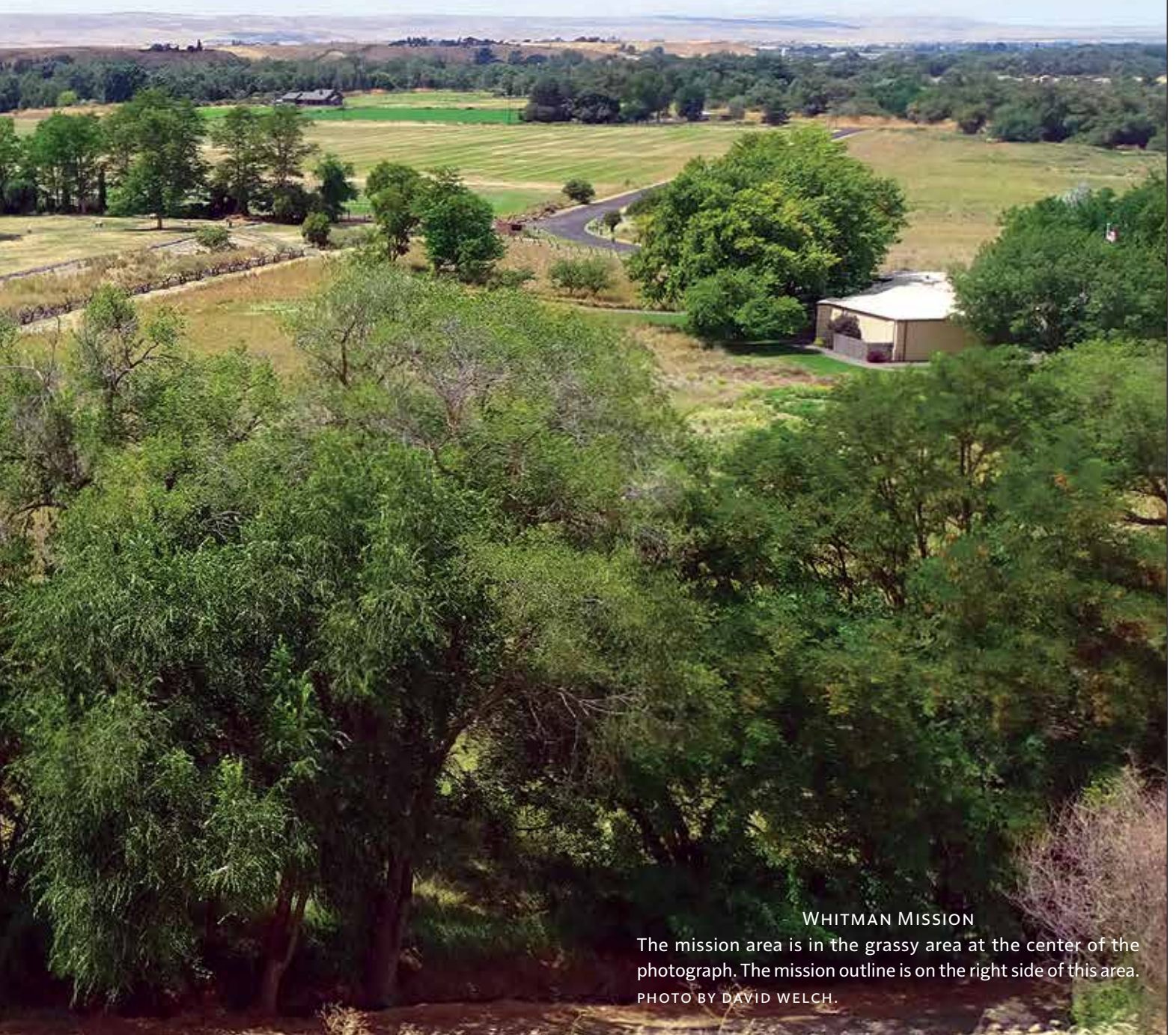


Finding the Original Oregon Trail 1841–1847 Routes to the Whitman Mission

BY DAVID J. WELCH



ALL TRAILS CHANGE THROUGH TIME. Shortcuts are found, obstacles avoided. The path to Oregon from the Missouri frontier was continually modified to meet the needs of travelers. In 1978 Congress authorized the designation of national trails, and the Oregon Trail was recognized and its route detailed in law. However, the recognized route ignored an early portion of the trail from the base of the Blue Mountains near Pendleton, Oregon, north to the Whitman Mission and



WHITMAN MISSION

The mission area is in the grassy area at the center of the photograph. The mission outline is on the right side of this area.

