

OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAIL

BURROUGHS CREEK TRAIL & LINEAR PARK



From 1830-1880, participants in the largest voluntary land migration in history passed this way on their 2,000 mile-plus transcontinental trek to the rich farmlands of Oregon and the goldfields of California

Hundreds of thousands of emigrants swept across northeastern Kansas following a route forged by fur traders in the early 1800s that crossed the formidable Rocky Mountains on a broad, low saddle of the continental divide in western Wyoming called South Pass.

The passage was further tested in the 1830s by small groups of explorers and pioneers such as William Sublette, and Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. In 1842, the US government officially commissioned John C. Fremont – an army officer attached to the Corps of Topographical Engineers and later known as “The Pathfinder” – to survey and map the area between Missouri and the Rockies.

From these meager origins began the trickle of emigrants that would become a flood of humanity as an estimated 400,000 made their way west.

Wagons approached Douglas County from the southeast where they split off from the established Santa Fe Trail near present-day Gardner. Traveling in a northwesterly direction emigrants would soon be in sight of Blue Mound, one of the first prominent landmarks on the Oregon-California Trail.

In the early days of the Trail, they traveled across land reserved for the Shawnee, Kansa, Delaware and Wyandot Native American tribes. A Shawnee Indian Chief, Charles Blue Jacket, operated a trading post southeast of Lawrence where wagons forded the Wakarusa River at what came to be known as Blue Jacket Crossing.

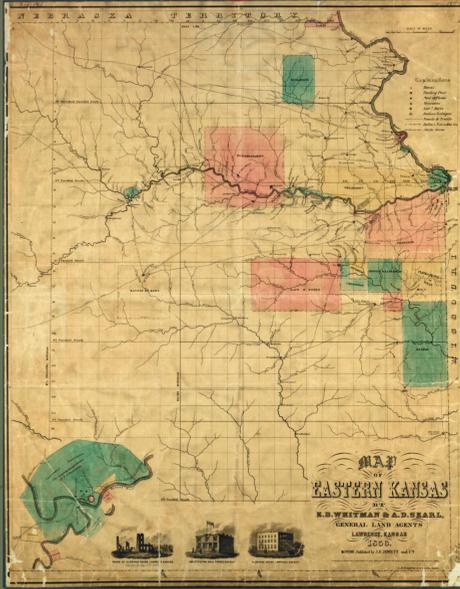
Later travelers would divert around Blue Mound to where an enterprising settler, Napoleon Bonaparte Blanton, built a toll bridge across the Wakarusa four miles south of Lawrence.

Wagon traffic crossed near here in the vicinity of present-day 19th Street heading toward a natural spring at the base of the hill close to today’s 17th and Tennessee streets. The wagons were then steered up the steep slope of Mt. Oread gaining the high ground as they rolled across what is now Jayhawk Boulevard through the heart of the University of Kansas campus.

Emigrants clung to the ridges west of Lawrence along the general route of present-day US Highway 40 where conditions become more favorable to cross the Kansas River. Remnants of the Oregon-California Trail, called ruts or swales, remain visible in Douglas County today, tucked away in the corner of a rural yard or a farm field where the plow was unable to reach.



Wagons West. Heading out in late spring when the grass was long enough to sustain the livestock, wagon travelers crossed through present-day Lawrence following their departure from the “jumping off” towns along the Missouri River. Independence, Leavenworth, and Westport weren’t much more than trading posts, but became bustling metropolises, bursting with hundreds or thousands of fresh pioneers readying for the challenging journey ahead. After traveling by steamship up the Missouri from points back east, they required wagons and oxen, close to a ton of food and a vast array of commodities to sustain them through the arduous, four to six month-long trek. The emigrants would then organize into groups, hire guides and venture westward on the Oregon-California Trail.



Tribes and Tribulations. Historically, the land crossed by emigrants in Kansas and west to Oregon was the realm of Native Americans. When emigrants began traveling westward in the 1840s, their route might cross land reserves held by the Shawnee, Kansa, Kickapoo, or Wyandot tribes. In the early days of the Trail, Native Americans often acted as guides, messengers, and tradesmen for the emigrants. Later, as friction over hunting areas increased and the press of hundreds of thousands of travelers and new settlers strained resources, interactions between emigrants and Native Americans occasionally erupted into violence.



