

## **Lost and Forgotten Historic Roads: The Buffalo Trace, a case study.**

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### **Introduction**

Not all historic roads are currently used or as well-known as US 40 (the National Road) or Route 66. Many major transportation routes during prehistoric and early historic times have been lost to history. Some roads have been completely forgotten, their story and their location lost. For others, remnants of the road exist but their history is lost, and for some their physical location is lost, yet the background of the road lingers in local folklore and histories. What do lost roads look like and what resources exist to identify these roads? This paper will detail the resources available for use in identifying lost roads, using the Buffalo Trace as a case study. Finally, the archaeological sites in the immediate vicinity of the Buffalo Trace will be included in the discussions to help visualize the prehistoric and historic landscapes associated with this early road.

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This paper and the interest in the Buffalo Trace was developed from fieldwork the authors performed while working for ASC Group, Inc. The project was conducted under contract with the USDA Forest Service-Hoosier National Forest and was based upon their previous research. Our work attempted to locate the Buffalo Trace as it passed through portions of the Hoosier National Forest, in southern Indiana. Angie Krieger, Forest Archaeologist, supplied us with background information about the trace.

The Buffalo Trace (also known in Indiana as the Vincennes Trace), extending through southern Indiana between Louisville, Kentucky, and Vincennes, Indiana, is an example of such a ‘lost’ road. What began, as a natural migration route for American bison or “buffalo” from the grasslands and salt licks of Kentucky to the prairies of Illinois became a Native American trail. Later the early American settlers used the Buffalo Trace to move livestock, facilitate commerce between Louisville and Vincennes and ultimately to settle the Northwest Territory. Lewis and Clark, George Rogers Clark, Abraham Lincoln, and Benjamin Harrison traveled sections of this road. Today it is part of the newly designated Historic Pathways National Scenic Byway.

Growing interest in prehistoric and historic trails has led to an increase in archaeological and historical research of these cultural resources, as remnants of old roads and trails abound. They can be recognized as areas of over grown ruts, wide paths that are free of trees in forested areas, or pathways eroded into the landscape. Some can be found with a dry laid stonewall or single course of stone along the side of the road. Most of the former can be attributed to small lanes used to get around the property by the landowner, or for farming or logging. The latter two types represent roads or trails that were more substantially utilized, probably used by more

people than just the landowner, resulting in the path becoming wider, more compacted, and eroded into the landscape.

### **Documentary Resources**

There are several resources available to the researcher to locate information on historic roads including: General Land Office (GLO) records, county, state, and regional histories, historic atlases, libraries and historical societies, and online libraries or documents.

The (GLO) surveyors noted features that they encountered during the course of their land surveys including trails and roads where they crossed section lines, but the exact path between those points was not generally mapped. County, state, and regional histories are another resource for obtaining information on trails and roads. Such histories often contain information on how a particular area or region was settled, who settled in a given area, and the means by which such settlers traveled through an area. The results of this research will be discussed later in the text.

Maps, particularly county atlases and the USGS quadrangles, are the most likely place to begin research on historic roads. Online resources such as libraries and electronic documents are resources to utilize. The Hoosier National Forest has on their website, an informational flyer that gives a brief outline of the history of the Buffalo Trace and a map of the Springs Valley Recreation Area where a hiking trail follows a portion of the trace.

Another website is the Indiana's Historic Pathways. This website contains a map that shows the Historic Pathway and the Buffalo Trace, a resource page that provides links to articles

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and book titles on various subjects of the state, including the Buffalo Trace, and provides turn by turn directions for driving the three loops of the Historic Byways that contain extant segments of the Buffalo Trace .

Another resource that was looked at was the archaeological sites recorded with the state. In Indiana, this office is known as the Department of Natural Resources–Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology. They maintain a database that can be accessed online. Our search found three prehistoric sites associated with the Buffalo Trace and one documented segment of the trace, in addition to the segment that ASC documented.

### **History of the Buffalo Trace**

George R. Wilson and Gayle Thornbrough’s book *The Buffalo Trace* states that in the early records and travelers’ accounts for the Buffalo Trace, it was variously called the Vincennes Trace, Harrison’s Road, Louisville Trace, Old Indian Trail, the Old Indian Road, Clarksville Trace, and the Trace to the Falls.