PHOTO BY DAVID WELCH.

on to the Columbia River. Instead it focused on a route from the base of the Blue Mountains to the Pendleton area, then west to The Dalles via Echo. With this article we offer initial results of a field study of the original route from the foot of the Blues toward the Whitman Mission west of today's Walla Walla, Washington. In a succeeding article we will examine the route thence down the Walla Walla River to Fort Nez Percés at its mouth, and then west on the south side of the Columbia.

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The Oregon Trail began in Independence, Missouri. The initial segments across Kansas and up the Platte River Valley evolved during the fur trade era of the 1820s and '30s. Trading caravans followed this route to reach a variety of rendezvous sites in Wyoming, where the business of the skin trade took place. The route across southern Idaho has its basis in both the fur trade and Native American trading and travel routes. The earliest white travelers through this region were the land party of the Astorians in 1811. They proceeded up the Burnt River Canyon in Oregon from Farewell Bend to the Powder River Valley and then across the Blue Mountains from near Grande Ronde. After crossing the Blues, they proceeded west to an intersection with the Columbia River and then west to the area of today's city of The Dalles.

Over the next two decades, trappers and traders used the route of the Astorians sparingly, but beginning in the early 1830s travelers of a different sort began crossing the landscape. In 1834 and 1835 missionaries arrived; first Methodist Jason Lee and then Presbyterian Samuel Parker. They both traveled a variation of the Astorian route to reach the Willamette Valley. In 1836 Henry Spalding and Marcus Whitman, sponsored

by the Presbyterian/Congregational American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions (A B C F M), entered the Columbia Basin with their wives, Eliza and Narcissa. These two women became the first white women to cross the continent, in effect opening Oregon for family settlement. The Whitman-Spalding party crossed the Blues on a slightly different route than the one later used by the Oregon Trail, traveling a more or less direct route from the base of the Blues north of today's Cayuse, Oregon, to the mouth of the Walla Walla River where it enters the Columbia River. They did not visit what would become the site of the Whitman Mission at that time, instead proceeding down the Columbia to visit John McLoughlin at the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Vancouver.¹

The two missionaries then returned east up the Columbia to establish their separate missions—Spalding at Lapwai on the Clearwater River above today's Lewiston, and Whitman at Waiilatpu among the Cayuse Indians near present Walla Walla—in October 1836.

In 1839 and the early 1840s a trickle of pioneers began appearing in Old Oregon, having traveled from the Missouri frontier. The Great Migration of 1843 opened the spigot, and settlers began to pour into the country from that time forward.

Opportunities for the migrants to pause and refresh, and even secure needed supplies, were rare for these early travelers. West of Fort Hall in present-day Idaho, the Whitman Mission provided a welcome respite. While some emigrants did head directly west from the base of the Blues beginning in 1847, in prior years most went north to the mission, west to Fort Nez Percés, then down the Columbia River. It is this pioneer route that we now trace. In doing so we seek to correct its exclusion from the congressionally designated Oregon National Historic Trail.

WHILE THE OREGON TRAIL IS OFTEN DESCRIBED AS analogous to a frayed rope, the 1978 National Trails System Act (as amended) mandated that "The Oregon National Historic Trail, a route of approximately two thousand miles

¹ See John W. Evans, *Powerful Rocky: The Blue Mountains and the Oregon Trail* (La Grande: Eastern Oregon College Press, 1991), for the definitive documentation on the Burnt River and Blue Mountain routes. Clifford Drury's *Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and the Opening of Old Oregon*, 2 vols. (Glendale, Calif.: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1973), documents the Whitman story.

