

**Mormon Trail Network in  
Nebraska, 1846–1868: A New  
Look**



# Mormon Trail Network in Nebraska, 1846–1868: A New Look

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For more than twenty years during the mid-nineteenth century, between 1846 and 1868, thousands of Mormons traversed southern Nebraska, going east and west, utilizing a network of trails aggregating well over 1,800 miles, considerably more than the famous 1,300-mile-long Mormon Trail from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake.<sup>1</sup>

To date, interest in and knowledge of these Nebraska trails has focused largely on the pioneer route of 1847. But there were many other trails and variants. A new picture of Mormon migration in Nebraska is emerging, showing that state to have been much more widely traveled by Mormons than has heretofore been recognized. We are just now beginning to appreciate the dimensions and magnitude of the Mormon use of Nebraska trails (see foldout map on preceding page).

These trails and variants may be grouped into three basic categories, time periods, and degrees of importance as follows:

1. *The Mormon Pioneer Trail of 1847* from Winter Quarters to present-day Wyoming. Used throughout the emigration period, 1846–68, it is the best known of all Mormon trails in Nebraska. There are, however, several little-known variants:

Variant A: At least four alternate routes between the Missouri River and the Elkhorn River.

Variant B: The Lone Tree Variant between Genoa and Grand Island and between Columbus and Grand Island.

Variant C: The Grand Island Bypass.

Variant D: The Shinn Ferry Crossing connecting the 1847 trail with the Oxbow Trail.

Variant E: The Fort Kearney Crossing connecting the 1847 trail with the Oregon Trail.

Variant F: The Roubadeau Pass and Mitchell Pass variants west of Scottsbluff and south of the Platte River.

2. *The Oregon Trail* along the Little Blue and Platte rivers via Ash Hollow to the Wyoming line. The Mormons used all or part of this trail and its variants from at least 1849 through 1868.

Variant A: The Oxbow Variant between Nebraska City and Fort Kearney, 1849–64.

Variant B: The Wahoo Variant (of the Oxbow).

Variant C: The Mormon Variant (of the Oxbow).

Variant D: The Bethlehem or Plattsmouth Ferry Variant between the Missouri River and the Oxbow.

Variant E: The Nebraska City Cutoff Variant between Nebraska City and Fort Kearney, 1864–66.

Variant F: The Wyoming Variant north of Nebraska City.

Variant G: The Upper California Crossing Variant via Court-house Rock, 1859–64.

3. *The Lodgepole Creek Trail* between the Upper California Crossing of the Oregon Trail along Lodgepole Creek into Wyoming. The Mormons used this trail between 1864 and 1867.

While the above list which atomizes the Mormon Trails system in Nebraska is useful and necessary, it is much more practical and simple to observe that we actually have but two main trails, the Mormon and the Oregon. These trails have many variants, much like two ropes frayed at both ends and stretched along the north and the south banks of the Platte River.

## THE TRAILS

### **Mormon Pioneer Trail of 1847**

The famous Mormon Pioneer Trail of 1847, which needs little description here, began at Winter Quarters (present-day Florence, Nebraska, just north of Omaha), and generally followed the north bank of the Platte River for 504 miles (according to William Clayton) to the current Wyoming line.

The Mormon use of this pioneer route has been well marked by the state of Nebraska, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Latter-day Saints. In the Winter Quarters area there are markers at the west entrance of the south span of the Mormon Pioneer Memorial Bridge, which carries I-680 across the Missouri River; one at the approximate site of the old Mormon mill at 9200 North 30th Street; two in the Florence City Park; several at the Mormon Pioneer Cemetery at State and 34th streets; and one in the Mormon Visitors' Center across the street from the cemetery.

Other markers referring to the Mormons are found at the intersection of 64th Street and old Highway 36 (just south of the North Omaha Airport); in Barnard Park at Fremont; in the Fremont State Recreation Area just west of Fremont; one-half mile east of Ames; in Genoa City Park; on Highway 14 just south of Fullerton; at the Mormon Island State Wayside

Area on I-80 at the Grand Island exit; west of Second Avenue in Kearney; just north of Lexington on Highway 21; at an I-80 rest stop about five miles east of Cozad; on the grounds of the Lincoln County Museum in North Platte; immediately north of the Platte at Bridgeport; at the intersection (“trisection”) of Highway 26, the Beltline Highway; and at the Burlington Railroad tracks east of the town of Scottsbluff, as well as one-quarter mile west along these tracks.

