

The National Historic Trail System

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This paper presents a discussion of U.S. national historic trails—and that means we’ll be talking about trail ruts, historic sites along the trail, and interpretive sites that get the word out regarding the trails’ importance.

By now, you may be wondering, “Why the concern with trails?” It’s because Congress asked us to. In October 1968, Congress passed the National Trails System Act, which stated that “trails should be established” both in urban areas and “within established scenic areas more remotely located.” The act that Congress passed in October 1968 established just two long-distance trails: the Appalachian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail, both of which were designated as scenic trails. But the legislation also called for the studies of 14 additional routes as potential scenic trails, most of which have since been added to the system. The Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, in the Department of the Interior, was asked to complete the required studies. But the agency, as it pursued those studies, soon ran into difficulties because it was asked to evaluate several *historic* trails according to *scenic* trail criteria. As a result, the studies that were written in the wake of the act’s passage recommended against designating any historic trails, and in fact between 1968 and 1978 Congress established no new trails of any kind. To get around the bureaucratic loophole pointed out in the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation studies, Congress in November 1978 passed a key provision in an omnibus park bill creating a third trails category: national historic trails. Given that new provision, Congress approved four new trails that had previously been bottled up in the bureaucracy. And in the years since that time, Congress—regardless of the party in power—has continued to approve new national historic trails: four during the 1980s, four more in the 1990s, and six since the year 2000, which has resulted in the system that we Americans enjoy today. Congress has now designated more than 30,000 miles of national historic trails. And this trend toward new trails seems likely to continue, because currently in the 111th Congress, a bill has already passed the Senate (S. 22) that would create one new national historic trail, expand another, provide for a special resource study for yet another, and mandate studies for additional routes for 6 existing trails.

So, given all this trail mileage that Congress has entrusted to the various federal agencies, how should they be managed? Once again, the 1978 amendment to the National Trails System Act provides us a clear guide, and more specifically, Congress has asked us to take on the identification and protection of trail resources in three distinct ways – by protecting trail segments, by preserving trailside historical sites, and by providing for trail interpretation.

As many of you may have gathered by now, the National Park Service and other agencies have been asked to take on a far different role than many of you in the various parks and

monuments may be familiar with. For one thing, the various national trails are not national park units; instead, they collectively constitute a program that both benefits from and is hindered by their lack of status as park units. But unlike the various national scenic trails, which attract thousands of long-distance hikers each year, the idea behind the national historic trails was to preserve and interpret as much as possible of their existing rights-of-way and the adjacent historical resources. And because they are trails, not parks, the best way to look at these trails is to conceive of them as linear landscapes. And underscoring the fragility of our management scope is the fact that very little of the land in the various trail rights-of-way belongs to the Park Service or any other federal agency. And because so much of the historic trails are on private land, it's not at all surprising that slightly less than ten percent of their mileage is now open to the public.

Because only a small percentage of the historic trails' rights-of-way are on federal lands, one might wonder how Federal agencies are able to manage these trails at all. Well, the answer to that question is through partnerships. Fortunately, there are tens of thousands of Americans who are interested in these trails (we call them "rut nuts"), and many of these volunteers are members of groups that serve as our primary trail partners. To give you a few examples, the Santa Fe Trail Association, formed in 1987, has hundreds of members and 12 chapters that are spread across the five states where the trail is located. There is also a Trail of Tears Association, formed in 1993, which has an international membership and nine chapters, one for each state with a Trail of Tears route. There's the Oregon-California Trails Association (Figure 1), a National Pony Express Association, and a number of similar groups, one for each of the national trails. All of these groups have a board of directors, a newsletter, an annual convention, and other activities that provide chances for people to explore the trails, share new research findings, and swap stories about the history and adventure of these trails.

One may also wonder where the Park Service fits into the management picture. First and foremost, the NPS doesn't run much of anything on our own, but we do play an important part in assisting our various trail partners. To some extent, the NPS helped fund the start-up and operating costs for our cooperating associations. And, in many other ways, we do what we can to identify and protect trail segments and historic sites, and we also help interpret the trail by funding the creation and installation of museum displays and interpretive waysides. In the process, we work with local partners to ensure that the museum displays and waysides have accurate information, that they're pleasant to look at, and that they'll last a long time.

A key way in which we work with our partners is through the Challenge Cost Share Program. This program gives the Park Service the chance to financially help partners with their trail-related projects, particularly if the projects have been well planned and will help tell the story of

Figure 1. Guernsey State Park, in southeastern Wyoming, offers some of the most well-defined ruts along the Oregon National Historic Trail. Photo courtesy of the National Park Service.



the trail more effectively. In the past, for example, we have assisted researchers who wanted to dig out historical materials from the National Archives, we have helped scan research collections to make them available to others, we have funded some bricks-and-mortar rehabilitation projects, and we have assisted with archeological digs at old taverns and cemeteries that were located along these trails.

