

Proposal for a new Southern National Historic Trail

A study proposal to obtain Congressional authorization for a "Feasibility Study" of the southern overland migration routes used by emigrants and gold rushers to reach southern California has been prepared by the Southern Trails Chapter, Utah-Crossroads Chapter, and the Legislative Liaison Committee of the Oregon-California Trails Association. The purpose of the "Feasibility Study" is to determine if these emigrant trails meet the criteria of the National Trails System Act for designation as a National Historic Trail.

While the better known emigrant trails to the north have been given National Historic Trail designation (California Trail, Oregon Trail, and Mormon Pioneer Trail), the lesser known, but equally significant, emigrant trails in the south have been overlooked. This proposal is designed to address that disparity. Currently there is no National Historic Trail telling the story of the great American migration to California from across the southern states.

Rightfully so, there are three National Historic Trails focused on emigration during the mid-nineteenth century across the northern half of the United States; however, we feel the trail history, as told by our National Trails System Act, of the greatest migration in the history of America is not complete until it includes a fourth National Historic Trail focus on that same migration from across the southern half of the United States.

The southern trails included in the proposal (See Map) were listed as "additional routes" recommended for "further study" in the *Comprehensive Management and Use Plan for the California National Historic Trail* published by the National Park Service in 1999. The decision, however, was made not to include these southern trails in the list of trails included in the Omnibus Land Act of 2009, currently under study for possible addition to the California National Historic Trail. All trails recommended by the National Park Service for future study in 1999 were included in the Omnibus Land Act of 2009 except the southern trails contained here in our proposal. The primary reason they were not included is due to the distances involved. Combined, these southern trails cover approximately 5,650 miles in eight states (Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, and California) which is equal to or greater than the total distance of the current National Historic California Trail. Being this large it was felt by many involved in the decision-making that the southern trails should stand on their own merits in order to qualify for national historic trail designation; therefore, the only chance these southern trails have for national historic recognition will be to initiate new Congressional support. The decision was made because of the size involved not that they didn't deserve consideration as a national historic trail. Actually, we agree with the decision and believe the southern trails should stand on their own as a national historic trail, which is what this proposal will attempt to accomplish.

The Southern Trail was the major gateway used by emigrants and gold rushers to California from the southern states and northern Mexico. It was also the trail of the Army of the West, which included the Mormon Battalion, and was instrumental in bringing California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada and parts of Utah and Colorado into the United States. This fact alone qualifies it for national historic trail status in the minds of many. It was the first wagon road from the United States to the shore of the Pacific Ocean, completed by Col. Cooke and the Mormon Battalion in January 1847 in their extremely difficult challenge to get military supply wagons to California.

Jedediah Smith, the first American to reach California overland in 1826 came largely by way of what would become the "Salt Lake to Southern California Road" and actually entered the future state on what is now the "Mojave Road". Both are trails in this proposal. In fact, the first four known Americans to permanently settle in California (Wolfskill and Yount in 1831, Warner in 1831, and Williams in 1832) arrived there using trails in this proposal.

As rich as the trail history is across the northern historic emigrant trails it is equally rich on the southern trails and a school child studying that history utilizing our National Trail System maps should not see a big void across the entire southern half of the United States. One is lead to believe looking at the current maps that the greatest movement of people in the history of the United States was strictly a northern experience, while it was truly a national experience that will be clearly demonstrated once we recognize a new Southern National Historic Trail. This will also bring closure for our National Trail System in recognizing all the major trails so important in that epic migration to the far west during the mid nineteenth century. Along with the three already recognized, those currently under study as a result of the 2009 Omnibus Bill, and now recognizing the Southern Trail we will have included them all and our National Trails System maps will show the true and complete story.

This study proposal is a giant undertaking with over 5,600 miles of the trails. The following is a brief description of the trails included in the proposal, generally running from the farthest points east to west.

Fort Smith to Santa Fe Trail [about 800 miles]

The Ft. Smith to Santa Fe Trail emerged in 1849 out of the gold rush frenzy of emigrants determined to head west from Ft. Smith to connect with the Southern Trail below Santa Fe. The U. S. Army ordered Capt. Randolph Marcy to escort emigrant parties and have his assistant, Lt. James Simpson, survey the route as far as Santa Fe. Emigrants used this route extensively during the early Gold Rush years.

This trail extended west from Ft. Smith, Arkansas, along the south side of the Canadian River (through Oklahoma and the Texas panhandle) into New Mexico where it connected with the Santa Fe Trail southeast of Santa Fe. Later it was extended west to Albuquerque to connect with the Beale Road.

Fort Smith to El Paso Trail [about 500 miles]

On Capt. Randolph Marcy's return route to Ft. Smith in later 1849, he surveyed what he regarded as a shorter route from the Rio Grande north of El Paso, across Texas, to the established wagon roads from Preston, on the Red River, that led northwest to Ft. Smith. Gold rushers from northern Texas and surrounding country used it.

From Ft. Smith, using wagon roads already existing in southeast Oklahoma, the route headed west and south over preexisting roads to Preston on the Red River. From there the trail surveyed by Marcy led southwest across Texas to the Upper Road on the Pecos River. Travelers then continued west on the Upper Road to El Paso and connecting routes in southern New Mexico to the Southern Trail.