Originally the bison wore a trace or trail into the earth as they migrated across Indiana. The Louisville area was an attractive locale for their migrations because the bison could walk across the shallow portion of the Ohio River at the Falls of the Ohio. The Buffalo Trace is known to have gone from Louisville through present-day New Albany, Indiana, across several small streams, then passing west through Harrison and Floyd counties to the Little Blue River in Crawford County. From there it tracked northwest and passed just north of what is today Valeene.

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The Buffalo Trace is thought to follow upland ridges and lowland valleys, avoiding marshes and hillsides. These latter types of terrain were difficult for bison to navigate due to their small hooves. They would graze these uplands by the thousands during the warm months. As winter approached, the reverse migration would take place and the bison would travel down the trail and into the large river valleys to winter in protected forests.

By 1819, more than 5,000 travelers were utilizing the Buffalo Trace enroute to Missouri. According to *The Emigrant's Guide to the Western and Southwestern States and Territories*, a traveler could journey from Clarksville to the Wabash River a distance of 114 miles in about three days by horseback. Nights would likely be spent in taverns offering varying degrees of discomfort. The earliest reference for a tavern that was established along the Trace can be found in George R. Wilson's *History of Dubois County, From Its Primitive Days to 1910*. It states that William McDonald was an early settler of what is now Sherritt's Graveyard, having settled in the area in 1801, and at this time, the McDonald family and others built Fort McDonald. As early as 1812, William McDonald kept the earliest known tavern on the Buffalo Trace.

The early traveler across the Northwest Territory would be offered three routes of travel: Native American trails, bison roads, and dry streambeds. Often the Native American and the bison availed themselves of the same path and their routes became the same. Three things directed the path that the bison took: proximity to water, salt from salt licks, and a direct and a convenient path to those two things. John Heckewelder, a Moravian missionary described the "Buffalo Salt Lick" as a "salt spot several acres in size that is so trodden down and grubbed up,

that not a blade of grass can grow and the entire woods for miles around are quite bare”. Wilson identifies Buffalo Salt Lick as present day French Lick.

The exact route that the trail followed at the time of the earliest references made to it cannot be determined. It is apparent that the path varied over time and that alternate paths could be taken, thus providing the traveler with a number of paths to choose depending on the season, weather conditions, and the location of Native American camps and scouts. If the trail was originally cut by migrating bison, there probably would have been several paths leading and converging at various points along the route, i.e., salt licks, watering holes, etc.

It is probable that the French were among the earliest white men to use this overland route shortly before and after the founding of Vincennes in 1731. However, it was not until after Clark’s expedition to Vincennes in 1779 that the trace became a major thoroughfare for travel from Louisville, across southern Indiana, and west into the Illinois Territory.

John Filson a surveyor, explorer, and author of the first history of Kentucky, made two waterway trips from Louisville to Vincennes, between the years 1785 and 1786, and returning by two separate overland routes. Filson’s first trip to Vincennes took 18 days and he remarked that the French, using the overland route or “the Trace”, covered the same distance in half that time. George Rogers Clark would once again use the Buffalo Trace in 1786 when he and 1,000 men marched from Louisville to the forts at Vincennes, for the Battle of Vincennes.

. On February 11, 1797, the people of Kaskaskia, Illinois sent a letter to the Post Office Department asking for a post road to be established from Kaskaskia to Louisville by way of Vincennes. On November 28, 1799 Postmaster General Joseph Habersham accepted John Rice

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Jones' offer to perform this route every four weeks at a cost of \$600.00. This appointment ushered in a new era of importance for the Buffalo Trace and the overland route was improved. On March 22, 1800, the route between Vincennes and Louisville was designated as a post road.

In 1800, the Indiana Territory was established with General William Henry Harrison as the governor. In February 1802, Harrison contacted the Secretary of War and asked for the establishment of "houses of accommodation" along the road every 20 to 25 miles. However, the State Department feared retaliation from the Native Americans and it would not be until 1805 that Harrison's aspirations would begin to be realized. In 1820, Harrison's Road was set up as a stagecoach line to run from New Albany to Vincennes, which would later become part of US 150 through portions of Floyd, Harrison, Washington, and Orange counties.

