

Westward Expansion

Oregon Trail

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The Oregon Trail was a major route that people took when migrating to the western part of the United States. Between 1841 and 1869, hundreds of thousands of people traveled westward on the trail. Many of them traveled in large wagon trains using covered wagons to carry their belongings.

The Route

The Oregon Trail began in Independence, Missouri and ended in Oregon City, Oregon. It stretched for around 2,000 miles and through six different states including [Missouri](#), Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho, and [Oregon](#). Along the way, travelers had to cross all sorts of rough terrain such as the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada Mountains.



Covered Wagons

The main vehicle used to carry the pioneer's belongings was the covered wagon. Sometimes these wagons were called "Prairie Schooners", because they were like boats going over the vast prairies of the west. The wagons were made of wood with iron around the wheels like tires. The covers were made from waterproofed cotton or linen canvas. The typical covered wagon was about 10 feet long and four feet wide.



Most of the settlers used oxen to pull their wagons. The oxen were slow, but steady. Sometimes mules were used as well. A fully loaded wagon could weigh as much as 2,500 pounds. A lot of the time the pioneers walked alongside the wagons. Traveling wasn't too bad with the wagons on the flat terrain of the prairies, but once the settlers reached the Rocky Mountains, getting the wagons up and down steep trails was very difficult.

Dangers

Traveling the Oregon Trail in the 1800s was a dangerous journey. However, the danger wasn't from [Native Americans](#) as you might think. As a matter of fact, many records show that Native Americans helped many of the travelers along the way. The real danger was from a disease called cholera that killed many settlers. Other dangers included bad weather and accidents while trying to move their heavy wagons over the [mountains](#).



Wagon Train

Supplies

The pioneers were able to bring very little with them. When they left their homes in the east, they had to leave most of their belongings. The covered wagon was mostly filled with food. It took over a 1,000 pounds of food to feed a family of four on the trip out west. They took preserved foods such as hard tack, coffee, bacon, rice, beans, and flour. They also took a few basic cooking utensils such as a coffee pot, some buckets, and an iron skillet.

The pioneers didn't have room for a lot of fancy items. They only had room to pack two or three sets of tough clothing. They packed candles for lighting and a rifle to hunt with along the way. Other items included tents, bedding, and basic tools such as an axe and a shovel.

Other Trails

Although the Oregon Trail was the most used wagon trail, there were other trails that led out west. Some of them branched off the Oregon Trail like the California Trail which left the Oregon Trail in Idaho and headed south to California. There was also the Mormon Trail which went from Council Bluffs, Iowa to Salt Lake City, Utah.

Interesting Facts about the Oregon Trail

- In 1849, a guide was published describing the overland journey to California.
- There were reports of the trail being littered with items that people cast off along the way. These included books, stoves, trunks and other heavy items.
- It took about five months for a wagon train to make the journey.
- The first major migration took place in 1843 when a single large wagon train of 120 wagons and 500 people made the trip.
- The trail was popular until the [transcontinental railroad](#) connected the east to the west in 1869.
- In 1978, the U.S. Congress officially named the trail the Oregon National Historic Trail. Although much of the trail has been built over through the years, around 300 miles of it has been preserved and you can still see the ruts made from the wagon wheels.