest city in Wyoming. But the boom went bust almost as quickly as it started, and the region fell into decline. Today the partially restored ghost town of South Pass City is the center of the South Pass Historic Mining District with numerous historic sites. (34 miles southwest of Lander on WYO-28. Follow signs to various historic locations.)



Trail ruts near the Sweetwater River.

South Pass: This broad pass, the highest point on the trail is at the summit of an almost imperceptible approach to the Continental Divide and was the key to the entire trail system. Every emigrant wagon train and handcart company that went westward rolled through this Pass. There was no other way to go. No other path offered a dependable supply of grass and water plus an easy grade to and through the mountains. On crossing the Pass one pioneer woman noted that, "...we have forever taken leave of the waters running toward the home of our childhood and youth...." Two-and-a-half miles farther west the emigration encountered Pacific Springs, the first water flowing westward. Stone monuments mark the Pass and honor Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spalding, the first white women to cross South Pass. (From WYO-28, take the dirt Oregon Buttes Road south from the summit of the first hill west of the Sweetwater bridge. Watch for Trail ruts and historic markers in 2.8 miles. Follow trail west to markers.)



Pacific Buttes

South Pass Overlook: This BLM interpretive site offers information and a panoramic view of Pacific Springs, South Pass and the Oregon Buttes. American Indian, mountain man, fur trade, Oregon, Mormon, California and Pony Express Trail involvement with South Pass are all interpreted (4 miles southwest of Sweetwater Bridge on WYO-28.)

Big Sandy Crossing and Station Site: The Mormon Trail and the main Oregon Trail to Fort Bridger crossed the Big Sandy River at this point before following its north bank to the Green River. A stage and Pony Express station was located here in the 1860's. This was also the first meeting place between mountain man Jim Bridger and Brigham Young during the Mormon leader's initial trip to the Great Salt Lake Valley in 1847. (At the junction of WYO-28 and US-191 in the town of Farson.)

Simpson's Hollow: In 1857, President James Buchanan, for political reasons, decided to replace Brigham Young as acting governor of the Utah Territory. Anticipating the Mormon reaction, Buchanan ordered an Army force of 2,500 soldiers, under the command of Brevet General Albert Sidney Johnston, to Utah to ensure that his orders were carried out. Young responded by calling out the Utah Territorial Militia (also known as the Nauvoo Legion) and placed the territory on a war footing. At Simpson's Hollow, the militia captured and burned 22 army supply wagons under the leadership of Capt. Lewis Simpson (thus the name Simpson's Hollow) On October 5. The destruction of this and two other wagon trains carrying a total of 368,000 pounds of military supplies and the onset of winter snows which closed the passes to Utah, forced the Army to spend the winter at the recently burned Fort Bridger. By the spring of 1858, the federal government and the Mormons had settled most of their differences and Alfred Cumming was installed as territorial governor. (On WYO-28, about 10 miles southwest of Farson.)

Lombard Ferry: The Lombard Ferry was one of the most commonly utilized crossings of the Green River. The location was first used for fording wagons in 1841. Brigham Young and the Mormon pioneers first used the crossing in 1847. By 1852, there was an operating ferry at the location. Charges were roughly three dollars per wagon and twenty-five cents per horse. During peak traffic, there was an average of roughly a drowning a day at the Green River crossings. In 1847, the Mormon pioneers were forced to build rafts to cross the Green River. At the time of their crossing they estimated that the river was slightly short of 300 feet wide. The ferry is named for William Lombard who operated the ferry from 1880 into the early twentieth century. The ferry had seen over fifty years of continuous service. (26 miles southwest of Farson on WYO-28.)



Church Buttes

Church Butte: Like many trail landmarks, this butte in the valley of the Black's Fork of Green River, had more than one name. John Boardman, an 1843 pioneer called it "Soloman's Temple" and described it as, "...of the shape of a large temple and decorated with all kinds of images: gods and goddesses, everything that has been the

subject of the sculptor: all kinds of animals and creeping things." The butte is said to have provided a spectacular backdrop for Mormon religious services conducted by Brigham Young early in July 1847. (10 miles southwest of Granger on the Black's Fork road. Dirt road. Make local inquiry.)



