



BLACK ROCK DESERT
HIGH ROCK CANYON
EMIGRANT TRAILS



NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA

Origins of the Applegate Trail

- “In 1843, Jesse and Lindsay Applegate, members of the first wave of Oregon Trail emigrants, watched helplessly as their ten-year-old sons drowned in the Columbia River when a boat overturned in rapids near The Dalles (1).”
- The family continued on their trek but vowed to find a better way for emigrants to reach Oregon; a route that didn’t involve crossing the Columbia River.
- The new route would also provide an “escape route for American colonists and a route by which troops and supplies could be safely transported into the Oregon Territory should the ongoing disagreement over possession of the colony result in war with Great Britain (2).”
- The Applegate party blazed a trail which deviated from the California Trail near present day Im-lay, NV and headed northwest via the Black Rock Desert to Oregon.
- The Oregon territory was settled peacefully and the Applegate trail was never used for militaristic purposes.
- The Applegate trail served at the best “alternate route to the Oregon Trail for Oregon-bound emigrants from 1846 through the 1850s (2).”
- In 1848 Peter Lassen opened a cutoff from the Applegate Trail which extended south from Goose Lake in northeast California through present day Chico, CA where he operated a trading post. Lassen advertised the cutoff as a shortcut to the goldfields.
- Heeding this advice, between 15,000-20,000 emigrants traveled the Applegate-Lassen Trail to California during the peak of the gold rush in 1849. The trail saw its greatest number of travelers in 1849.
- Jesse Applegate had not anticipated that his cutoff would ever receive such heavy use and the trail was not really designed to handle such a volume of traffic and Peter Lassen and the gold rush caused it to receive.
- Jesse Applegate wrote a “Waybill from Fort Hall to the Willamette Valley” advising travelers of the difficulties and suggestions about sojourning the Applegate Trail; but emigrants “paid this advice no heed and as a consequence, the long awaited watering holes frequently were mere muddy quagmires littered with the bodies of dead and dying animals (2).”
- The small amount of accessible water “transformed the passage in to a nightmarish journey and its hardships were broadcast widely (2).” As a result, post-1849 the trail received little use by those heading toward California; though it was used during the 1850s by settlers voyaging to Oregon.

1. Applegate National Historic Trail, <http://www.endoftheoregontrail.org/oregontrails/applegate.html>

2. McGuckian, Peggy. *Emigrant Trails in the Black Rock Desert*. Page 16. 1978. Winnemucca, NV.