Another way that we work with our partners is through the Certified Sites Program. A clause in the National Trails System Act encourages non-Federal partners to take an active role in trail and site preservation and interpretation, and the Certified Sites Program provides an official mechanism for that participation. To join the program, owners of qualified sites along the trails simply fill out a short partnership form—which is revocable at any time. Being part of this program provides another way in which partners can obtain signs, interpretive waysides, and various other forms of technical assistance from the Park Service. Currently there are more than 70 certified partners along the Santa Fe Trail (Figure 2, 3), about 40 along the Trail of Tears, and a number of others from the seven remaining historic trails administered through the NPS National Trails System Office, Intermountain Region.

To finish up this discussion, I'd like to present a couple of examples in which the Park Service worked with our partners on projects that served our mutual interests.

For one project, a Trail of Tears Association member from Missouri let us know that she was concerned about where two of the lesser-known Cherokee detachments went as they traveled west through her state. To give you a bit of a background, there were 17 different detachments of Cherokee Indians that made the difficult trek west from the southern

Figure 2. The former Havana Stage Station, located in east-central Kansas, is a Santa Fe National Historic Trail historic site. Photo courtesy of the National Park Service.





Figure 3. Ross Marshall, an active member of the Santa Fe Trail Association (which cooperates with the NPS on trail management) is shown uncovering a century-old Daughters of the American Revolution historical marker. Photo courtesy of the National Park Service.

Appalachians to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) during 1838 and 1839. Eleven of those detachments followed the main route, or northern route, that began in the vicinity of Chattanooga, Tennessee, headed northwest through Kentucky to the southern tip of Illinois, went west into central Missouri, then southwest through northwestern Arkansas to the Cherokee country near present-day Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Historians have a fairly good idea of the route that these 11 detachments took. But two other land detachments, led by John Benge and Peter Hildebrand, broke away from the main group. Neither Benge nor Hildebrand had any scribes, diary writers, or military personnel with them, and very few newspaper notices about their travels have come to light.

So to help fill the information gap, Park Service personnel contacted a number of trail to learn what they knew about those routes. All of these people had some strong hunches about where these detachments must have gone, so in September of last year several of those experts—a Missouri Department of Transportation historian, a state park interpreter, a forest service archeologist, pioneer family members, and several local historical society enthusiasts—gathered together. We spent the day together, talked about the trail's history, and drove over the most likely routes that these two detachments would have taken. With the Benge Route, one of the group members was able to obtain a series of maps and surveys for roads that had been built during Missouri's late territorial period and early statehood period. And after our day together, we had collectively concluded that this detachment went in a far different direction than we had previously thought, primarily because the 1812 New

Madrid earthquake had turned much of extreme southeastern Missouri into a roadless swamp. Additional portions of the old route, in the Greenville area, are now under a reservoir, but they had once been part of a military road built from Cape Girardeau, Missouri, to Natchitoches, Louisiana.

As a result of our combined efforts, none of us, of course, can be absolutely certain of the route they followed, because the data just aren't there. However, there *is* a relatively broad consensus that the route we picked is the most plausible route that John Bengé and his detachment must have taken, and we have prepared a report that patiently explains why we selected the route that we did. Similarly, the route that the Peter Hildebrand detachment took was largely unknown between Jackson and Springfield, Missouri. However, the group did know that the detachment camped near Pilot Knob, in the Arcadia Valley; we also knew where they crossed the Gasconade River (about 60 miles west of Pilot Knob), and—based on the recollections of pioneer family members—we're fairly certain that the detachment would have taken a known ridge route rather than one that went up and down between ridge tops and river crossings. Of course, we'll eagerly await the day in which some future researcher can gather new and more certain information that was not available to the group that we had assembled. Until that day, however, we feel that our group made real progress in ascertaining a new, previously unknown route where the Hildebrand detachment went.

Another major project had to do with the Santa Fe Trail. Because this trail, from central Missouri to Santa Fe, covers a lot of dry, untilled land, and because people traveled over the Santa Fe Trail for almost 60 years—as opposed to just a few months for the Trail of Tears—the right-of-way of the Santa Fe Trail is fairly well known. But the key personnel in the Santa Fe Trail Association knew the trail in a substantially different way than Park Service personnel did. So to “share in the experience,” so to speak, a five-person team from both the Santa Fe Trail Association and the National Park Service undertook the “Santa Fe Trail Rediscovery” during the summer of 2006. Over the course of several weeks, the group stopped at scores of sites and had the chance to compile a major electronic database about the trail. The outcome of all of this work has helped point out which sites and segments offer the best interpretive possibilities, which sites are potential candidates for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, and which sites are most in danger of losing their historical significance through deterioration or development. By all accounts, the rediscovery trip seems to have succeeded in its mission, and the database promises to guide trail planning efforts for years to come.