

Emigrant Trails at Westminster Woods



Old Stage Road stone marker in the vicinity of what is referred to as the Blue Mountain Crossing of the Oregon Trail (app. 10 miles west of La Grande). It marks the location of the Old Stage Road, which is shown in General Land Office surveyor notes from 1887 as accessing the Westminster Woods and Emigrant Springs locations. (At the crossing itself, the Oregon-California Trails Association installed a nice brass plaque commemorating the Blue Mountain Crossing.)

The legacy of the Oregon Trail era still resonates through time and space, encompassing various qualities that represent our collective identity as Americans. The people who bid farewell to the securities of their known life to brave the trail west sought out similar things: opportunity, liberty, and security in a time of national expansion and uncertainty. Today, to walk in the ruts¹ of emigrant trails from the Oregon Trail era, and experience many of the same smells, sights, and sounds as those that traveled the same path so long ago, is a very powerful opportunity.

¹ This document refers to ruts or swales. What is the difference between them? A rut has a berm (a raised area) located between two well-defined grooves in which wagon wheels traveled. But occasionally, there is no center berm – all that remains is a flat-bottomed depression as wide as the width of a wagon. This feature is properly termed a swale (a swale is defined as “a slight depression in generally level ground”).

Note that in 1841, at the dawn of an Oregon Trail era, there were no wagon roads through the Blue Mountains – 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.

The First Presbyterian Church of Pendleton owns and manages a land parcel near Meacham, the Westminster Woods Camp and Conference Center, and it contains several emigrant era features.

At Westminster Woods (WW), one interesting feature from the Oregon Trail era is historical evidence of the Meacham Toll Road, which was constructed in the early 1860s by Alfred and Harvey Meacham at a cost of app. \$81,000. WW has nice examples of ruts (swales) and a likely gravesite related to the road.

In the past, these features were referred to as being from the Oregon Trail, but recent work completed by the Oregon-California Trails Association (OCTA 2021) indicates they are most likely related to the Meacham Toll Road, which dates to the waning days of the Oregon Trail.

INVESTIGATIONS OF EMIGRANT ERA FEATURES

Beginning in July 2012, investigations were begun to identify ruts, swales, and other possible emigrant era features on Oregon state lands administered as the Emigrant Springs State Heritage Area. These investigations also included the Westminster Woods property, which borders the Emigrant Springs State Heritage Area on two sides. [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, Westminster Woods (WW) members attended field trips to examine emigrant trail features near Emigrant Springs State Heritage Area, including some on the WW core area (66 acres) and others on a WW land parcel purchased in 2018 (165 acres). These field trips included personnel from the state heritage area and the National Park Service (NPS).

An example: during the investigations, two possible locations of human remains were discovered, located just beyond the WW property line (by about 20-30 feet) on state property, and another possible site was found on private land about 140 feet southeast of WW's pioneer gravesite. And on WW's recently acquired land parcel, there is a set of side-by-side swales heading up a moderately steep hill, with one set being at least 3 feet deep (note that it is always possible that one or more of the swales could be remnants of old logging roads).

NPS experts (two from Santa Fe, NM and one from Salt Lake City, UT) referred to the deeper swales as a 'passing lane' – a shallow one occurs to the left, and a deeper one is found to the right, about 15 feet away. If they are related to an emigrant trail, then slower wagons could have used one set to climb the hill, while faster wagons could use the passing lane swale.

Depressions heading up the slope certainly look like swales, but in some ways, they look like old logging roads – they head north-south (not east-west like the main emigrant era trails), 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 trail routes (located north and east of this area toward the state heritage area), and away from the good water sources found at Emigrant Springs?

When reaching the top of the hill, just past the passing lanes, it seemed as though some questions may have been answered – a large meadow system exists there. [The meadow vicinity might be an excellent option for church 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 may have been an encampment area because it provided animal forage.

As early emigrants traveled west, 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 would often need to abandon their wagon and most of their belongings, and to continue on foot, carrying what they could.

Detailed investigations of the early roads were completed by the Oregon-California Trails Association (OCTA) during late June and early July of 2021, when it was found that swales at Westminster Woods are probably evidence of the Meacham (later Foster) Toll Road. It was the most important freight and stage route through the area from the early 1860s, when gold was discovered – first at Auburn (located about 7 miles southwest of Baker City) and then later in the Boise Basin – until a railroad came through in the 1880s.

In a sense, the toll road was a successor to the Oregon Trail through this section of the Blue Mountains. As westward emigration to the Willamette Valley tapered off and traffic began flowing east to supply the mining camps, the original route of the trail was found to be too difficult for stagecoaches and freight wagons, so an alternate road was constructed by the Meacham brothers.

This account demonstrates that Westminster Woods sits in a traditional transportation corridor. Early emigrants definitely followed wagon roads through the Blue Mountains in this area, if for no other reason than there were dependable water sources at Meacham Creek and Emigrant Springs.

Then came the Oregon Trail (particularly from 1847 on), followed by the Meacham/Foster Toll Road and the Pendleton and La Grande Wagon Road. Travel by autos over the old roads led to demand for better highways – the first being the Old Oregon Trail Highway, which later became part of Highway 30, the third longest US highway (3,112 miles). It's been said that the last segment of Highway 30 to be completed was between Meacham and Kamela. Highway 30 was eventually replaced by Interstate Highway 84.