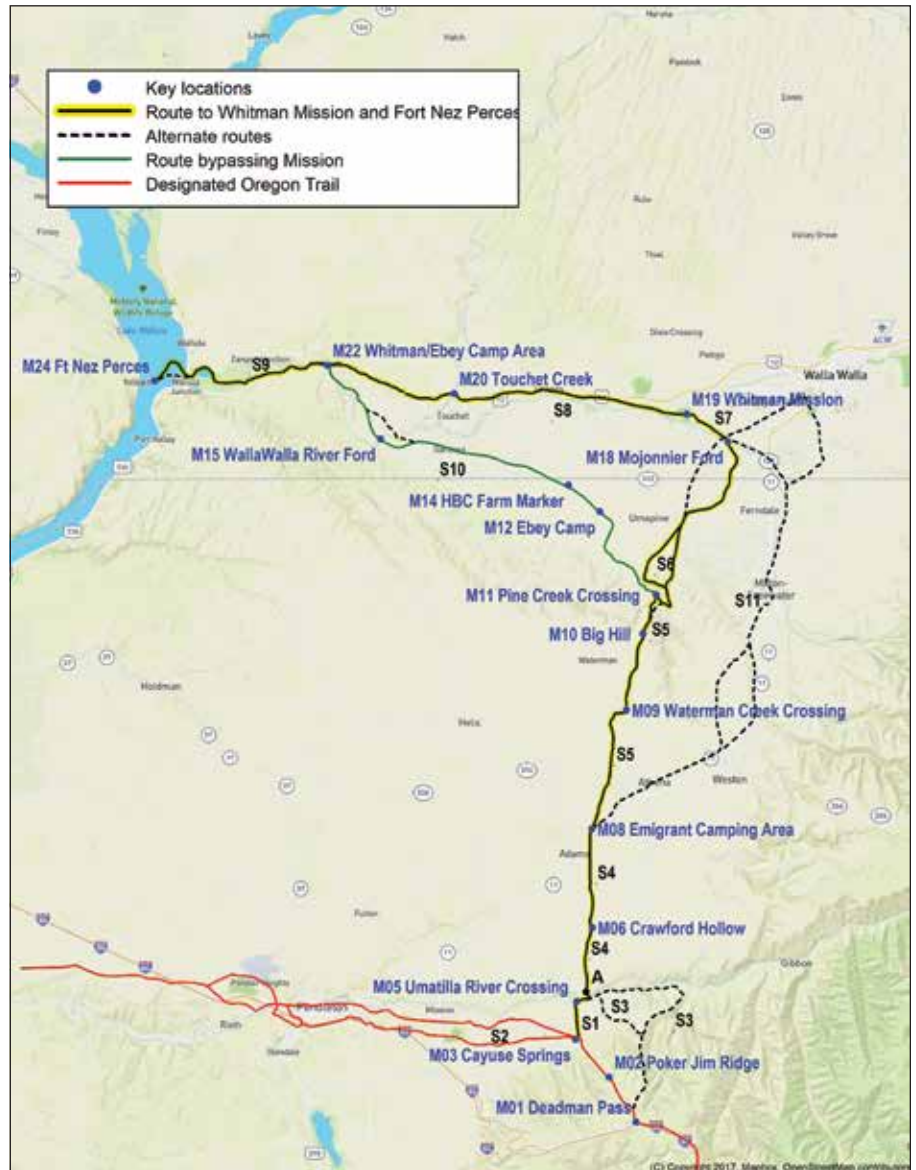
extending from near Independence, Missouri, to the vicinity of Portland, Oregon, follow a route as depicted on maps identified as ‘Primary Route of the Oregon Trail 1841–1848,’ in the Department of the Interior’s Oregon Trail study report dated April 1977.”

In other words, the legislation mandated that the Oregon Trail officially consisted of a single route. It omitted an important portion to and through the Whitman Mission, the route that was used by most emigrants until November 29, 1847, the date the Whitmans were slain and the mission closed. The problem of omitting that section of trail is exacerbated by the fact that little physical evidence and documentation of the trail to the mission have been found, while extensive evidence remains of the variant route to and beyond Pendleton to Echo.

Why did the route change to bypass the mission on a more direct route to the west? Emigrants hoping to replenish supplies had inundated Marcus Whitman. In 1847 he took a wagon west to The Dalles, generally following the Well Spring route, to get supplies and with the intent to prove the more direct route was feasible. A couple of months before the Whitmans were killed in late November 1847, Marcus met the arriving emigrants at the base of the Blues, directing them onto the new route—the route Congress designated as a National Historic Trail. However, during the first six years of overland migration, the traffic went to the mission, then to Fort Nez Percés, and down the Columbia River.