Ft. Bridger

Fort Bridger State Historic Site: In the summer of 1842, mountain man Jim Bridger announced that he was building a trading post, "...in the road of the emigrants on Black's Fork of the Green River." From its beginnings as a log and mud trading post, Bridger's "fort" matured into a modern frontier military post before the days of the covered wagon emigration were over. The Mormons purchased the fort from Bridger's partner Louis Vasquez in 1855 and operated it, together with Fort Supply 12 miles to the south, until the fall of 1857. With the onset of the Mormon War and the approach of Johnston's Army, Mormon proprietor Lewis Robinson burned both forts to the ground before departing for Salt Lake. The U. S. Army assumed ownership and command of Fort Bridger the following year. A very successful ranching operation grew around the Fort under the direction of Post Sutler Judge William A. Carter. With the ranch came settlement and, eventually, the town of Fort Bridger, the only community in Wyoming with direct roots to the earliest days of the Oregon Trail. Today Fort Bridger is operated by the State of Wyoming as an historical attraction. (In the town of Fort Bridger on I-80 Business Loop.)

Mormon Trail Crossing: The Mormon Trail crosses WYO-150 about eight miles southeast of Evanston, near the Wyoming-Utah border. The Mormon Trail follows the Hastings Cutoff to California that was pioneered by the ill-fated Donner Party in 1846, a year before Brigham Young's initial trip west. A monument marks the site.

Visiting the Mormon Pioneer Trail in Wyoming

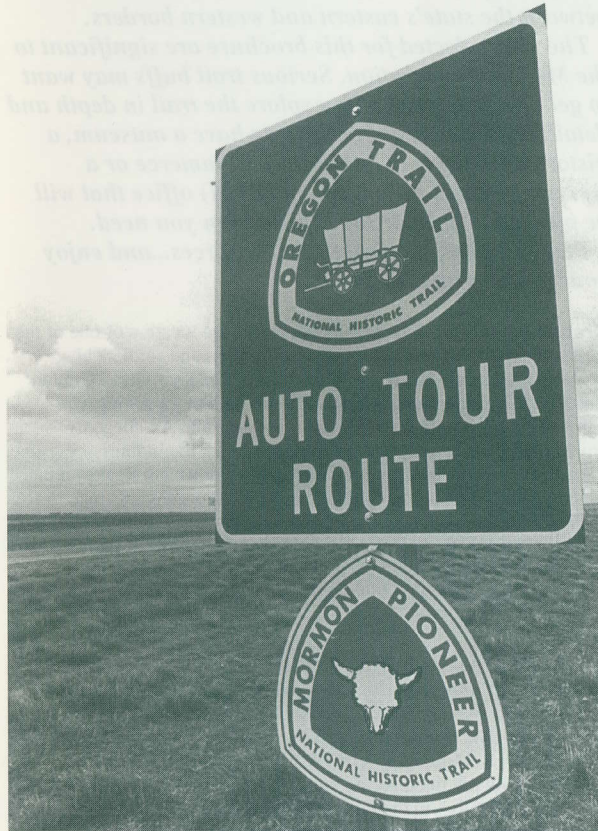
WARNING!! During the Mormon Pioneer Trail Sesquicentennial many surviving segments of the trail are in danger of being loved to death.

BLM is proud that many of the most pristine existing trail segments occur in Wyoming. Visitors today can see a landscape and trail almost unchanged from that viewed by the Mormon pioneers 150 years ago. With a potential for thousands of visitors to walk the trail, we ask everyone to treat it gently. We want future generations to be able to share this same experience.

PLAN AHEAD AND PREPARE - Plan your trip along well-traveled roads. Make sure you have sufficient fuel, water, and food. For many parts of the trail, there are no services. Know where you are. Plan your itinerary carefully and contact all private landowners whose property you are crossing. Maps showing land ownership status are available at all BLM offices. Know area regulations and concerns; pack proper equipment like map/compass and water filter; repackaging food into plastic bags can save on garbage and reduce the chance of littering. Watch yourself and members of your party for signs of altitude sickness (most trail segments in Wyoming are over one-mile in elevation). Check for ticks. Brigham Young caught tick fever in the 1847 trip. The tick which did this probably caught him somewhere between Granger and Farson, Wyo. Descendants of that same tick are likely waiting for you in the sagebrush...so be careful. Bring insect repellent — the mosquitoes and gnats can be ferocious. Dress appropriately for conditions. The sun has more effect at the higher elevations in Wyoming than at sea level so wear sunscreen. Bright orange clothing is recommended for visitors during hunting season. Most of the public lands which contain trail segments are leased for livestock grazing. Be careful around livestock.