This trail north of the Platte River later became famous because Brigham Young led the Mormon Pioneer exiles along it in 1847; however, it was used by some Mormons in 1846. During July of that year, Brigham Young dispatched some “pre-pioneers” to the Grand Island area. By 27 July their leader, Bishop George Miller, was at the Pawnee village, about 120 miles west of Winter Quarters on a well-known and well-worn trappers’ trail. Eventually fourteen families settled at the Pawnee village, but by mid-September they had either returned to Winter Quarters or followed Bishop Miller north to winter on the Ponca River with some friendly Indians.<sup>2</sup>

### **Variants of the 1847 Trail**

The first set of variants developed when several ferries crossing the Missouri River gave rise to different routes to the Elkhorn River. The “Mormon Ferry” was near the mouth of Mill Creek, about one-half mile above today’s Mormon Pioneer Memorial Bridge at Florence. This was the major ferry used by the Mormons. A second ferry was at Trader’s Point, almost due west of Kanesville, approximately where I-80 crosses the Missouri River today. A third crossing was just north of old Bellevue, Nebraska’s oldest city, founded in 1822.

To the north of Winter Quarters about twelve miles was the so-called “Wet Weather Variant” westward from old Fort Atkinson, which had been built in 1820 to protect the American fur trade. (It was built at the site of the original Council Bluffs. Subsequently, the name *Council Bluffs* drifted downstream and across the river to the present-day city of the same name in Iowa.) This variant followed very closely the trail which Major Stephen H. Long used on his well-known expedition of 1820.

The Mormons also used a short trail north to the Fort Atkinson area where they established “Summer Quarters” for haying, farming, and grazing purposes. Like others before and after them, they used the mud bricks of ruined Fort Atkinson (which had been abandoned in 1827) for their own purposes.

Along these variants there are only two Mormon markers. One marks the semilegendary “Mormon Hollow” where some Mormons allegedly wintered in 1846. No hard evidence supports the existence of a Mormon camp there, but the tale is persistent. Mormon Hollow is located in the

Fontenelle Forest Natural Landmark north of Bellevue. The marker, which was erected by some Boy Scouts in 1932, has since been thoroughly vandalized, and nothing is left but the cobblestone base. This base can be reached from Camp Wakonda off Forest Drive or by following the Burlington and Northern Railroad tracks for four-tenths of a mile south of Childs Road. The ruined marker is just to the west of the tracks. The second marker which refers to the Mormons is located in the Amelia Hill rest area off the south lane of I-80 in Sarpy County.

Two variants of the Pioneer Trail of 1847 developed along the Loup River. The early Mormons forded this stream near present-day Fullerton. Later, in 1857, a downstream ford was discovered near Genoa, which the Mormons established as a way station that same year. From this ford the trail angled southwest along the Platte, reaching the 1847 trail a few miles east of Grand Island. In 1858 a ferry began operating at the mouth of the Loup near today's Columbus. Since both of these variants passed the famous "Lone Tree," they can be dubbed the Lone Tree variants.

Three markers along these Lone Tree variants refer to the Mormons. The first is in the Genoa City Park. Although Genoa was first laid out by the Mormons with distinctive ten acre blocks and 132 foot wide streets following the compass, none of that remains today. Current Genoa consists largely of 1.6 acre blocks with streets 80 and 100 feet wide. (The Mormons were run out of the area in 1859 by an unfriendly Indian agent who wanted the land for the Pawnees.) Another marker, also commemorating the famous Lone Tree, is located in the Mormon Trail Wayside Area on U.S. 30 nine miles east of Central City; a third is at the western end of Central City. Trees being scarce in Nebraska, the Lone Tree was a noted landmark; however, it died in 1863.