In August 1804, treaties were drawn up between the United States government and the Delaware and Piankashaw Nations by which the Nations ceded all claims to a 300-mile tract of land lying between the Wabash and Ohio rivers, below the Vincennes Tract and the old road leading from Vincennes to the Falls of the Ohio. The treaty stipulated that instead of following the winding course of the trace, the northern boundary should be a straight line drawn parallel to the general course of the trace, and should not pass more than a half mile north of its most northerly bend. This meant that in order to keep the half-mile distance from the trace the old Native American road would have to be surveyed.

The task of surveying the trail was undertaken by deputy surveyor William Rector beginning on July 15, 1805. However, according to Wilson and Thornbrough, "it would be an impossible task to locate the exact course of the trace from Rector's field notes today." And,

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because of surveys made after Rector, the path of the trace can be followed from Clark's Grant to the White River. The surveyors of the Vincennes Tract were ordered in 1804 to record the locations of all mines, salt springs, salt licks, mill seats, and where the old Trace crossed section lines, from the Falls of the Ohio to the crossing of the White River. The maps produced by these surveyors are currently housed at the Indiana Historical Society.

A map of the eastern part of the Vincennes Land District made in 1807 shows the location of the trace across section lines through Floyd, Harrison, and Crawford counties, and eastern Orange County. A similar map made in 1808 shows the route of the trace through Vincennes Common and Knox County. Thus portions of the trace from Vincennes to the Falls of the Ohio has been mapped where it crossed section lines.

### **Fieldwork**

The Forest Service has taken an active interest in locating and interpreting the Buffalo Trace within the Hoosier National Forest. The locations of the GLO survey points where the Buffalo Trace crosses section boundaries have been digitized and a draft line feature representing the trace was mapped utilizing ArcMAP. This line feature and the GLO points were provided to ASC in order to facilitate the search in parcels through which it is believed to pass.

Extant sections of the Buffalo Trace have been previously inventoried, particularly in DuBois and Orange counties, where the most visible traces remain. Site 12Or600 is a recorded section of the Buffalo Trace in Orange County and is a 15-m long segment of trail that is about 2 m wide and 2 m in depth entrenched below the surrounding landscape. The Forest Service



recorded this site during a monitoring project for the Springs Valley Trail. Another section of the Buffalo Trace is visible in the road cut for SR 37, about 0.5 mi north of Pine Valley.

ASC investigated seven areas for portions of the Buffalo Trace using the information supplied by the Forest Service. During the investigation one probable section of the Buffalo Trace was located by visual inspection. This documented section of the Buffalo Trace is approximately 16 m in width and 165 m in length and is located on a wooded slope in Orange County adjacent to the Patoka River Valley. The correspondence between this entrenched road and the location and trend of the historical trace, as depicted in the Forest Service GIS file, led to the identification of the entrenched roadway as being a remnant of the Buffalo Trace.

This section of the trace was entrenched a maximum of 2.5–3 m below the surrounding terrain. In both cases, the trace consisted of long angled sidewalls with a narrow roadbed. The roadbed was either fairly flat or was somewhat sloped with two deeper ruts but overall is about 2.5 m–3 m wide. No artifacts were found during the excavation of the remnant of the trace. Two prehistoric sites and one historic site were found in the vicinity of this Buffalo Trace remnant, but these sites could not be conclusively linked to the Buffalo Trace.

### **Obstacles to Fieldwork**

During the fieldwork and identification of site 12Or856 by ASC, several issues were encountered that hindered identification of the Trace. These include but are not limited to vegetation/ground cover, erosion, plowing, and poor/incomplete historic mapping.

## Conclusion

There are numerous resources available one can use to gather information on a historic road including: GLO records; county, state, and regional histories; historic atlases; libraries, historical societies; and online resources. There are a number of field conditions that can affect the identification of historic roads/trails. These include but are not limited to vegetation/ground cover, erosion, plowing, and poor/incomplete historic mapping.

The Buffalo Trace is a heritage resource of great importance to the history of Indiana and the history of westward migration in the United States. It engages themes of military history, exploration, and settlement, Native American peoples, and natural history themes surrounding the bison. As more segments of the Buffalo Trace are identified it will be important to gauge the level of degradation and select methods to preserve and interpret them. Many times, trying to positively identify a historic road/trail can be extremely difficult. However, that is not necessarily the case with the Buffalo Trace. Countless individuals have contributed to our knowledge and understanding of the trace and have kept the legacy of this important historical road alive.