For years, researchers have sought to identify the mission route. Many accepted that the route followed Oregon Highway 11 and Washington Highway 125 through Milton-Freewater to Walla Walla, but this route probably developed when the area was settled in the 1860s. The fact that Ezra Meeker planted a marker in Milton-Freewater is taken as proof, but those familiar with Meeker’s work know that his marker placements were influenced by the enthusiasm and contributions of local communities.

I became interested in the Whitman Mission route at Lethene Park’s 1996 seminar “Walla Walla Weekend” and



MAP 1. Overview of Oregon Trail Routes to the Walla Walla Valley.



POKER JIM RIDGE, S1.

Descent from the Blue Mountains to Cayuse Spring (a.k.a. Cayuse Post Office) above the crossing of the Umatilla River (M07). The scarring visible in the picture is from various pipelines and utilities descending the ridge, but it approximates the original location of the trail. As is often the case, the emigrant's choice is validated by later roads, pipelines, and utility lines.

PHOTO BY DAVID WELCH.

have been researching it on and off since that time. On many field trips over the years, I was accompanied by Ray Egan and assisted by residents Sam Pambrun, Vernon Elsasser, and Brian von Borstel. Sam is a descendant of a French-Canadian employee of the Hudson's Bay Company, Pierre Pambrun, and has been studying the history of the area for many years. Brian von Borstel is an employee on a ranch in a key location and facilitated access and provided guidance to locations on private property. Both individuals are well-qualified local experts. Vernon Elsasser resides in Touchet, Washington, near the route from the mission to Fort Nez Percés (a.k.a. Fort Walla Walla) on the Columbia River. He facilitated access to a key site along the Walla Walla River that probably contains early trail features. Important maps by Theodore Kolecki during Col. George Wright's expedition in 1858 were found and provided by Mahlon Kriebel. Much of the credit for re-discovering the old routes belongs to Sam, Brian, and Mahlon; my role has been as trail analyst and integrator of information, and as the project cartographer.

The topography of the routes to the Walla Walla Valley is presently characterized by rolling hills with gradual slopes, planted mostly in wheat, with modest descents on the north side into the valley. Some areas have been cultivated for more than 150 years. The land is private, and access to many areas is limited. County roads once traversed the area above the southern edge of the Walla Walla Valley, but they have largely been abandoned, officially or unofficially. The Walla Walla Valley itself is extensively cultivated with large farms and urban/suburban developments. Few physical remnants of the early trails have been found.

Map 1 shows an overview of the research area and what we now consider to be the most plausible routes. The Whitman Mission route is shown as a black line with yellow highlighting. Also shown are the route west from the mission to Fort Nez Percés on the Columbia River (labeled S8 and S9), and the route that bypassed the mission after 1847 on the south side of the Walla Walla Valley (S10). Note that the route from Cayuse Springs to the Whitman Mission is a direct route about ten degrees east from due north. As such, it represents the shortest route, a choice of the emigrants whenever possible. Possible alternate routes for future study are shown as dashed lines.

The area shown in Map 1 has been occupied by Native Americans for thousands of years and Euro-Americans since about 1818. Trails—and after 1818, wagon roads—probably

connected points in the Walla Walla Valley (Hudson’s Bay Farm, Mojonnier Crossing, Fort Nez Percés) to the Cayuse area. These, in turn, overlaid ancient Indian routes in the area. The emigrants did not arrive to virgin ground that required trail blazing. They were probably able to move about on existing trails at least as good as those encountered previously to the east. This is shown by the reference in James Nesmith’s journal to being met by Dr. Whitman in a wagon in 1843 near Wildhorse Creek.

For this study the routes are divided into segments as shown below. The dashed lines in Map 1 are other possibilities not covered in this article.