The only other significant variant on the trail of 1847 appears to have been west of Scottsbluff. (The Grand Island bypass, Shinn Ferry Crossing, and Fort Kearney Crossing were very minor variants.) Most Mormons remained north of the Platte all the way across Nebraska, but a few, including Heber C. Kimball in 1848, crossed the river near Scottsbluff and picked up the Oregon Trail, which left Nebraska via the Roubadeau Pass until 1851 and thereafter via the nearby Mitchell Pass.

## **Oregon Trail**

The Oregon Trail, the eastern terminus of which in the 1840s was Independence, Missouri, entered Nebraska near present-day Steele City, Jefferson County, and followed the Little Blue and Platte rivers, via Ash Hollow and Chimney Rock, across the state. The Mormons used all or parts of this "Main Street of the Old West" from 1846 through at least 1867. This trail, which lay south of the Platte, had two advantages for the Mormons,

especially for those whose jumping-off places for the West were already south of the Platte—it was a little shorter and it avoided the difficult crossings of the Elkhorn and Loup rivers. Several Mormons to use this trail were Thomas W. Cropper in 1853, Christian J. Larsen in 1854, and Joseph Heywood in 1856.

Other Mormons picked up the Oregon Trail at Marysville, Kansas (ten miles south of Nebraska), via the “Mormon Grove Trail” out of Atchison and nearby Mormon Grove, Kansas. (I have found nine accounts of this, all during 1855–56.)<sup>3</sup>

Although the Oregon Trail proper is extensively marked in Nebraska, I have noted only two markers and one museum exhibit referring to the Mormons on this trail. The first marker is on U.S. 183 twenty miles west of Fort Kearney; the second is at the southern end of Bridgeport on County Road 385. The museum exhibit, which tells the story of westering Mormons and features a full-scale reproduction of a handcart, is in the Oregon Trail Museum at the Scotts Bluff National Monument. There was, at one time, a third marker pertaining to the Mormons on this trail. It was located at the Sioux Lookout Monument about eight miles southeast of North Platte, but this marker has, regrettably, been removed to the grounds of the Lincoln County Museum in North Platte.

### **Variants of the Oregon Trail**

There were at least eight variants of the Oregon Trail proper which the Mormons used. The Oxbow Trail came into existence in 1849 to connect Fort Kearney with the Missouri River. It started at present-day Nebraska City and generally followed the Platte in a huge bow (hence its name) to Fort Kearney. This trail lasted until 1864 when it was replaced by the shorter and more direct Nebraska City Cutoff.

The Oxbow itself had two variants. One, which I designate the Wahoo Variant, followed the Wahoo Creek north from the Salt Creek Ford, near present-day Ashland. There was also what came to be called the “Mormon Variant” (by what means I know not), which separated from the trunk route at the Weeping Water Creek, rejoining near Brainard.

Of the twenty-two accounts I have read of Mormons using the Oxbow and its variants, none specify which of the three routes they followed.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, all of these accounts indicate that the Mormons did not pick up the Oxbow at Nebraska City but to the west (by two differing routes) from the Bethlehem or Plattsmouth Ferry. This ferry was very popular with the Mormons because it was only about twenty-five miles south of Winter Quarters and Council Bluffs and, during high water, enabled them to avoid the Elkhorn and Loup rivers crossings. This ferry was used between 1849 and 1867, especially during the high water years of 1850–52.

Along all these variants of the Oxbow I have located only one marker referring to the Mormons—located on U.S. 6 in Ashland, site of the famous Salt Creek Ford.

Another variant of the Oregon Trail goes by the name of the Nebraska City Cutoff, commencing, of course, at Nebraska City, one of the many Missouri River points of departure for the Far West.<sup>5</sup> That Mormons used this trail is certainly not well known today. Actually, the Mormons seldom were in Nebraska City itself; rather they were seven miles north at an obscure village named Wyoming, just forty-five miles downriver from Winter Quarters. While far from being one of the most important trails west, this cutoff is considered the last of the overland trails to the West. It flourished from 1859 to 1866, when it gave way to the Union Pacific Railroad. This cutoff, as its name clearly indicates, went nearly straight west for 169 miles to Fort Kearney and shortened the distance of the roundabout Oxbow Trail by about forty miles, or twenty-three percent—two or three days of travel. And then as now, time was money.

