

Oregon Trail at Westminster Woods



An interesting attraction at Westminster Woods (WW) is the Oregon Trail. WW has impressive examples of Oregon Trail ruts (swales) and an Oregon Trail gravesite.

A contemplation bench, installed adjacent to the ruts/swales, is used quite often by WW guests. The bench provides a wonderful opportunity to enjoy coffee or tea while contemplating the hardships faced by emigrant pioneers as they made their way west – to the ‘promised land’ of Oregon!

[In 1841, dawn of an Oregon Trail era, there were no wagon roads – only Native American footpaths worn deeper by fur trade traffic. No member of an emigrant party knew the route, and no useful government map or guidebook was available to advise travelers.]

When the First Presbyterian Church of Pendleton (FPCP) purchased a land parcel near Meacham in November 2018, which was used to expand the Westminster Woods camp and conference center’s footprint, it also acquired more Oregon Trail features. Recently, these features were investigated by Oregon state parks employees and the National Park Service (NPS), National Trails System branch.

It seems as though ***ruts and a gravesite at WW are the only officially authenticated Oregon Trail features near Emigrant Springs State Park.*** Beginning in July 2012, state park employees started at the WW ruts and began investigations outward from there, eventually identifying ruts and other features on state park lands. [Keith May, local Oregon Trail historian and past chair of Oregon Historic Trails Advisory Council, assisted with these investigations.]

In July and August of 2019, WW members attended several field trips to examine Oregon Trail features near the Emigrant Springs Park, including features on the existing WW core area (66 acres) and on the land purchased in 2018 (165 acres).

An example: two possible gravesites were discovered, located just beyond WW property (by about 30 feet). And on the new land parcel, there is a nice set of side-by-side ruts heading up a moderately steep hill, with one set of ruts at least 3 feet deep.

NPS experts (two from Santa Fe, NM and one from Salt Lake City, UT) referred to the deeper ruts as a 'passing lane' – shallow ruts occur to the left, and deeper ruts are found to the right, about 15 feet away from the others. Slower wagons used one set to climb the hill; faster wagons used the passing lane ruts.

Ruts heading up the hill certainly look like ruts, but in some ways, they look like an old logging road – they head south (not west like the main Oregon Trail), and they head uphill, even though terrain at the hill's base is flat. These facts raised questions – why would wagons head uphill (more work), ostensibly away from the main Oregon Trail (located north and east of this area toward the state park), and away from good water sources (at Emigrant Springs)?

When we reached the top of the hill, just past the passing lanes, it seemed as though some of the questions were answered – a large, flat, beautiful meadow system exists there. [This meadow area might be an excellent option for camp expansion in the future (it is a flat, elevated setting, and it is quiet with little or no noise from I-84). The assembled experts speculated that this meadow was probably an Oregon Trail encampment area, and it provided oxen forage.

As emigrants traveled west on the Oregon Trail, two necessities were of paramount importance – water and grass. Water was needed by people and stock (oxen), and access to forage (grass) was crucial for oxen. If draft animals (oxen) died, emigrants were forced to abandon their wagon and most of their belongings, and to continue on foot, carrying what they could.

Users and visitors to Westminster Woods are encouraged to visit the Oregon Trail features. The ruts and gravesite provide an interesting peek into an important historical era for the western United States.

Compiled by: Dave Powell, Westminster Woods Commission, First Presbyterian Church of Pendleton



Oregon Trail gravesite at WW. The gravesite is protected with a split-rail fence.



Oregon Trail contemplation bench at WW, which is located next to one set of Oregon Trail ruts.



Oregon Trail ruts on the south side of Westminster Woods. This is a fine example of Oregon Trail ruts; they are moderately deep here, and trees and other vegetation have not been allowed to grow up in them.

These ruts continue west onto the recently acquired Brunette land parcel. They also extend south onto another portion of the Brunette land parcel, indicating that at least three contiguous rut or swale sections exist in this portion of Westminster Woods.

Note that some folks refer to Oregon Trail evidence as ruts, and others call it swale. In some locations, a berm is still evident between two well-defined depressions (ruts) in which wagon wheels traveled, and these features could properly be termed ruts (plural) because they are separated by a berm. In other places, there is no center berm – all that remains is one wide, flat-bottomed swale corresponding to the width of a wagon, and this feature could properly be termed a swale (swale is typically defined as “a slight depression in generally level ground.” Depressions the width of a rut are too narrow to qualify as a swale, which is a term used when classifying landform features).

Diaries and other Oregon Trail references suggest that in places where many wagons passed on one constrained trail segment, there may not have a berm between two ruts – the trail segment may have had a swale shape during the Oregon Trail era. In other instances, two ruts and a berm may have been present when the trail was being used as the Oregon Trail, but the center berm was subsequently lost due to erosion or from uses of the trail corridor occurring after the Oregon Trail era.



'Passing lane' ruts or swales on the recently acquired Brunette land parcel. Mark Miller, Emigrant Springs State Park manager, and Carole Wendler, chief of interpretation with NPS National Trails Intermountain Region (stationed in Santa Fe, NM), are standing in the 'passing lane' ruts, which are app. 3-4 feet deep just below the crest of the hill.

Note how much vegetation has grown up in the ruts; according to Lee Kreutzer, Archaeologist with NPS National Trails Intermountain Region (stationed in Salt Lake City, UT), we should carefully remove this vegetation to restore a full profile for the ruts.

OREGON TRAIL RESOURCES

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