- S1 Oregon Trail descent from Deadman Pass on Poker Jim Ridge. The trail passes through Cayuse Springs (a.k.a. Cayuse Post Office) where S2 divides into two routes heading directly west (see below). S1 extends to the Umatilla River crossing near Cayuse village.
- S2 Upper and Lower (relative to the Umatilla River) Oregon Trail routes to the Pendleton area. These routes are part of the congressionally designated Oregon National Historic Trail (ONHT).
- S3 Kanine Ridge descents to the Umatilla River. These are alternates to the Poker Jim route.
- S4 Umatilla River crossing at Cayuse to Wildhorse Creek.
- S5 Wildhorse Creek to Pine Creek crossing. Includes the “Big Hill” referenced by Ebey (1854).
- S6 Begins at Pine Creek crossing. Ascends ridge east of Pine Creek. It is a direct route to the Whitman Mission. There may be two descents into the Walla Walla Valley. The two routes of S6 join after entering the Walla Walla Valley. S6 ends at Mojonnier Ford of the Walla River. The precise location of S6 in the valley is uncertain.
- S7 Mojonnier Ford to Whitman Mission.
- S8 Whitman Mission to Byrnes Road junction at Nine-mile Farm. Junction is near the campsites of the Whitmans (1836) and Winfield Scott Ebey (1854).
- S9 Byrnes Road / Highway 12 junction (Nine-mile Farm) to Fort Nez Percés.
- S10 Alternate Route to Fort Nez Percés from the foot of Ebey’s “Big Hill” via Pine Creek bypassing the



MAP 2. Poker Jim Ridge descent and Umatilla River Crossing. Last ruts at “A.”

mission. Used by Ebey and others heading to the Puget Sound via Naches Pass after 1847.

- S11 Route through Milton-Freewater. This probably developed as an emigrant route in the 1860s. Perhaps its first use was by Colonel Wright when returning from the military expedition in 1858.

The analysis in this article is limited to an overview of the project and a more detailed discussion of findings regarding the route from the Umatilla River Crossing to Pine Creek (S4 and S5). Other segments will be addressed in future articles.

S4: UMATILLA RIVER CROSSING TO WILDHORSE CREEK

S4 extends from the Umatilla River crossing at Cayuse to an area on Wildhorse Creek the emigrants identified as a camping area just northeast of present Adams (Mo8 on Map 1). The ground on which the trail lies is private, cultivated land (wheat and beans). There is no obvious evidence of the trail on this segment although there are clues dictated by the topography. Future archaeological research might reveal trail evidence.

Sam Pambrun has studied the S4 route for over 50 years. He recalls trail swales plowed circa 1990 that provide anchor points for our studies. The first were above the Umatilla River crossing on the slopes ascending the plateau to the north. Map 2 shows a blow-up of the area.

According to Pambrun, there were swales near Point A on the map. Note that North Cayuse Road ascends a relatively shallow grade, so it cannot be excluded as a possible route. There are other dry creek beds in the area (not shown) with flat bottoms that may also mark ascents from the river. From the crossing, I have chosen a path that has two features:

- 1 It points directly to the emigrant's objective;
- 2 It follows the easiest (low-grade) topography.

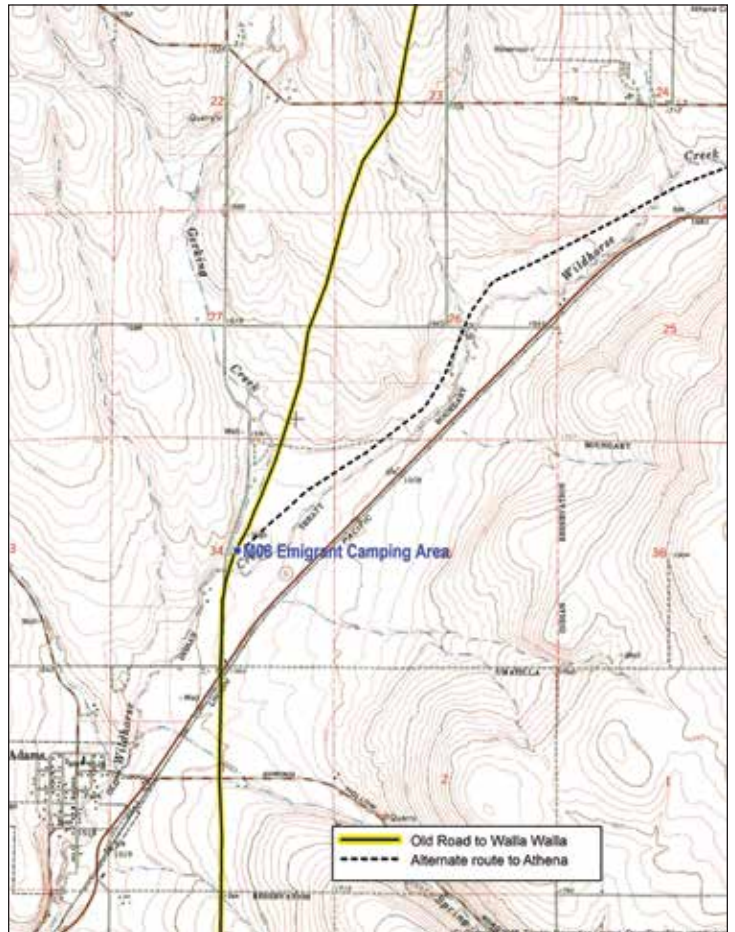
The trail line should not be considered as definitive, but the trail (or trails) probably lie within one-tenth mile (500 feet) of the line.