The principal reason for the Mormons' switch to this trail seems to have been the Indian troubles that broke out during the Civil War when many regular troops were withdrawn from military posts on the Plains. The Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and other tribes seized this opportunity to try to drive the whites off the Indians' ancestral lands.

The town of Wyoming, founded in 1855 as a river port, was favored by the Mormons over nearby Nebraska City because it provided more open area for their staging ground and was well removed from the rough elements of the bigger community. Although the Mormons built a few structures in Wyoming, nothing is left of the buildings, or much of anything else, today.

Although most Mormon emigrants experienced no trouble at all with Indians along western trails (Indian depredations along the trails have been criminally exaggerated by films and fiction), they, like many others, did have trouble during the Civil War, especially in 1864 and 1865. In 1864, Jesse N. Smith reported several deserted and burned ranches; Orley D. Bliss saw a dead body at a ranch where Indians had burned eleven wagons, killed eleven men, and kidnapped a white woman; he also saw some Indians burning another ranch. In 1865 Jonas Myers witnessed an attack on his freight train when Indians tried to steal the cattle. One white man was killed. In that same year, one of the very few documented cases of a white Mormon woman's being kidnapped by Indians took place when F. C. Grundvig's wife, Jesine, was captured (in Wyoming, not Nebraska) and never heard from again.<sup>6</sup>

The Nebraska City Cutoff has been fairly well marked, but only four of the markers refer to the Mormons. The first is located in Nebraska City east



of the Courthouse at Central Avenue and Fifth Street near restored “old” Fort Kearney, established 1846. (“Old” Fort Kearney had a very short life before being moved to present-day “new” Fort Kearney.) The second marker is on Highway 2, near the hospital in Syracuse. The third and fourth are located at rest stops on the east- and westbound lanes of I-80 at the York exit.

Regardless of when and which of all these trails and trail variants the Mormons used between 1846 and 1868, the trails all converged near the southernmost bend of the Platte, near Fort Kearney. The Mormon Trail and its variants remained along the north bank, all others on the south.

Since we have already discussed the Mormon Trail to and beyond the Fort Kearney area, we will now follow the Oregon Trail and its variants west of Fort Kearney via O’Fallon Bluffs to various Platte crossings.<sup>7</sup> Until 1859, almost all Mormons crossed the South Platte at what came to be known as the Lower California Crossing and proceeded via California Hill and Ash Hollow to the south bank of the North Platte. A few experimented with other crossing places, notably at the so-called Lower Crossing, and headed for Ash Hollow, reaching that camping site by the Cedar Grove route rather than by the very difficult Windlass Hill approach.

After the 1859 gold rush in Colorado Territory, the Oregon Trail was extended farther along the South Platte River to a Cheyenne crossing in the area of Julesburg, Colorado, where a new crossing, dubbed the Upper California Crossing, was developed. After making this crossing, the gold rushers followed the South Platte River to Denver. Mormons and Oregonians, however, picked up the Lodgepole Creek and followed it west to where Sidney, Nebraska, is located today, then northward via Mud Springs and Courthouse Rock, joining the older route of the Oregon Trail near present-day Bridgeport. In the various Mormon accounts of traveling along the Oregon Trail, I have located only two references, both in 1864, to the Upper California Crossing. (The tip was reference to the Muddy Springs.) Despite the seemingly little Mormon use of this fording area, one crossing place south of the Lodgepole Creek did acquire the name “Mormon Ford.”

### **Lodgepole Trail**

Once overland emigrants started following the Lodgepole Creek to present-day Sidney and north to the North Platte River, it was perhaps inevitable they would follow it west into present-day Wyoming.

