

MULLAN CHRONICLES

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The Mullan Military Road from Fort Walla Walla to Plante's Ferry

This is from Kay's "cousin-cousin" who has done a lot of research on the Mullan Road but is a driving force in OCTA—Oregon-California Trail Association.

by Don Popejoy

The Mullan Military Road was constructed by Lieutenant John Mullan between 1859 and 1862. After the road's completion in 1862 Lt. John Mullan was promoted to Captain. The Mullan Military Road was the first engineered road (done by both civilian and army work crews) to connect Fort Benton, Montana on the Missouri River to Fort Walla Walla on the Columbia River, thus bringing the Great Plains closer to the Pacific Northwest. The purpose of this military road was threefold: To survey a possible railroad route between the two river ports, to build

an access road along this proposed railroad to bring supplies and materials needed for construction of a railroad, and to transport military supplies and troops to the northwest for support of the thousands of pioneers who were flooding the area. In fact, the Indian trouble that started in 1853, was a result of this road being surveyed and possibly built through their country.

Washington Territorial Governor, Issac I. Stevens, came up with the original concept as a result of the northern railroad exploration survey of 1853-1855. Lieutenant John Mullan, who did the actual survey, design and construction work, was assigned as his assistant. Four possible routes through the Bitterroots were suggested; the one chosen by Mullan was traveled several times by

Stevens before he declared it to be the most direct route possible. Nothing really came of this idea of a military road from the Missouri River to the Columbia until 1857, when the Yakima War and the Mormon War showed the obvious need for another military route, other than the Oregon Trail, through Washington and Oregon.

In May 1853, Mullan actually started his survey, but because of the impending Indian crisis, the survey work was canceled for several years. Then on May 15, 1858 Mullan was ordered to begin construction of this road of nearly 625 miles, of which 125 involved cutting through heavy forests and another 30 miles of cut and fill work. Numerous bridges were built and some of the road had to be

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Visit from a Mullan!

On New Years Day I had the pleasure of hosting a visit to the museum in Superior of Caitlin Mullan. Caitlin is the granddaughter of Dr. Hugh Mullan and daughter of Dr. Fitzhugh Mullan. She was in St. Regis for the rededication of the Mullan statue with her family in 1989.

Caitlin is a graduate of Brown College in Rhode Island where she majored in environmental studies. She hopes to make another trip this way in a warmer climate and when she can stay longer.

MC



Historian and speaker extraordinaire Bill Weikel describes the location and operation of the St. Regis Ferry across the Clark Fork river to a fascinated audience at the 2001 Mullan Day walkabout.

Part of MMR followed the old Colville Road

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corduroyed. Construction went quickly through Washington, only some grading and building bridges over watercourses was required. The initial road was completed but in the winter of 1860, Mullan decided that the road through the marshy areas south of Coeur d' Alene Lake was not practicable. In early 1861 Mullan be-

The Mullan Military Road helped open up this part of the country to settlement, especially during the gold rush days.

gan phase two of the military road. A new route was blazed north of Coeur d' Alene Lake, thus avoiding the seasonal flooding and wide river crossings along the southern route, as well as repairing parts of the original route.

This Road was primitive at best and in most places, deterioration from disease and the weather caused the Mullan Military Road to fall into disfavor. Even though this road was used only once by the military shortly after its construction, the road did pioneer the railroads through the same general area as surveyed. The Mullan Military Road helped open up this part of the country to settlement, especially during the gold rush days in Montana, Idaho and Washington. The Road was used for many decades by the settlers and farmers and in some cases, is still used by the locals. An interesting quote comes from Orland Scott: "It was this route from Walla Walla to Cheney which my father and mother, with their family, had taken in 1879, at which time they had made temporary settlement at a place called Crescent near Cheney. In the summer of 1885 they again followed the old Mullan Road from Cheney to the Hangman

Creek crossing. From there they traversed virgin country, open timber and grass lands, going in the general direction of the present town of Plummer, Idaho."

Another quote comes from Ermal Denham who says that "The Mullan Road was nothing fancy, just a dirt road with deep ruts... In places the railroad was built on the road. We would straddle the railroad tracks with the wagon and send my brothers both behind and ahead of us to stop any train that might be coming."