Before reaching Wildhorse Creek, the trail encounters Crawford Hollow (see Mo6, Map 3), which dips about 60 feet

MAP 3. Crawford Hollow.



MAP 4. Wildhorse Creek and Emigrant Camping Area.



below the adjacent terrain. It can be avoided by shifting about a half-mile east, which some may have done, but there are remnant farm roads that traverse the hollow that may coincide with the old trail. The homesite in the hollow has been considered to be “on the trail” by locals, according to Pambrun.

From Crawford Hollow the trail proceeds to Wildhorse Creek (Map 4), which is mentioned by several emigrants (W. S. Ebey, Harvey Jones, and others). The creek’s course in this area is generally southwest to Pendleton. The creek bottom offers an extended area for emigrant layovers after the climb from the Umatilla River. Water and grass were readily available. Today a highway, an old railroad bed, and utilities parallel the creek between Adams and Athena. Distance measurements from the Umatilla River by Winfield Scott Ebey in 1854 (“traveled eight miles . . .”) place his camp about one mile northeast of Adams in the northwest quarter section of Section 34 (Mo8). Since this site is reasonably well specified, it provides credibility for the direct route from the Umatilla River as described.

S5: WILDHORSE CREEK TO PINE CREEK

The emigrant camp on Wildhorse Creek is the beginning of S5, which extends to the trail’s crossing of Pine Creek twelve miles to the north. The area was also visited by Col. George Wright in 1858 as the military expedition passed through the area on its way to U.S. Army Fort Walla Walla near present Walla

Walla. His force included a cartographer, Theodore Kolecki, whose maps provide definitive evidence of pre-existing trails.

Colonel Wright came up Wildhorse Creek from its junction with the Umatilla River in present Pendleton. He seems to have visited the emigrant camp site (see diversion on Map 5, a detail of the Kolecki map, at Point B) and then proceeded to a campsite in present Athena (Point C). Here he established his “Station o” for his survey to Fort Walla Walla. Near the emigrant camp he crossed the emigrant route (labeled “Main Road to Walla Walla”). Wright did not take the “Main Road” at this point, but as we shall see, he joined it north of present Athena on present Waterman Road.

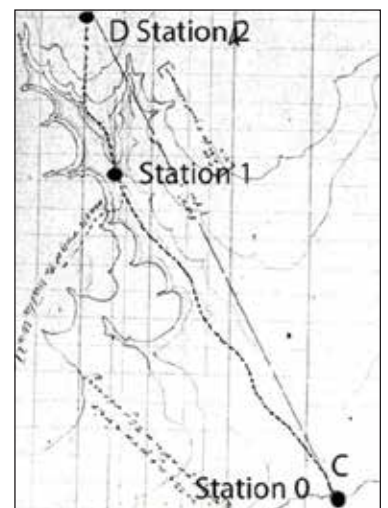
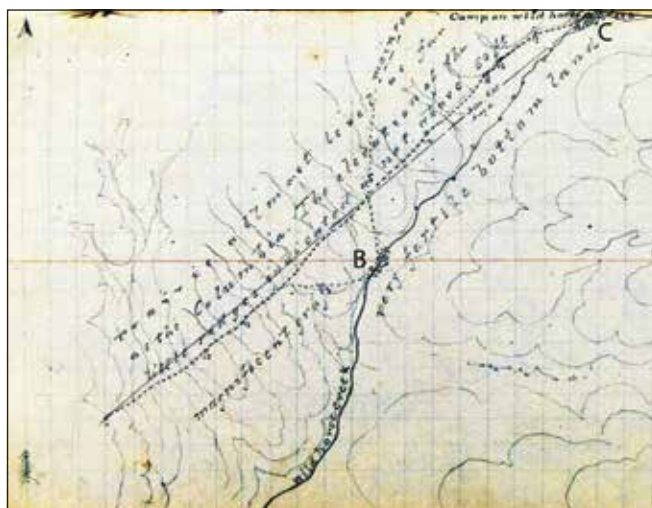
The grid on Kolecki’s maps is 0.25 miles. From Station o in Athena back to the point on Wildhorse Creek to which Colonel Wright diverted is about 2.5 miles. This is consistent with the emigrant camping area being at Point B on Kolecki’s map (Map 5).