What became the Lodgepole route officially began in 1850 as a result of the efforts of Captain Howard Stansbury of the U.S. Army Topographical engineers, guided by Jim Bridger, to find a route far south of the Mormon and Oregon trails in order to avoid the heavy snows along those trails. Actually, parts of this southern route from Julesburg to Fort Bridger had

been known to trappers as early as 1825. Part of the route was often referred to as the Cherokee Trail from the fact that in 1849 a party of Cherokee followed part of it through Colorado and Wyoming to California.<sup>8</sup>

This southern route became especially popular after 1862 because of a great increase of Indian trouble, especially Sioux, along the northern route. The Mormon use of the route appears to have been restricted to the years 1864–67.

## TRAILS TODAY

All of these trails can be followed today quite closely in ordinary passenger cars. At no time during my travels in Nebraska over the years have I ever needed four-wheel drive. The accompanying map, by Diane Clements, lays out the trails and modern roads clearly enough to be followed, if supplemented with an ordinary state road map. For the closest approximation of the old trails, however, travelers should secure official county maps for those counties they wish to explore in detail. These maps are on a one-half inch to the mile scale and can be obtained from the Nebraska Department of Roads at Lincoln.

Scattered along these trails, twenty-seven markers, one museum exhibit, and one visitors' center refer to the Mormons. In addition, there are many other trail markers which do not mention the Mormons.

East of Fort Kearney are few topographical features of either interest or significance, other than the several rivers which had to be ferried or forded. Fort Atkinson and Fort Kearney are well worth visits, and traveling Saints may choose to picnic at any of an assortment of interesting spots: the old Winter Quarters area, the Mormon Trail Wayside Area, the Mormon Island Wayside Area (which commemorates an 1848 Mormon Winter Camp on an island in that area), Mormon-founded Genoa, or other trail sites.

The only wagon ruts east of Fort Kearney which have endured (roads, railroads, plows, and urban sprawl have left few trail ruts in Nebraska) are to be found at the Rock Creek Station State Historical Park, located on an isolated county road north of Endicott and east of Fairbury. These are ruts of the Oregon Trail proper, but many Mormon wagons helped deepen them.

On the Oregon Trail and on variants west of Fort Kearney the terrain gets a bit more interesting, especially near the previously mentioned Sioux Lookout Point. Of interest are the trail ruts at O'Fallon Bluffs, located at a rest center on the eastbound lane of 1-80 two miles east of Sutherland.

Much more dramatic ruts, which are more than six feet deep, are found at the California Hill area about five miles west of Brule town center and to the north of U.S. 30. These ruts are on private ground, and permission must be obtained to visit them (also watch out for a mean bull). Nearly as dramatic are some ruts at Ash Hollow. To see them, one can merely hike

to the crest of Windlass Hill and go westward several hundred yards. (In the visitors' center at Ash Hollow are brief references to the westering Mormons.) Courthouse Rock, Chimney Rock, the Scotts Bluff National Monument, and the famous ruts in nearby Mitchell Pass are also Oregon Trail sites that should be visited.

On the Mormon Trail west of Fort Kearney, travelers should note the 100th Meridian at Cozad (beyond which rain was once considered too slight for agriculture), as well as some excellent (and rare) Mormon wagon ruts atop the sand hills immediately north of the North Platte River due north of Hershey. (Buffalo steaks may be obtained on Ogallala's Front Street.) Indian Lookout Point, located one and one-half miles west of Lisco on U.S. 26, is well worth a climb for the view, as are the Ancient Bluff Ruins six miles farther west. These bluffs, however, are on private ground, and permission to visit them must be obtained from the local rancher. Some slightly discernible ruts may be seen just north of U.S. 26, three-tenths of a mile east of the ranch road leading into the Ancient Bluff Ruins area. Several miles east of Scottsbluff is an informational sign regarding Rebecca Winters's grave.<sup>9</sup> The grave itself is one-quarter mile west along the tracks.

## THE RAILROAD

In conclusion, a few words should be said about the Mormon use of the Union Pacific Railroad across Nebraska. The Iron Horse, or at least its tracks, started west from Omaha on 10 July 1865. Unfortunately, on the Omaha side of the Missouri River area, there is nothing except the Union Pacific Museum to commemorate or mark this event. When the Missouri changed course in the mid-1870s, ground zero was inundated and is now in the middle of Carter Lake opposite Pratt Street. Across the river in Council Bluffs, however, the Golden Spike Monument may be seen near the intersection of 9th Avenue and South 21st Street.

