

June 20, 2011

Gretchen Ward
National Park Service
P. O. Box 728,
National Trails System Office
Santa Fe, NM 87504

Dear Ms. Ward:

It was a pleasure to meet you in Vancouver. Your work concerning the 64 additional routes is much appreciated. It is truly a large and challenging project for which I must take some blame. It is long story, but briefly there was a controversy about the inclusion "all routes and cutoffs" in the plan for the California Trail. The final plan was not inclusive of all trails that many in OCTA thought should be included and had been agreed to by a prior agreement. Rather than continuing a divisive discussion, I and others in OCTA suggested that the additional routes be added through legislation. That was about 1998 or 1999. How time flies.

General Comments: Timeframe and Significance

The purpose of this letter is to comment on the material presented in Vancouver. At one point there was a discussion of the timeframe as specified in the Oregon NHT legislation. It was inferred that the new routes associated with the Oregon NHT could not be considered because they were later than 1848. I was surprised by this statement because it has always been assumed by us that the timeframe would be modified for the new routes. I believe that the addition of new routes requires modification of the Trails Act even if they were within the original timeframe so including a new definition of the timeframe in the modification adds little. If a timeframe is needed, I suggest that 1869 be used since that is when the transcontinental railroad began operation. OCTA has used that date as an unofficial cutoff for the wagon emigration although we know many traveled by wagon after that date.

I would also like to point out that the designated route of the Oregon NHT as described in the Comprehensive Management and Use Plan, August 1981, ignores important pre-1848 routes such as the route to the Whitman Mission and down the Columbia River by land or water from the junction of the Walla Walla and Columbia Rivers. Also, those emigrants that did not go to the Mission went through the present day Pendleton area and then down the Umatilla River to the Columbia River. Prior to 1847, when the Whitman Mission was destroyed, these were the only routes to The Dalles.

The designated Oregon NHT west from Echo was in fact not used until late 1847. Whitman explored the route in 1847 and suggested it to emigrants shortly before his death. The P. W. Crawford and Loren B. Hastings diaries of 1847 both refer to 1847 emigrants using "Whitman's

new route." The route technically meets "1841-1848" requirement but at the expense of the routes that were used extensively from 1841 to 1847.

My second comment concerns the suggestion, as I understood it, that each route must have a unique "nationally significant" event to qualify. That is also a very narrow interpretation of the requirement. The event of national importance for all emigrant trails is the westward migration that established the United States as a coast-to-coast nation. In our case that achievement was facilitated by the Oregon Trail itself including all of its alternate routes. I believe that is consistent with the approach that has been applied to other trails.

For example, if one were to apply the unique "national significance" criteria to the Barlow and Applegate Trails, I doubt they would qualify. What nationally significant event can you identify that is unique to those routes? The Applegate and Barlow routes provided an alternative to the dangerous Columbia River route, but would the history of Oregon (or the United States) be significantly different if everyone went the river route? I think not. In fact, the Naches also provided a "safe" alternative for settlement north of the Columbia (Puget Sound) similar to that provided by the Barlow and Applegate for the area south of the Columbia (Willamette Valley).

Criteria for Designation as a National Historic Trail

In the brochure you provided for the meeting three criteria are listed for designation as a NHT. The first is that it must be "a trail or route established by historic use and must be historically significant as a result of that use." The Naches route is well-documented (Ebey, Longmire, Biles, Meeker, etc.) and it is historically significant as a route of an alternate of the Oregon Trail to the Puget Sound. The settlement and development of the Puget Sound is a vital component of the U. S. history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Puget Sound, not Oregon or the Columbia River, developed as the primary gateway to the Pacific Rim.

The second criterion says that it must be nationally significant. As I noted above, the Oregon Trail meets that criteria. The Naches is an alternate of the Oregon Trail. The criteria also states that Native American use may also be considered. The portion of the route from the Columbia River near the Hanford Reach across the Yakima Firing Center and the Cascades to the Puget Sound was a traditional trading route of the plains tribes, extending back to Montana, to the Puget Sound (and vice versa).

The third criteria states that it must have significant potential for public recreational use. Portions of the Naches Trail in the Cascades are already widely used for hiking, off-road vehicles, and camping. The area in the Hanford Reach, now managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service presents new opportunities. Swales appear pristine in this area.

Local museums dot the trail route from Walla Walla to Steilacoom interpreting its history. An auto tour route could be easily configured near the trail in most areas. Some interpretation is already in place at many sites. The end of the trail is at Fort Steilacoom which has been preserved.

Maps of the Naches Trail

First, it should be noted that the Naches Trail is distinct from the route to the Whitman Mission discussed previously. Those travelling the Naches did not go to the old mission site and most likely used a route from the base of the Blue Mountains near Cayuse to the Columbia River that stayed on the south side of the Walla Walla Valley. Winfield Scott Ebey's journal in 1854 is clear on this point.

The Naches Trail was documented by me in very preliminary maps provided to the Kay Threlkeld in the mid-1990s. These maps were at a scale of 1:250,000. Since that time I have been updating those maps. As with most trails, in some cases we know its exact location and in others the trail corridor is known but the exact location is not. Digital data are now available for its entire length (Cayuse to Fort Steilacoom) with varying degrees of credibility. I have been working with John Cannella to develop a means to transmit these data electronically for inclusion in the NPS database. The data do not document condition (MET classification) at this time. That is a work in progress that will not be complete by July 30, 2011.

I have attached three maps that cover portions of the trail that I have been studying for the past couple of years. At this point they should not be considered definitive. Additional field work is needed to verify the routes. The first map is of the area between Cayuse (near Pendleton) and the Walla Walla Valley. Three routes are postulated (labeled I, II and III). I must admit that the known physical evidence for any of them is slight. Almost all of the area under consideration has been cultivated since the late 1800s. However, there are pristine, multiple swales at the point labeled "A" on the map.

Route I is based upon a map that was a handout at a conference OCTA conducted in Walla Walla in the 1990s. I have not been able to determine its source, but it is credible based upon general descriptions of the route and analysis of the terrain. Route II is also a credible route based upon the terrain. Route III and the dashed line that comes off of it are consistent with the traditional route as described by residents of Milton Freewater (M-F), but it is probably a later stage road. Ezra Meeker placed a marker in Milton Freewater in 1906, but that should not be taken as conclusive since Ezra was often uncertain in 1906 as to the trail's location and was not above placing a marker where funds could most easily be raised. Of course, Milton Freewater did not exist at the time the emigrants passed through the area.

Another anchor point (like the swales at Point A) is the diary of Winfield Scott Ebey. It is clear that Ebey camped near Point B, then travelled northwest. This does not help discriminate between Routes I, II and III, but does place them on the south side of the Walla Walla Valley.

Some maps show a loop from Point B eastward joining the dashed line to the Whitman Mission. The only evidence for this is the fact that the trail into the mission comes from the east and not the south. I think a direct route from Point B to the Mission might have been difficult due to the wetness of the valley.

The second map is of the route through the west side of the Hanford Reach. This area is closed but I have observed trail evidence from the air. We may need NPS assistance to gain access to the area. It is well away from nuclear facilities.

The third map is through the Department of Defense's Yakima Firing Center. The general route along Cold Creek is well documented in the journals, but we have not been able to conduct any ground research. An aerial survey was promising. We are working with the Army to schedule access when an exercise is not underway.

I hope that you find these comments useful. I believe that we have provided all of our documentation to you although some additional material may be found at the website. Please do not hesitate to contact me for additional information or clarification.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David J. Welch". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

David J. Welch

cc: Lee Kreutzer, John Cannella