Map 6 is Kolecki’s map from Station o (Point C) in Athena to Station 2. This distance is about 5.0 to 5.5 miles. The “Main Road to Walla Walla” joins Kolecki’s route about 1.5 miles back towards Athena. These points establish the emigrant route from the camping area to Waterman Creek and on to Pine Creek.

The 1864 GLO survey map of the area (not shown) shows a road leaving Waterman Road about 2.5 miles north of Athena. Nothing is visible today in the cultivated fields, but the

(RIGHT) MAP 5. Kolecki’s Wildhorse Creek Map. Emigrant camp at B. Athena/Station o at C.

(FAR RIGHT) MAP 6. Kolecki’s Map from Station o at Present Athena. Note label “Main Road to Walla Walla” upside down left of center.




the search team

BRIAN VON BORSTEL is a descendant of Oregon pioneers. Working at Northstar Farms near Athena, Oregon, adjacent to the original trail to the Whitman Mission, he met Sam Pambrun who was looking for evidence of the trail. Having grown up in the area, Brian assumed the trail's location was common knowledge. Sam recognized and appreciated Brian's interest and enthusiasm, and invited him to join the search team in looking for evidence of the trail.

MAHLON E. KRIEBEL of Garfield, Washington, has long been enamored with the conflicts between the U.S. Army and Native people in eastern Washington in the 1850s. He holds a Ph.D in Zoology and was a professor of Physiology at SUNY Health Science Center, Syracuse, 1969-2002. Since retirement he has lectured and written on the military campaigns of eastern Washington, John Mullan, and the 1858 field note maps of Theodore Kolecki.

SAM PAMBRUN of Adams, Oregon, is descended from the Pambrun family, who migrated to North America from France in 1715 and was employed in the fur trade industry. In 1824 the Pambrun family crossed the Rocky Mountains and arrived at Fort George, New Caledonia (now Prince George, British Columbia). In 1831 the family arrived at Fort Nez Percés, located at the confluence of the Walla Walla and Columbia Rivers in present-day Washington State. He is a retired educator and past president of Umatilla County Historical Society and Frenchtown Historic Foundation, and he has researched, written, and lectured on Northwest history for years. He has received numerous awards for work in agriculture, vocational education, civic service, and history.



EBEY'S BIG HILL

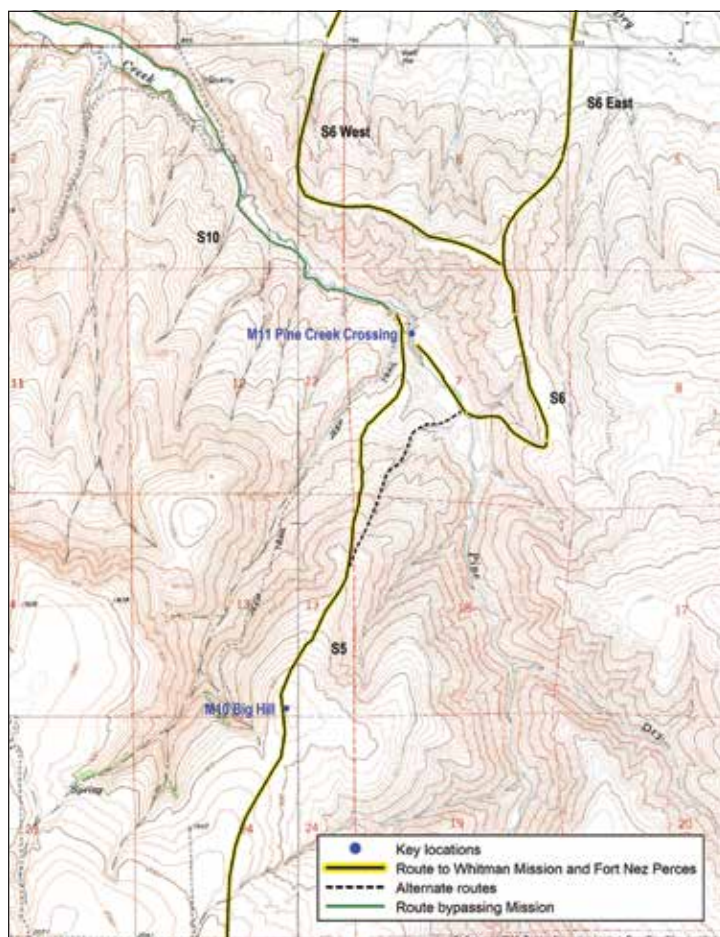
On S5 at M12. Ebey mentions the descent of a "big hill" to Pine Creek. Extensive swales have been located on various parts of the hill. PHOTO BY DAVID WELCH.