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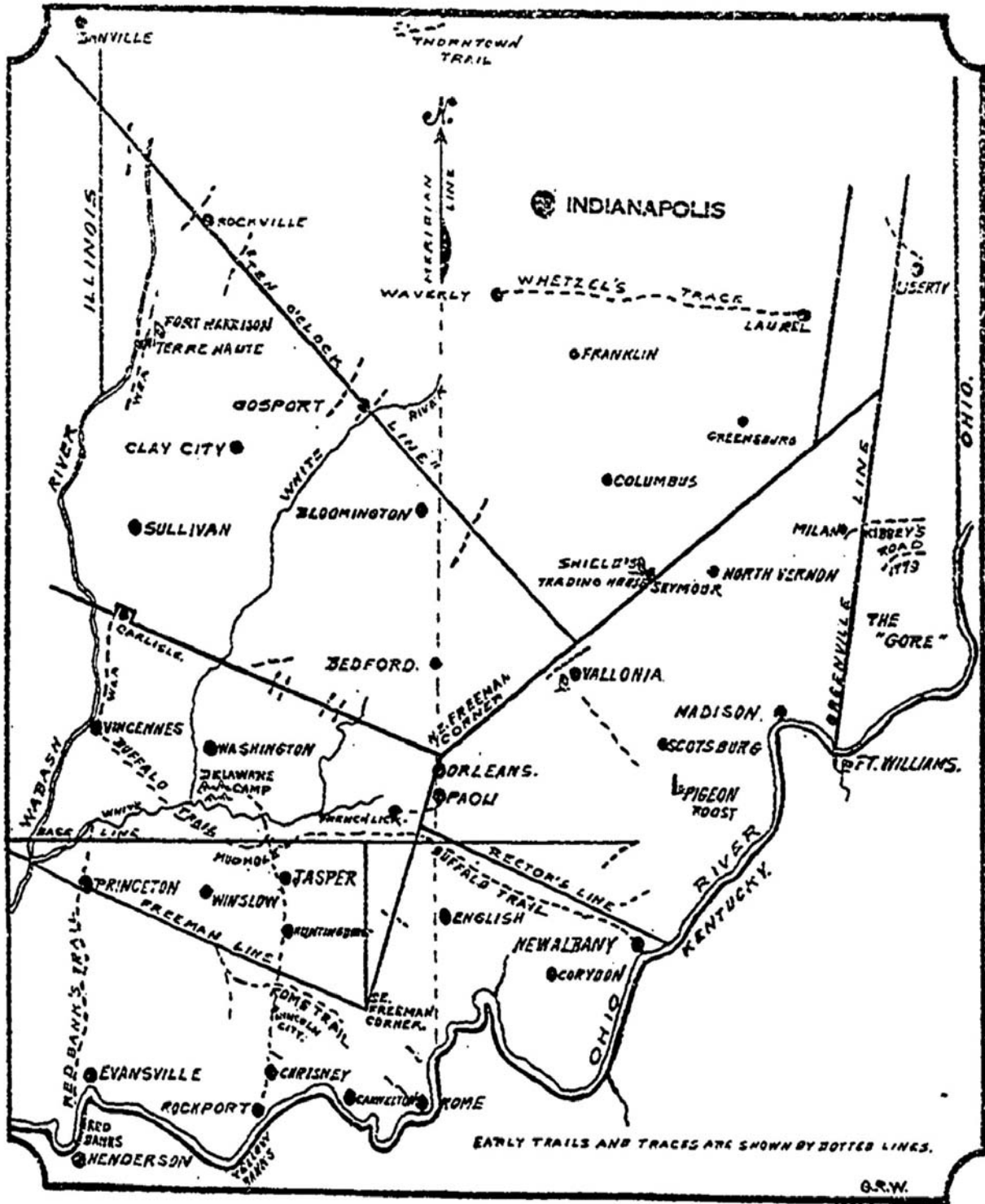
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**Figures:**

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Figure 1. Map of Indiana showing the route of the Buffalo Trail (Buffalo Trace) and the major surveyor lines, including Rector's Line. Taken from Wilson (1919).



Figure 2. Overview of 12Or856, a segment of the Buffalo Trace identified by ASC Group.