

The Oregon Trail Crossing Northeast Kansas

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Will Bagley wrote, “in an age without photographs, travelers entered a landscape unlike anything they had ever seen or could even imagine back home (New England to the Mississippi Valley). Western terrain was more alien to overlanders than the surface of Mars would be to citizens of the twenty-first century. Besides fantastic geological formations, emigrants encountered wonders such as mirages, geysers, perpetually snowcapped mountains, mid-summer blizzards, mummified carrion, grizzly bears, and other phenomena completely outside their experience.” #1

The starting point for crossing Kansas, lay along points in Missouri and Council Bluffs requiring the crossing of the Missouri River and sometimes the Kansas River. Westport stood approximately a mile from the Missouri River which became an advantage over Independence with its three mile trek to the river. Westport was called “the usual rendezvous” for travelers headed to the Rocky Mountains as early as 1839. #2

Thirty miles upriver, stood Ft. Leavenworth, established in 1827. Four miles above the Fort and on the Missouri side of the river was Weston. James Carleton accompanied the military expedition that improved the wagon road from Ft. Leavenworth to the Oregon Trail in 1845. He wrote that “the road began at the extreme western bend of the Missouri and avoided the Kansas River and several other bad crossings and ‘those notoriously adroit and impudent thieves, the Kansas Indians’ to be found on the Independence Road.”#3

By 1846 St. Joseph was advertised as the most “favorable point at which to rendezvous, and where all necessary outfits can be procured, at the least possible expense”. Robidoux’s Blacksnake Hills trading post had grown to a river town with grocery and dry goods stores, flour mill, and meatpacking plant and a population of about one thousand souls. Steamboats offered a passage to St. Joseph from St. Louis as well. #4

Council Bluffs served as a rendezvous for migrants coming from Illinois and other northern most points. Rarely did those travelers drive wagons south to Missouri, rather they traveled thru Nebraska meeting up with migrants as they came west northwest thru the Kansas route after turning north from points of Council Grove and Diamond Springs meeting at the Platte and Blue River rendezvous in Nebraska.

Map by Ezra Meeker, from Ventures and Adventures of Ezra Meeker or Sixty Years of Frontier Life, Seattle, 1909



As we note from diaries and journals of the 1830's and 40's trace and swale remnants show themselves as scattered paths across the northeast Kansas territory as the rule and not the exception. As an example, ferry crossing at St. Joseph to the Kansas side with wagons continuing along a southwesterly route ultimately converging with today's HWY 36. Prominent swale remains can be observed at the Native American Heritage Museum site outside of Highland, Kansas [1737 Elgin Road; Highland, KS 66035]. Iowa and Sac & Fox Mission (highlandks.com/visitors) KSHS.org.

Many traces of the old Kansas/Missouri gateway to the American West are still visible. Some traces are commemorated with parks, monuments, museums, and visitor centers; others are only highway pullouts near isolated grave markers, wagon swales through creek beds, and scatters of adobe and melted glass where a mail station once stood. In some places, today's traveler can see protected patches of original tallgrass prairie, sites of native villages, and landmarks, mounds, and springs that marked the slow progress of travelers 150 years ago. Historic trails, recognized by Congress under the National Trails System Act, identify the prominent past routes of migration, trade, communication, and military action. What remains today are primarily remnant sites and trail segments of these once-prominent roads to the West.

[Auto Tour Route Interpretive Guide, Western Missouri Through Northeastern Kansas \(nps.gov\)](https://www.nps.gov/learn/visit/plan-your-visit/auto-tour-route-interpretive-guide-western-missouri-through-northeastern-kansas)

When emigrant wagons rolled westward out of St. Joseph and Independence between 1841 and 1869, they passed the reservations of Eastern tribes such as the Shawnees, Delawares, Sauks and Foxes, Kickapoos, Wyandots, and Potawatomis. Those reservations, in turn, were carved out of the original homelands of the Kanza (also called Kaw) and Osage peoples. As trains of wagons moved over their land and camped by their springs, the Indian residents of eastern Kansas often offered assistance and shared their resources. They returned lost livestock, sold fresh vegetables, carried mail, and pulled wagons from the mud and ferried them across streams. Tragically, the travelers sometimes left behind more than wagon ruts and trade goods as they continued on their way: cholera, smallpox, measles, and other infectious diseases spread from the emigrant camps into Indian communities, taking many more lives. #5

[history.com/topics/westward-expansion/Oregon-trail#life-on-the-oregon-trail](https://www.history.com/topics/westward-expansion/Oregon-trail#life-on-the-oregon-trail)

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1. Bagley, Will (2010) OVERLAND WEST: The story of the Oregon and California trails, Vol. 1. 1812-1848. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press. p. 78.
 2. Wislizenus, F.A., Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the year 1839. St.Louis: Missouri Historical Society 1912, Reprint Galleon Press 1992. p. 27.
 3. Carleton. James H. The prairie logbooks: Dragoon campaigns to the Pawnee villages in 1844, and to the Rocky Mountains in 1845. Edited by Louis Pelzer (1983).Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. pp. 170-71 & 178-79.
 4. Lewin, J., Taylor, M.S., & Watkins, B. (1988), "St. Joseph, Missouri: Early impressions." in Overland Journal, 6, 1, pp. 2-7.
 5. Auto Tour Route of Oregon Trail (2010), p. 6.