

The Ice Age Oregon Trail

Part Two: John Day River to the Willamette Valley

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The ice age floods had cut good paths for the Oregon Trail immigrants down to the John Day River but getting back out of the canyon was a whole new story. It took as long as a week for a wagon train to climb out of the John Day Valley, even using double and triple teams because of the steepness of the hillside. The first wagons up the hill west of McDonald Ford camped while their teams were used to bring up the remaining wagons.



Figure 12 Trail up from the John Day River in the center right. (Note scour marks and slumping)

The trail after McDonald Ford is above the affects of the Lake Missoula Floods. A fork in the trail (after the Barlow Road was created) allowed travelers to go SW toward Mt. Hood or proceed northwest toward the Columbia. Near Biggs the trail came down a ravine to a basalt ledge above the Columbia River.



(Figure 13) Oregon Trail ruts above modern highway west of Biggs

The ruts here are still very visible, even from I-84 if one knows where to look. They stayed on this ledge until they met the Deschutes River. There, an island at the mouth of the river, and the aid of local Native Americans, for a price, helped them ford the stream and head back up to higher ground.



(Figure 14) Looking across the Deschutes River at the Oregon Trail ruts climbing up the hillside (center right to the top center)



(Figure 15) Oregon Trail (Moody Road) west from the Deschutes crossing.

There are several sets of ruts visible on the west side of the Deschutes, but one of the main trails is now followed by Moody Road to Fairbanks Gap where it is met by a portion of the trail that stayed on the top of the ridge above the area scoured by the floods.



(Figure 16) Trail west turning south through Fairbanks Gap down to 15 Mile Creek.

Fairbanks Gap is one of two overflow channels from the Columbia River into 15 Mile Creek. Here the Oregon Trail followed the expansion ripples down to the Creek. A rock harvesting area shows that a huge amount of gravel flowed through Fairbanks Gap.



(Figure 17) Fairbanks Gap from the air looking north. Oregon Trail cuts from the center to the lower right side of the photo. It then crosses the lower part of the photo and exits the canyon at the lower left.



(Figure 18) Fairbanks bar gravel deposit.

Just northwest of Fairbanks Gap is another, even larger gap scoured by the floods and an even larger gravel harvest area in what used to be the town of Petersburg.



(Figure 19) Petersburg overflow into 15 mile creek. (Purple Arrow. The Dalles Dam upper left. "A" marks the gravel area)



(Figure 20) Petersburg gravel deposit.

Petersburg Gap is over a mile wide but was not used by the Oregon Trail pioneers because at Fairbanks they climbed out of 15 Mile Creek and went overland into The Dalles where they had a major decision to make.

The only trail, if you could call it such, west from The Dalles was the Columbia River itself. This was because the sleep cliffs of Rowena Gap came right down to the river leaving no place to put a trail. But the river route was expensive. They had to rent or build a raft to float their belongings. It was also dangerous. Each year both lives and belongings were lost due to overturned rafts.



(Figure 21) Before the freeways were built the cliffs of Rowena Gap went straight down into the river making no room to get wagons passed except on rafts.

The other choice was to turn south from The Dalles and follow the newly built Barlow Toll Road. One would think that the Oregon Trail would get easier as you got further along. No so!

The Barlow Road was considered by many to be the roughest and hardest section of the whole trail. Having to pay to use it was like adding insult to injury so they tried to bypass the tollgate wherever possible. This led to the tollgate being moved every few years. As it was, Barlow and his partners never really turned a profit from the road.

This road left the ice age flood paths behind until it reached Eagle Creek in the Clackamas Valley, where they were again in a Lake Missoula Flood area. Near Carver Gap they climbed out of it to cross a ridge into Oregon City which was their final destination.

Oregon City was built on Lake Missoula Flood terraces at Willamette Falls which was created by the Ice Age Floods. From there, they could file land claims and start farming the rich deposits of Lake Missoula Flood soil in the Willamette Valley which had been their goal all along.