Upper Road [to El Paso about 600 miles] **& *Lower Road*** [to El Paso about 650 miles]

With a flood of gold rushers entering southern Texas from Gulf ports, as well as Texans who also wanted to join the rush to riches, a need arose to find routes from Austin and San Antonio northwest across unsurveyed country to El Paso. In early 1849 several attempts were made finally resulting in the establishment of two routes, the Upper Road and Lower Road to El Paso. Because the Lower Road, sometimes called the Military Road, had more protection from a string of forts built from 1849 to 59, it eventually became the preferred route.

The Upper Road was linked to San Antonio and Austin by feeder routes to the newly established German community of Fredericksburg which served as a jumping off place for emigrant travel. From Fredericksburg the Upper Road curved northwest, west, and then south to the Pecos River crossing. From there the route continued northwest along the south side of the river and then west to El Paso.

The Lower Road led west from San Antonio to the Rio Grande, and then turned north paralleling the Pecos River. Crossing the Pecos, it again turned west toward the Rio Grande and then northwest to El Paso.

Southern Trail (also known as the Cooke-Graham Wagon Road) [about 1100 miles]

The Southern Trail was opened in 1846 during the Mexican War by Lt. Col. Phillip Cooke leading the Mormon Battalion and was realigned in 1848 by Maj. Graham from the San Pedro River to the Santa Cruz River. It became the principal emigration route during the Gold Rush to southern California.

This trail went south of Santa Fe along the Rio Grande and then turned southwest below Socorro to Guadalupe Pass at the boundary junction of New Mexico, Arizona, and Mexico. From there the trail turned west along the boundary of Arizona and Mexico to the Santa Cruz River where it turned north to the Gila River and the Pima Villages. From the Gila, the trail turned west to the Yuma crossing of the Colorado River and then across the desert to Warner's Ranch in California. There the trail split, with one branch going northwest to Los Angeles and the other branch going southwest to San Diego.

Gila Pack Trail [about 400 miles]

The Gila River route was first used by fur trappers and in the Mexican War of 1846; Gen. Stephen Watts Kearny led his Army of the West over the Gila River on his march west to secure California. Packers used this route during the Gold Rush. The rugged canyons and terrain along the upper half of the Gila River made travel by wagons impassible.

The pack trail branched off the Southern Trail on the Rio Grande near modern Truth or Consequences and generally followed the upper half of the Gila River to the Pima Villages where it rejoined the Southern Trail.

Apache Pass Cutoff (to Tucson) [about 200 miles]

The Apache Pass Cutoff was opened to wagon travel in 1849 by emigrants heading to the gold fields in California. Because it greatly shortened the Southern Trail route to Tucson, the cutoff later became the main route for mail and stage travel.

The cutoff branched off the Southern Trail in the southwest corner of New Mexico and headed west over Apache Pass to Tucson where it rejoined the Southern Trail.

Beale Road [about 500 miles] & ***Mojave Road*** [about 150 miles]

The Beale Road resulted from the federal government's plan to survey and build a wagon road along the Thirty-fifth Parallel, extending from Ft. Smith to southern California. Edward F. Beale was selected to explore and survey the route from Albuquerque to the Colorado River during 1857. In 1858-59 Beale was tasked with improving the Ft. Smith to Santa Fe Trail and extending these improvements on the route he had surveyed from Albuquerque to the Colorado River. At the time Beale was completing his road building to the river, a Mohave Indian uprising on the river led to the building of Ft. Mojave in 1859. To supply the fort from the California side, a wagon road was projected eastward from the Salt Lake Road across the Mojave Desert. Called the Mojave Road, it connected with the western end of Beale's new road at Ft. Mojave.

Modern Interstate 40 approximates the Beale Road from Albuquerque to Kingman, Arizona, and then continues westward to the site of Ft. Mojave on the east side of the Colorado River. The Mojave Road continues westward from the river, across the East Mojave Desert, to near present Barstow in southern California.

Salt Lake to Southern California Road [about 750 miles]

The Salt Lake to Southern California Road began in late 1847 and early 1848 as a Mormon pack trail from Salt Lake City that connected with the western half of the Old Spanish Trail (near present Cedar City) and continued on to the Los Angeles pueblo. By 1849 it had been

converted to wagon travel, with trail realignments, and was used by gold rushers to avoid late season travel over the Sierra Nevada on the northern trails. The Mormon settlement of San Bernardino in 1851 and increased commerce led to two-way wagon traffic in the 1850's.

Modern Interstate 15 approximates the wagon road from Salt Lake City to Las Vegas. From there the route is west of the Interstate until near Barstow in southern California where I-15 parallels the wagon route to Cajon Pass. From the pass, the route dropped down into the valley to San Bernardino and Los Angeles.

The Oregon California Trail Association, encouraged by the recent resolution of support passed by the Leadership Council of the Partnership for The National Trails System, is determined to see that the Southern Trail receives its rightful recognition as a national historic trail.

We will greatly appreciate your help and support. To find out how you may help please contact Albert Eddins at aseddins@msn.com or call 480 575-2733.