CAMP AND TRAVEL ON DURABLE SURFACES - While there are no developed public camping facilities along the trail, there are several BLM campgrounds in the vicinity of the trail. A BLM factsheet lists these campgrounds. Many of the local communities along the trail are opening new campgrounds for the Sesquicentennial. Call the nearest Chamber of Commerce (listed on the campground factsheet) and find out what options for camping exist. Camping on undeveloped public lands near the trail is also allowed. If you do choose to camp in a primitive setting, avoid camping on the trail. This will minimize your impact on other visitors and will allow them the sense of viewing the trail as it was 150 years ago.

DRIVING THE TRAIL - For those trail buffs who will settle for no less than to travel the trail itself, that opportunity is available, but considerable advance planning and knowledge is required. A four-wheel drive or other high-clearance vehicle is advisable. To actually travel the trail, you must have an understanding of land ownership in the area and landowner permission to visit the trail on private lands. If you do decide to drive the trail, use existing roads. Cross-country travel is not allowed. Hiking or mountain biking are excellent low-impact ways to see and experience the trails.



AT CAMP - Use existing sites that are 200 feet (70 adult steps) from water to keep water clean and allow animals to drink. Protect vegetation by wearing soft-soled shoes which cause less soil compaction. Place human waste in catholes (4"-6" deep) 200 feet from water, camp and trail. Wash yourself and dishes 200 feet from water. Scatter strained dish water. Pack out strained food. Good campsites are found, not made. Altering a site with structures or trenches is not necessary when you have proper equipment and camping skills.

PACK IT IN PACK IT OUT - Take everything out that you brought in. Look in camp for trash (yours and others) and any evidence of your stay. Pick up all spilled food. Pack out toilet paper when possible.

LEAVE WHAT YOU FIND - Respect your natural heritage by leaving plants, rocks and historical artifacts where you find them. Please do not deface emigrant register panels. Metal detecting or digging within the trail corridor are prohibited. Let nature's sounds prevail by keeping loud voices and noises to a minimum. Protect wildlife by keeping your dog under control at all times. Leave gates as you find them, whether open or closed.

WATCH OUT FOR RUTS - Ruts, the most noticeable feature of the trail, are areas where the topsoil and original vegetation cover have literally been worn away by thousands of footsteps, animal hooves and wagon wheels. In a few places in Wyoming, such as near Guernsey, ruts are worn into rock. However, it is more common for them to be worn into very fragile desert soils. Accordingly, extreme care should be involved in each decision to travel along the trail. The base of the rut is delicate but the edges of the ruts (called the swales) are extremely fragile.

TREAD LIGHTLY - When using the trail, respect others on the trail. Avoid trail use in areas where the vegetation seems to have been worn away by heavy traffic. Don't drive on the trail when it's muddy. Don't create a new trail by driving around puddles.

WEATHER - Watch the weather because it can change quickly in Wyoming. It can snow during any month of the year. Lightning storms can be ferocious and the winds blinding. Use good sense to avoid getting stuck in a storm. Temperatures on the trail can range from over 100 degrees F. to well below zero.

MINIMIZE USE AND IMPACT OF FIRES - Where fire is permitted, use an existing fire ring or bring a fire pan to avoid creating more scars. Camp stoves minimize impacts. Bring your own cooking fuel with you. If you must, gather 'wrist' size sticks from the ground, not live trees. Make sure your fire is out by placing hand in cooled ashes. Remove and pack out unburned trash from campfire and scatter cooled ashes far from camp, trail and water. Check with the local BLM office to find out what fire restrictions may be in effect.

Photos courtesy of Randy Wagner

FOR MORE INFORMATION - Check with BLM offices for notifications of trail segment closures and fire restrictions, to buy maps, or for other conditions which may affect your visit.

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Platte River Resource Area
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***SKILLED USERS OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE
LANDS LEAVE NO TRACE AND TREAD
LIGHTLY!***