Few, if any, Mormons bothered using the railroad until the summer after it reached North Platte 291 miles west on 2 January 1867. A few proceeded by rail to Julesburg, Colorado, after the line reached there later that same year on 5 July.<sup>10</sup> Extensive use of the Union Pacific by Mormons, however, did not take place until after it had reached as far west as Laramie, Wyoming, on 16 May 1868. The next and last main jumping-off point was Benton, Wyoming, which was reached early in August of 1868. During all subsequent migrating seasons, it was possible to go by rail all the way to Ogden, Utah, which the Union Pacific reached on 9 February 1869. The "last spike," of course, was driven at Promontory, Utah, on 10 May 1869.

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1. I say utilized, rather than developed, for there is scant evidence that the Mormons blazed as much as one linear mile of the trail in Nebraska (or anywhere else). Mormons always used available roads and trails. The legend that they established the famous trail north of the Platte River is just that. In reality, the original Oregon Trail was north of the Platte before it was moved to the south bank. Mormons, like many others, did, of course, create small variants here and there in response to high water, bad weather, the fear of cholera, the desire to avoid crowds (and messy campsites), and the scarcity of feed for animals.

The concept of western trails as two wagon ruts disappearing into the sunset is strictly romantic. We should, rather, think in terms of corridors—yards, hundreds of yards, even thousands of yards wide.

2. For a more complete discussion of this group of pioneers, see Lawrence G. Coates, “Cultural Conflict: Mormons and Indians in Nebraska,” 274–300, in this issue.

3. Among these nine accounts are those by J. M. Coombs, Truman O. Angell, Matthew Rowan, and Henry I. Doremus. The first Mormons to use any part of the Oregon Trail were some Mississippi Saints in 1846. For a detailed study of the “Mormon Grove Trail,” see my *Discovering Mormon Trails* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1979).

4. Among those who took this route were Jesse Crosby, Ephraim Green, Shadrach Roundy, Sophis Hardy, and Warren Foote.

5. For a more detailed story of this trail, see my *Discovering Mormon Trails*. I have found twelve Mormon trail accounts of this route, including those of Zebulon Jacobs, Thomas Briggs, Joseph W. Young, Orley Bliss, Henry Ballard, and F. C. Grundvig.

6. Perhaps the first serious Indian trouble on Nebraska trails was on 19 June 1847 when Francis Weatherby was killed near the Elkhorn River (see Coates, “Mormons and Indians in Nebraska,” 296, this issue). In the same place a year later some Indians wounded several other Mormons; both attacks were made by Indians trying to steal Mormon cattle at this difficult crossing. The best-known account of a Mormon being killed by Indians was the case of Almon Babbitt, secretary of Utah Territory, who was killed in September 1856 by Cheyenne Indians about fifteen miles west of Fort Kearney.

7. For a detailed study of the Mormon use of this section of the Oregon Trail, see my “Another Route to Zion: Rediscovering the Overland Trail,” in the *Ensign* 14 (June 1984): 34–45.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Rebecca Winters’s grave is one of many wayside graves that can be found along the old Mormon Trail. Rebecca Winters died in 1852 at the age of fifty and was buried near Scottsbluff, Nebraska. The railroad was moved slightly from the proposed course in order to avoid passing over the grave. At the time her grave was marked with an old wagon wheel; later, however, Heber J. Grant erected the permanent marker that can be seen today.

10. References to Mormon emigrants at the North Platte railhead are very scarce. One of the few is by Simpson M. Molen, who reported that in 1868 sixty oxteam wagons were sent east to meet a large group of Mormons at North Platte. Since the average number of people assigned to one wagon was five, as many as three hundred Saints could have been in that one company. Similarly, references to the Mormons at the Julesburg railhead are scarce. Zebulon Jacobs and John Hardie are two of the few who left accounts of being there.