A little later, beginning in the late 1870s, the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company railroad became an important transportation option. Founded by Henry Villard in 1879, the OR&N company undertook construction of a rail line over the Blue Mountains in northeast Oregon and entered into an agreement to make a connection with Union Pacific's subsidiary, the Oregon Short

Line, at Huntington on the Oregon-Idaho state line. The Huntington extension reached Meacham, about twenty-five miles northwest of La Grande, on October 3, 1883. After borrowing another \$6 million, the OR&N railroad reached Huntington, south of Baker City, on November 25, 1884. Through service then commenced on December 1, allowing uninterrupted passage from Portland to Omaha, Nebraska (Kamholz 2022).

And finally, there was a transcontinental air mail route – the Salt Lake-Pasco Airway, Contract Air Mail Route #5, probably passed directly over the Westminster Woods area between its beacon on Cabbage Hill, the concrete arrow just outside Meacham, and another beacon 4 miles outside (south) of Meacham, on top of what is called Airway Beacon Hill.

Visitors to Westminster Woods are encouraged to visit emigrant trail features found within the camp and close by. The swales and possible gravesite provide an interesting peek into an important historical era for the western United States.

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Review and edits, and some of the history information in this document, was contributed by Chuck Flood with the Oregon-California Trails Association organization.



Possible pioneer gravesite at WW (AKA the Pioneer Grave). This gravesite was first discovered by a Westminster Woods volunteer (Dale Wilkins, the Westminster Woods maintenance coordinator) in June of 2005. It was difficult to recognize as a possible gravesite because it was covered by a profuse growth of grasses and forbs – the tips of a few rocks were showing through the vegetation, but it did not assume the shape of a possible gravesite until the vegetation was cleaned off, as is shown in this image.

The gravesite is protected by a split-rail fence. Why is it fenced? The Westminster Woods Commission (the camp's governing board) wants to enclose the gravesite to protect it from equipment damage; a split-rail fence enclosure was constructed as a mission project during the Eastern Oregon Presbytery Youth Retreat in the summer of 2006.

In May of 2026, cadaver dogs were used to investigate this rock pile, and three other smaller ones on adjoining properties (two at Emigrant Springs State Heritage Area, and one on timber industry land). These dogs are highly trained to use their sense of smell to detect possible locations of human remains (a dog's sense of smell is app. 10,000 to 100,000 times more sensitive than a human's sense of smell). When they have a positive detection, the dogs 'alert' by lying down on the identified spot or by barking.

When the Pioneer Grave was investigated, all three dogs alerted strongly. When two possible sites on the Emigrant Springs State Heritage Area were investigated, two dogs alerted at one of them. When a triangular arrangement of stones was investigated on private property near Westminster Woods, all three dogs alerted.

Alerting is not definitive proof; it only indicates the possible location of human remains. The more dogs that alert at a spot, the higher the degree of confidence that something of interest was detected. In the case of the Pioneer Grave at Westminster Woods, the behavior of all three dogs seems to suggest that it is an actual gravesite.



Emigrant Trail contemplation bench at Westminster Woods, which is located next to a deep swale. Hiking out to this bench with a thermos of hot beverage rewards a visitor with peace and quiet, and a good opportunity to contemplate the rich history of emigrant trail use occurring in this broader area in the mid to late 1800s. (Note that ruts and swales continue to the west for quite a distance beyond this bench, and visitors are encouraged to walk them clear out to the smooth-wire fence on the property line.)



Emigrant Trail swale feature on the south side of Westminster Woods. This is a fine example of an Emigrant Trail swale feature; the swale is moderately deep here, and trees and other vegetation have not been allowed to grow up in it.

From the location shown here, ruts and swales continue to the west. They also occur to the north on another portion of the parcel, indicating that at least three separate rut or swale sections exist at Westminster Woods (later photos in this document show other swale sections).

Diaries and other references suggest that in places where many wagons traveled on one constrained trail segment, a berm may not have existed between two ruts because it was worn away by the heavy use. In this instance, the trail segment may have had a swale shape even during the emigration era. In other instances, two ruts and a berm may have been present when the trail was being used, but the center berm was subsequently lost due to erosion or from uses of the trail corridor occurring after the emigration era.



'Passing lane' swales on a recently acquired land parcel (the First Presbyterian Church of Pendleton purchased the parcel in November 2018). 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' swales, which are app. 3-4 feet deep just below the crest of the hill.

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



OCTA mapping crew in a deep swale on the north side of the Westminster Woods property. The Oregon-California Trails Association did extensive investigations at Westminster Woods and Emigrant Springs in late June of 2021.

[The OCTA investigations were authorized and funded through an agreement with the National Park Service, National Historic Trails System.]

Many of the emigrant trail features that are signed at Westminster Woods are located to the south of the chapel facility. But there is an extensive series of emigrant swales located on the extreme north end of church camp, immediately adjacent to the Emigrant Springs state heritage area property. This image shows an OCTA mapping crew examining a north-end swale.



Cadaver dog named Blaze investigating a rock pile (possible gravesite) at Westminster Woods to determine the possible presence of human remains. On May 14, 2026, three cadaver dogs (and their handlers) visited Westminster Woods and were used to investigate 4 different rock piles to determine the possible presence of human remains (one site was the Pioneer Grave at Westminster Woods, and the other 3 sites were on Oregon state land or nearby private land). Based on whether or not the dogs 'alerted,' three of the four sites seem to qualify as possible emigrant-era gravesites.

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