



## Chimney Rock



Ezra Meeker in front of Chimney Rock, c. 1906 North Platte Valley Museum



Chimney Rock 2009 Mike Tigas

### History

Chimney Rock has become one of the most famous landmarks in the American West. The first recorded mention of Chimney Rock was in 1827 by Joshua Pilcher. He journeyed up the Platte River valley to the Salt Lake rendezvous of the Rocky Mountain fur trappers. The first non-natives to see the pillar were probably the Astorians of Robert Stuart in their eastern journey from the Pacific Ocean in 1813.

In 1941, the 80 acres containing the site were transferred to the Nebraska State Historical Society by the Roszel F. Durnal family. In 1956, Norman and Donna Brown deeded additional land to the society. In that same year, Chimney Rock was designated a National Historic Site by the federal government.

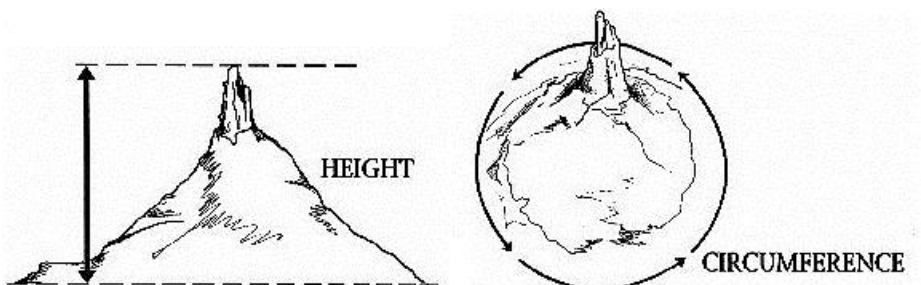
### Emigrant Landmark

During the 1800's, Chimney Rock served as the most mentioned landmark along the Oregon, California and Mormon Trails. As the emigrants passed by this rock, most of them noted in their diaries or journals that they *"were glad to see that they are going the right direction and it spired to the heavens."* So intrigued were the emigrants that thousands climbed up the cone to carve their names on the tower. Though no inscriptions are known to survive today, there is ample written testimony that thousands of names once adorned the rock.



### Size

In 1830, Warren A. Ferris offered the first known estimate of Chimney Rock's height. Ferris wrote, *"It's a half mile in circumference at the base and rises to the height of 300 feet."*



The United States Geological Survey calculated the elevation of Chimney Rock in 1895 as 4,225 feet above sea level.

The spire has lost about 30 feet in the last 150 years. Today, its summit rises 470 feet above the North Platte River and measures 325 feet tip to base, with the spire measuring 120 feet.

During the time of the western migration, Chimney Rock was substantially higher. Wind, erosion and lightning have cut down its height over the years, although the exact amount is disputed.

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**Names**

Throughout the years, Chimney Rock has been called by many different names.

- *The Teepee* by Native Americans
  - *Wigwam* by Native Americans
  - *The Chimney* by the fur trappers
  - *Nose Mountain* by Warren Ferris- Amercian Fur Trading Company
  - *The Smokestack* by Virgil Pringle
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**What is it Made of?**

The pillar referred to as “marl” or “earthly limestone” by the emigrants, consists primarily of Brule clay interlayered with volcanic ash and Arikaree sandstone. Because the Brule clay is susceptible to erosion, it undermines the Arikaree, resulting in changes that are episodic and unpredictable, such as rock falls. The harder sandstone layers near the top have helped protect the pillar. In somewhat less striking fashion, this is the same geological principle that is demonstrated at Scotts Bluff National Monument.

Early accounts mention a split in Chimney Rock, still in evidence today, and the dire predictions that were made of its imminent demise.

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**Significance of Chimney Rock**

After examining over 300 journal accounts of settlers moving west along the Platte River Road, historian Merrill Mattes concluded that Chimney Rock was by far the most mentioned landmark. Mattes notes that although no special events took place at the rock, it held center stage in the minds of the overland trail travelers. For many, the geological marker was an optical illusion. Some claimed that Chimney Rock could be seen upwards of 30 miles away, and though one traveled toward the rock-spire, Chimney Rock always appeared to be off in the distance.

**Chimney Rock Pony Express Station**

In the immediate vicinity of Chimney Rock there was an excellent spring that made it a favorite campsite. In the 1860's there was a Chimney Rock Pony Express Station that later became a telegraph and stage station. The exact location of this site is still unclear. Two traditional sources place the station between the Chimney Rock formation and river. One source places the station at Facus Springs, nine miles northwest of Bridgeport, while the other source locates it two miles south and one mile west of Bayard.

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**Nebraska State Quarter**

The Nebraska State Quarter Design Committee accepted nearly 6,500 quarter design ideas from citizens. Four of these were forwarded to the United States Mint and were used as the basis for narrative designs that were created by mint sculptor-engravers and artists.

Governor Dave Heineman chose the Chimney Rock and covered wagon design over “The Capitol”, featuring a rendition of the striking State Capitol in Lincoln; “The Sower”, depicting the figure that stands atop the Nebraska Capitol; and “Chief Standing Bear”, paying tribute to the Ponca Indian Chief.

**Chimney Rock Today**

Chimney Rock has not changed much since the first pioneers passed by it in the 1800's. The only modern developments are the Chimney Rock Cemetery and the Christopher J. Abbot Visitor Center that houses museum exhibits, a hands-on opportunity to “pack your wagon” and a video that tells the story of the great migration West.

Chimney Rock was designated a National Historic Site on August 9, 1956, and is today maintained and operated by the Nebraska State Historical Society.

