

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### THREE ISLAND CROSSING

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Known in later years as Three Island Crossing, the Oregon Trail ford across Snake River above Glenn's Ferry actually used only two of the three islands available at that point in the channel. Located on an old Indian and fur traders' route through the valley of the Snake, the crossing formed a difficult obstacle to emigrant wagons. Those who could generally used it, even though they had to cross the Boise at Canyon Hill (near Caldwell) and the Snake again at Fort Boise; otherwise they faced a longer, harder route on the south side of the Snake. By 1852 a ferry was available above Thousand Springs for those who wanted to use the more direct north side route, and after discovery of gold in Boise Basin in 1862 brought settlement to the Boise region, Gus P. Glenn put in a ferry a short distance above the crossing. Ruts of the Oregon Trail leading to the ford still are visible south of the crossing; because heavy freight wagon traffic (which came after settlement began) tended to use the ferry instead of the ford, the tracks to be seen near the crossing are mostly of emigrant wagons.

A number of diaries of Oregon Trail emigrants mention the crossing whether they used it or not. The experiences they recorded at the crossing tell something of the problems that emigrants faced there. A letter from Mrs. Marcus Whitman and samples from published diaries follow:

Mrs. Marcus Whitman, August 13, 1836: "We have come fifteen miles and have had the worst route in all the journey for the cart. We might have had a better one but for being misled by some of the company who started out before the leaders. It was two o'clock before we came into camp.

They were preparing to cross Snake River. The river is divided by two islands into three branches, and is fordable. The packs are placed upon the tops of the highest horses and in this way we crossed without wetting. Two of the tallest horses were selected to carry Mrs. Spalding and myself over. Mr. McLeod gave me his and rode mine. The last branch we rode as much as half a mile in crossing and against the current too, which made it hard for the horses, the water being up to their sides. Husband had considerable difficulty in

crossing the cart. Both cart and mules were turned upside down in the river and entangled in the harness.

The mules would have been drowned but for a desperate struggle to get them ashore. Then after putting two of the strongest horses before the cart, and two men swimming behind to steady it, they succeeded in getting it across. I once thought that crossing streams would be the most dreaded part of the journey. I can now cross the most difficult stream without the least fear.

There is one manner of crossing which husband has tried but I have not, neither do I wish to. Take an elk skin and stretch it over you, spreading yourself out as much as possible, then let the Indian women carefully put you on the water and with a cord in the mouth they will swim and draw you over. Edward, how do you think you would like to travel in this way?"

James W. Nesmith, September 10, 1843: "I took a trip down the river this morning in quest of animals. Overtook the wagons in two miles. Traveled eight miles. Encamped on an island in the river." September 11, 1843: "Crossed the river this morning without difficulty. Traveled four miles. Encamped on a dry branch, water in holes."

Overton Johnson and William H. Winter, 1843: "After leaving the Salmon Falls, we traveled down near the river, our path frequently leading us along the sides of the almost perpendicular bluffs. Twenty-seven miles below the Salmon Falls we came to the crossing where the companies which preceded us had passed over to the North side, which is much the nearest and best way, but we, having attempted the crossing and finding it too deep, were obliged to continue down on the South. This is, perhaps, the most rugged, desert and dreary country, between the Western borders of the United States and the shores of the Pacific. It is nothing else than a wild, rocky barren wilderness, of wrecked and ruined Nature, a vast field of volcanic desolation."

Edward Evans Parrish, September 24, 1844: "We crossed the river safely after noon today and camped on a fine bed of grass within sight of the ford. The river is rapid and the water middling low. The bottom is gravel of the prettiest kind and the water is clear. In consequence of two islands, side by side, we had to cross three streams. Our cattle are now doing well. To-morrow, it is said, we have to drive twelve miles. Last night the bachelors lay out on the prairie without

water or grass. This is the second time they have done so. Better reach camp late, as we did, than do so."

John Ewing Howell, August 23, 1845: "Trav. cross bluff. Crossed Lewis River about ½ mile wide, average depth 2 ½ feet. Brisk current 2 islands in the ford. Camp on dry branch 3 miles from ford. Good grass shrub wood and sage."

Robert Robe, July 25, 1851: "Ascended this morning to the river at the old crossing where we arrived about noon. Two trains were in the act of crossing which are the first this season. The south side is almost universally traveled to avoid the difficulty of crossing. We determined to cross and take the north side hoping thereby to obtain better grazing hence vigorous preparations were commenced by the calking of wagon beds etc."

P. V. Crawford, July 30, 1851: "This day we traveled twelve miles. The first four or five miles were very hilly and sandy, then four miles of level sandy plain. Then down a ravine to a dry channel, that has the appearance of being a large creek at times, but is at this time perfectly dry. We followed the channel down to the river. Here camped, but had to swim our cattle across the river to grass. This is now called the upper crossing of Snake river. Here we decided to cross over to the north side."

July 31, 1851: "This day we spent in arranging for and crossing the river. We accomplished this by corking two wagons and lashing them together. By this means we were able to ferry over a wagon and its load at each trip. By noon we had our boat ready and began operations, but found it slow business, but succeeded in getting all over safely, but not the same day, for we had to lay by on account of wind. Leaving part of our camping on each side of the river, here we had both sides to guard."

August 1, 1851: "This day we completed crossing our fifteen wagons before night. Last night we had three horses stolen, and three more shot in the shoulders with arrows. Grass is good here, but Indians are very bad."

Elizabeth Wood, August 21, 1851: "We forded the Snake river, which runs so swift that the drivers (four to a team) had to hold on to the ox yokes to keep from being swept down by the current. The water came into the wagon boxes, and after making the island we raised the

boxes on blocks, engaged an Indian pilot, doubled teams, and reached the opposite bank in safety. It is best in fording this river to engage a pilot.--The "Telegraph Company," as we call them, who passed us in such a hurry on the Platte, have left their goods and wagons scattered over the mountains. We find them every day. Their cattle have given out, and I have seen several head of them at a time which had been left dead at the different camping places on the road. We drove too slow on the Platte, and the "Telegraph" hurried too fast, and while our cattle are comparatively strong and in good condition, and will enable us, if we have time before the setting in of winter, to reach our destination, theirs are so worn out from hard usage that it is doubtful if they get through at all this season. We have met some "packers," and they inform us that we are too late to cross the Cascade mountains this season."

John Z. Zeiber, August 28, 1851: "Traveled to the river before we took breakfast, and then cooked for both dinner and breakfast, taking both at one meal. At 2 P.M. renewed our journey from the ford of Snake river, which we concluded not to cross but continued down on the south side. We again reached the river and camped in a small bottom where there was considerable grass but much of it very salty. Here we camped for the night."

David Dinwiddie, August 3, 1853: "About two miles brought us to where we left the river, here the river passes between high mountains, we turned to the left, passing round a high sand mountain, heavy sand roads, sand and sage, one endless looking sage plain. In five miles we reach the river again, here we camped, turned our stock across a branch of the river, onto a large island good grass but some aklali pools on it, had to guard our stock from them, pleasant day. Quite a number of Indians along here, a number of them camp, poor looking creatures, several entirely naked, excepting their clouts, the others having old cloths given to them by the emigrants, or thrown away by them . . ."