The Snake River crossing southern Idaho served as a route of travel by native Indians for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Early fur trappers followed the river, attempting to carry their goods in dugout canoes in the early 1800's. As missionaries and emigrants began to travel across the country, they also followed the south side of the Snake River across much of the state.
Main Oregon Trail

The Oregon Trail enters Idaho along the Bear River in the southeast corner of the state. It travels hundreds of miles across the state and leaves near Farewell Bend on the Snake River. Numerous alternative routes were developed through the years.

The first major obstacle the emigrants encountered was Big Hill, a high mountain which had to be crossed. A road built along the river around the mountain lasted only a year.

The route then followed the Bear River valley to the northwest. The area was a pleasant change with good grasses and many small streams flowing from the mountains.
At the northernmost point of the Bear River, the emigrants came to an area known as Soda Springs. A number of carbonated springs in the area were a great curiosity. Steamboat Spring made the noise of a steamboat whistle as it spewed forth. It is now under the waters of Alexander Reservoir but becomes accessible when the reservoir is low.

Continuing northwest up the Portneuf River valley, the Oregon Trail turns west and climbs over the northern shoulder of Mt. Putnam. This route is on the Shoshone-Bannock Fort Hall Reservation and requires special permission to access.

On the western side of the summit, a large spring provided good water and a chance to rest. Trout swim in the spring today.
The Oregon Trail descended through a narrow canyon along Ross Fork before opening up to the Snake River bottoms.

Nathaniel Wyeth built a trading post along the Snake River in 1834. For many years it was an important stop along the Oregon Trail where supplies and information could be obtained. It was abandoned in the 1850’s as cutoffs took away the emigrant travelers.

The route along the south side of the Snake River was often frustrating to the emigrants as the river flowed deep in a steep canyon which was often inaccessible. Indian attacks west of American Falls caused fear among the emigrants and led to the use of Goodales Cutoff as an alternate route.
Large boulders near camping sites along the trails became message boards or post offices for the emigrants. They would carve or write their names in axle grease so that friends and relatives who followed would know that they had reached that location. Register Rock is covered with hundreds of names and dates.

The original California Trail branched south from the Oregon Trail at Raft River. Later the Hudspeth Cutoff and the Salt Lake Alternate drew much of the traffic headed for California.

Emigrants forded the Snake River at Three Island Crossing in order to avoid a very dry and often dangerous route continuing along the south side of the river. The crossing could be dangerous if the river flow was high. Reenactments were held for many years but have since been terminated as they were also dangerous.
The hot springs at the base of Teapot Dome were mentioned in most emigrant diaries. Both hot and cold water flowed from the ground. The springs dried up when irrigation wells lowered the water table in the area.

Canyon Creek was an oasis in the desert. It was a popular camping site along the Oregon Trail with lush grasses and a clear running stream. It later became a stage station along the numerous freight and Overland roads.

Another rock with emigrant names written in axle grease is located east of Boise on Ditto Creek. This site is on private property. Many of the names have faded due to being exposed to the elements.
Cresting the ridge southeast of the Boise River gave the emigrants their first view of trees in several weeks. The Boise River valley was covered in lush grasses and trees lined the river's edge.

Alexander Ward and his party were attacked by Indians and killed along the Boise River west of Boise in 1854. In all, 18 people in the wagon train and one of the rescuers were killed. Two young boys survived by hiding in the brush even though they were wounded.

The Hudson Bay Company built a trading post along the Snake River near the mouth of the Boise River in 1834 to compete with the newly established Fort Hall in eastern Idaho. The post struggled with spring flooding of the Snake River and eventually was abandoned in the mid-1850's. Travelers were forced to cross the Snake River a second time here. A monument honors the site which is now under the waters of the Snake River.
Goodales Cutoff

As Indian troubles increased along the Snake River, an alternative route was developed across the Camas Prairie. Goodales Cutoff crossed the Snake River on a ferry a few miles above Fort Hall, traveled around the north side of the volcanic area now called Craters of the Moon, and crossed the Camas Prairie, before dropping out of the mountains to rejoin the Main Oregon Trail southeast of Boise.