GLO survey shows a road gradually ascending the ridgeline and then descending to Pine Creek. For this discussion I will refer to the hill as “Ebey’s Big Hill,” although to my knowledge it has no formal name. The summit of Ebey’s Big Hill (M10) is in T5N-R34E-S25. There is substantial physical evidence of a trail beginning just prior to the crest of Big Hill and thereafter, all the way to Pine Creek.

The use of the GLO map from 1864 to document the route of emigrants in 1841 to 1847 is debatable. It does not prove that the road existed in the earlier period. However, the GLO route is used to collaborate a route determined by other means. The route was first determined by analysis of the terrain and aerial photographs that revealed scarring. The key evidence from Kolecki is his reference to the “Main Road to Walla Walla,” but technically we only take that to mean pre-1858. The earliest direct evidence of the use of this route is found in Ebey’s diary in 1854, although he makes it clear that the route pre-existed.

Ebey notes that prior to reaching Pine Creek, they descended a “Big Hill.” This descent is shown in Map 7 and the “Big Hill” photo. On the route being studied, the descent extends for about three miles and leads into the Pine Creek valley as described by Ebey. Numerous parallel swales can be observed over a wide area just as the trail reaches Pine Creek. Swales are deep, probably due to erosion of the fine soil and heavy use.

At the base of Ebey’s Big Hill, he noted a “right-turn, left-turn” decision that faced emigrants. During our original research, we thought that this decision was made at the mouth of Pine Creek near present Seven Hills Road. Later we realized that the decision was made at the base of the hill when they reached Pine Creek. A left turn takes you out Pine Creek in a northwesterly direction and away from the mission (S10). A right turn with a short segment along Pine Creek leads to a gradual ascent of the ridge northeast of Ebey’s Big Hill and a direct route to the mission (S6). This is probably the route of pre-1848 emigrants and Colonel Wright.



MAP 7. Big Hill Descent and Routes to the Walla Walla Valley.

SUMMARY

The primary purpose of this paper is to establish a basis for future studies. Some of the routes are speculative, but I believe they are close to the actual routes. Studies to date permit the following conclusions to be drawn:



PINE CREEK TO WALLA WALLA VALLEY

Junction of S5 and S6 at M14. Ebey made a left turn at the base of the hill and proceeded northwest down Pine Creek to the Walla Walla Valley. Emigrants going to the mission crossed Pine Creek and ascended the hill on the east side of Pine Creek. After a short distance, they descended to the Walla Walla Valley on S6. PHOTO BY DAVID WELCH.

- Emigrant diaries support the location of an emigrant camp on Wildhorse Creek near Adams.
- The route of Colonel Wright from Wildhorse Creek to U.S. Army's Fort Walla Walla in 1858 is established with high confidence from Kolecki's maps, except a four-mile segment in the Walla Walla Valley prior to the Mojonner Ford.
- Kolecki's identification of the "Main Road to Walla Walla" is the best evidence of the "Original Oregon Trail" from Wildhorse Creek over the Big Hill to Pine Creek and beyond.
- Colonel Wright followed the same route from Waterman Road to Pine Creek used by Winfield Scott Ebey and others in 1854.
- Ebey turned left when he reached Pine Creek. He followed Pine Creek into the Walla Walla Valley, bypassing the Whitman Mission site, and proceeded to Fort Nez Percés along the southern edge of the valley in a northwesterly direction. 