



Old Oregon Trail | Scotts Bluff National Monument, NE

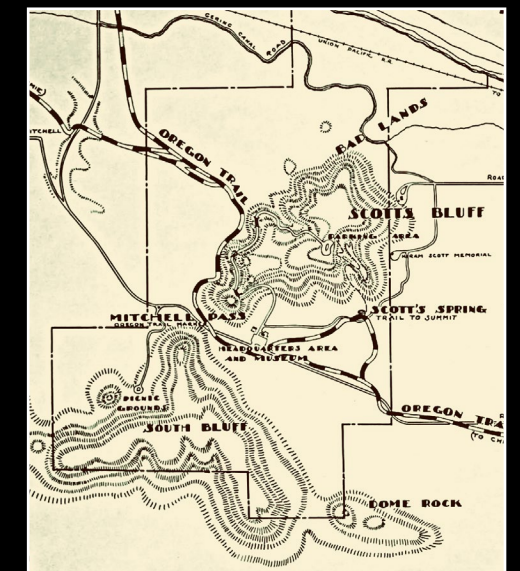
Wagon Train | William Henry Jackson | From the Scotts Bluff National Monument museum collection [SCBL 53]

In the mid-1800s emigrants began travelling the Oregon Trail for over 2,000 miles from Missouri to the Oregon Territory along routes first established by Native Americans and fur traders. The first organized party of emigrants traveled across the west in 1841, and soon were followed by thousands of pioneers headed west to settle new lands. By 1848, word of gold found in California dramatically increased the number of emigrants headed west along the route. Eventually over a quarter million individuals followed the trail. The Oregon and California Trails followed the same route until they reached Idaho, where the trail split into one heading toward Oregon and the other toward California.

Chimney Rock, shown center-left in the painting, is the most frequently mentioned landmark in the emigrants' diaries and journals. The area between Scotts Bluff and South Bluff further beyond was also known as Mitchell Pass

or "The Gap." The early route of the trail followed the south side of the North Platte River, until it approached the badlands area of New Scotts Bluff. At that point, the travelers were forced to make a wide swing through Robidoux Pass, as the terrain through Mitchell Pass would not accommodate wagons. Beginning in 1850, the pioneers excavated the most treacherous segments through the Pass, significantly shortening the distance traveled by approximately eight miles. This eliminated a day's travel time along the trails. Emigrants reaching these landmarks and successfully navigating the Pass would have completed one-third of their journey to Oregon.

William Henry Jackson (1843-1942) was an American painter, Civil War veteran, geological survey photographer, and an explorer famous for his images of the American West.



Scotts Bluff National Monument area map showing Oregon Trail passing through Mitchell Pass between Scotts Bluff and South Bluff (c. 1936) (SCBL Archives).