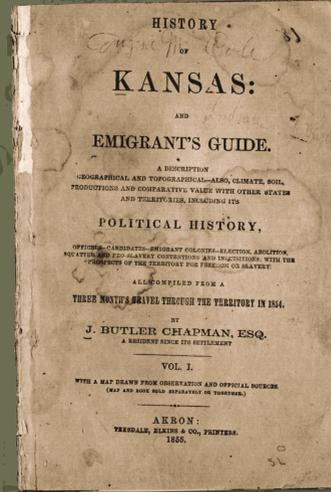
Local Landmark. Blue Mound, rising 150 feet above the surrounding landscape and visible for miles to the southeast of Lawrence, was the first major landmark on the Trail. Many emigrant diaries mentioned it, as did US Army surveyor John C. Fremont (above). Starting in 1842, Fremont explored and mapped the west on five separate expeditions. His report and survey published by Congress in 1843 was used by thousands of emigrants to navigate the route west to Oregon and California. Fremont noted in May 1843 that he placed “a signal as agreed on Blue Mound” to reconnoiter with his Shawnee Indian guides.



Blue Jacket Crossing. River crossings challenged wagon traffic and required careful planning. Steep banks and periodic flooding often created hazardous conditions. Safe places to ford became well-known and heavily used. One such ford, on the Wakarusa River east of Lawrence, was Blue Jacket Crossing (top right). Here, portions of the sandstone bluffs punctuating the riverbanks eroded into a gravel bed, creating a firm footing and shallower depth across the river. In the 1850s, the land surrounding the crossing was part of the Shawnee Indian Reservation. Shawnee Indian Chief, the Rev. Charles Blue Jacket (left) and his family operated a trading post and hotel at the ford. In the 1890s, the crossing provided a genial resting spot for picnickers (bottom right).



[Top Image Credit: Spencer Heister of Art, University of Kansas; Bottom Image Credit: Mary Gage]



[Image Credit: Kansas State Historical Society]



Death on the Trail. Disease, river crossings, violent storms, stampeding buffalo herds, and wagon accidents posed serious threats to emigrants traveling the trail. Six to ten percent of those who undertook the long journey did not live to see their destination. Most fatalities were the result of disease rather than any other mishap. Cholera, a sudden and violent illness caused by drinking contaminated water, was often the culprit, sometimes killing within hours. Falls from the wagon, especially by children, might result in being crushed by wagon wheels. River crossings required great skill and diligence. Drownings were not uncommon and greatly feared.



[Image Credit: Kansas State Historical Society]



“A truly splendid scene.” Passages from emigrant diaries extol the beauty of the landscape around what would become Lawrence. “In our travels, we crossed a stream called the Walkarusha, extending back from which, about two miles in width, we discovered a bottom covered with heavy bur oak and black walnut timber,” wrote Joel Palmer in his journal in 1845. “After passing through this bottom, the trail strikes into a level and beautiful prairie, and crossing it – a distance of four miles – rises gradually to the ridge between the Walkarusha and the Caw, or Kansas River. We camped upon the ridge, in full view of two streams, which at this place are from six to eight miles apart. The banks of both streams, for fifteen or twenty miles, with alternate forests and prairies, presenting to the eye a truly splendid scene.” Ten years later, Sara Robinson (left), one of the original settlers of Lawrence in 1855 and wife of Charles Robinson – an agent of the New England Emigrant Aid Company who would become the first elected governor of Kansas following statehood – wrote about wagon traffic on the Oregon-California Trail in her book, *Kansas, Its Exterior and Interior Life*. “May 24, 1855. The roads for many days have been full of wagons – white-covered, emigrant wagons. We cannot look out of the windows without seeing a number, either upon the road through the prairie east of us, which comes in from Kansas City, where most emigrants leave the boats and buy wagons and provisions for the journey, or going on the hill west, on their way to Topeka, or other settlements above.”



Only Ruts Remain. Deep ridges carved into the rock and soil by the hard, iron rims of thousands of wagon wheels carrying emigrants across Kansas on the Oregon-California Trail scarred the prairie landscape for years to come. Members of the Oregon-California Trails Association, scholars and “rut nuts” seek out, record, and map these ghostly remnants of the great westward road. Also known as swales, locally visible ruts include those leading down to the Wakarusa River at the site of Blue Jacket Crossing in rural Douglas County.



[Image Credit: Mary Gage]

Markers and Memories. Many plaques commemorate the Oregon-California Trail, including several in or near Lawrence. A marker on Jayhawk Boulevard in front of Lindley Hall (right) reads: “Beginning in 1849, there plodded up the southern slope of Mount Oread a vast emigration bound for the Golden Land of California. One branch of the great California and Oregon Trail thus passed over the very ground now part of the University Campus and many a camp fire gleamed on summer nights from the crest where now throngs of students tread.” The pioneers “rode the ridges” meandering along the highlands, avoiding the mud and heavy brush of the valleys. The trail headed west toward Topeka, generally following the route of present-day US Highway 40. At the intersection with County Road 1029, the Daughters of the American Revolution placed a marker (left) in 1930 commemorating “Coon Point – A Camping Ground” on the Oregon Trail.