Much of Goodales Cutoff is difficult to explore because of long distances on bad roads and few access points.

Near Big Butte
(Photo by John Briggs)

Goodales Cutoff rejoined the Main Oregon Trail on Ditto Creek and Soles Rest Creek. Many diary accounts note the remains of a massacre near the junction.

Cadaver dogs mark a grave approaching the Main Oregon Trail
North Alternate

Emigrants on the Main Oregon Trail were promised a better route if they crossed the Snake River above Salmon Falls in 1852-1854. Those who believed the ferrymen enjoyed lush grasses for a few days before encountering bad water which resulted in the frequent deaths of animals and travelers. The North Alternate rejoined the Main Oregon Trail on Hot Springs Creek east of Mountain Home.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Snake River lies deep within a steep canyon carved by the Bonneville Flood thousands of years ago. Wagon travel out of the canyon on the north side was impossible except for one small gap in the basalt cap.</th>
<th>Climbing out of Snake River Canyon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After encountering diseased water at Clover Creek, the North Alternate turned west to rejoin the Main Oregon Trail southeast of Teapot Dome. Diary accounts note dozens of graves along this route.</td>
<td>Heading west towards Teapot Dome</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## South Alternate

Emigrants on the Main Oregon Trail who did not cross the Snake River at Three Island Crossing were forced to follow the south side of the Snake River, a route which was drier, rougher, and often dangerous.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Utter wagon train was attacked near Castle Butte in September, 1860. 17 members of the party were killed at this location. Many escaped to hide in the brush along the Snake River. Their saga continued for many weeks until the few remaining survivors were rescued on the Owyhee River, starving and near death.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The steep climb up Sinker Creek Grade was just one of the many difficulties endured on the South Alternate. Ruts in the sandstone on top of the bluff are carved a foot deep.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Area of Utter Attack near Castle Butte*

*Sinker Creek Grade*
Emigrants heading to California had several options within Idaho. The original route headed south from the Oregon Trail at Raft River. In 1849, a new route called the Hudspeth Cutoff branched west a few miles west of Soda Springs. Another route took emigrants through Salt Lake City to rejoin the California Trail just west of City of Rocks. The combined route traveled over Granite Pass as it left Idaho heading southwest to the Humbolt River and California.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hudspeth Cutoff</th>
<th>Hudspeth Cutoff near Massacre Site</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

In 1849, the Hudspeth Cutoff was started west of Soda Springs as a route to bypass the extra travel north to Fort Hall and back south along Raft River. It was more difficult than the Raft River route since it crossed several mountain ranges. Although Hudspeth's route proved to save little if any time, it soon captured most of the travelers heading to California.

An Indian attack in 1859 on the Shepherd-Wright wagon train killed 5 people in this valley. Witnesses claimed at least three of the attackers were white people. Over $750 in gold coins were taken which would have been unusual for an Indian attack.
Many emigrants stopped to write their names on the huge granite rock formations at City of Rocks. There are several such rocks in the area.

The Salt Lake Alternate traveled northwest from Salt Lake City until it joined the California Trail west of City of Rocks. Many travelers commented on the steep granite peaks they saw near the junction. A stage station was built in the area to serve the Kelton Road, a freight road from Kelton, Utah, to Boise.

The gradual ascent to the summit of Granite Pass was no indication of the steep and dangerous descent which awaited the emigrants on the west side of the mountain. The emigrants were often required to lock their wheels and use ropes around large trees to lower the wagons to the valley floor.
Lander Road

Frederick Lander was authorized by the US government to build a wagon road from South Pass to the Humbolt River. Known as the Lander Road, this route was popular in the early 1860's. After crossing through mountains in eastern Idaho, the route continued west to Fort Hall. From Fort Hall, the traditional routes to California and Oregon were followed, as well as a route north to the Montana mines.

The grave of J. W. Lane, an emigrant who died in 1859.
"...at this camp Mr. Lane passed away... We marked it as best we could by putting a rather flat stone on which we put his name."

Joel Barnett

The Lander Road crosses through beautiful mountains in eastern Idaho, providing scenery far more pleasant than that endured by most of the emigrant trails across Idaho.