Lt. John Mullan's work through Washington was fairly simple as part of it followed the old Colville Road, but the scenery was nothing short of spectacular. The following excerpts are taken from John Mullan's journal *Mullan Road-1861 Document #44*" (the spelling and quotes are as he wrote them).

"We reached Fort Walla Walla on the 27th of May, and after all necessary arrangements were completed, we left on the 1st of June."

June 1, 1859 Left Fort Walla Walla early in the morning, and making a detour towards the west, on account of a wet place which made the usual route almost impracticable for heavy loaded Wagons, we struck Dry Creek at the usual crossing.

June 2, 1859 Following... the well marked road, we reached the Touchett River, and fording it without diffi-

culty, encamped on its north shore.

June 3, 1859 Started at 5 a.m., and followed, for four miles, a good level route on the north side of Reed Creek valley. There, turning to the north, the road led through a winding and gradually ascending valley, with a dry water run (Colville Springs). Two miles from the mouth of this valley we discovered a small spring in a little side ravine, containing little, but very cool water.

June 4, 1859 The Road then turns to the northeast and led through a narrow and rather rocky canon (canyon), still ascending. At some point

The width of Snake River is about 350 yards... by a combination of adversities we succeeded in getting everything across.

this canon would widen a little more and close up again at others. The valley leading towards the Snake River affords also a good road. The final descent to Snake River is accomplished by winding around several bluff points, and by no means an easy one for wagons. The width of Snake River at the present high water is about 350 yards... by a combination of adversities we succeeded in getting everything across.

June 5, 1859 The ascent to the table land extending towards the Pelouse River is exceedingly difficult, the bluffs being from 900 to 1,100 feet high, very steep, and consisting, at those places where the rock does not outcrop from the surfaces, of a sandy soil.

June 6, 1859 After crossing a little

Now wired!!

mrshezzie@blackfoot.net will get to me. Please send address changes and your email address to me so we can keep our files up to date.

Plante's Ferry crossed Spokane River

prairie ridge we reached the top of a divide, 700 feet high, which afforded a very good road. notwithstanding the deep, sandy portions of it. We struck Cow Creek. Cow Creek contains a small volume of water, which runs in a very irregular bed with respect to its width. (Authors note: Here at Cow Creek the road turns northwest towards Colville, becoming the Colville Road, and the Mullan Road continues in a northeast direction towards Spokane)

June 7, 1859 After ascending the easterly bluff, which was only effected by double teams, and even then with great exertions to the animals, we reached a lofty plateau. Four and a half miles before reaching camp we passed a fresh water pond thickly covered with weeds and reeds...the only watering place on this long, bad, tiresome stretch. I had today twice an opportunity to see Pyramid Peak (Steptoe Butte) and took bearings on it.

June 8, 1859 We saw "Big Lake"

We passed a fresh water pond thickly covered with weeds and reeds...the only watering place on this long, bad, tiresome stretch.

(Sprague Lake) before us with its pine clad hills. The lake bears the name Big Lake in all Indian languages; it has a length of six miles and a width varying from 1/2 to 3/4 of a mile. The water is not fresh, and has a swampy taste.

June 9, 1859 Passing over a low divide, which is partially covered with pine timber, we struck in one and a half

mile Rock Creek. This creek is 15 feet wide, has a rocky bed, and is bordered by a luxuriant growth of large timber.

June 10, 1859 We went to camp on the head creek of Willow creek (Author's note: Latah Creek known today as Hangman's Creek). Willow Creek flows into the Spokane River about four miles above the old Spokane House. The Valley or Willow creek (Hangman Valley) is well marked to the east by disconnected ridges. The most prominent peak is called Bark Mountain (Mount Spokane) and constitutes a good landmark. I saw plenty of snow yet on its tops, and to judge from that circumstance it must have considerable elevation.

June 11 & 12, 1859 Traversing a gentle prairie ridge (Moran Prairie) and which requires a Corduroy to allow wagons to pass. The soil, which becomes very productive: high and rich grass intermixed with flowers covers the hills, and groves of luxuriant trees are dotted all over the country. We struck a sandy ravine, which brought us by gentle grade to the water's edge of the Spokane River at a

The PenD'Orielle Route to Montana

Originally appeared on the front page of the *Montana Post* (Virginia City), November 25, 1865; reprinted in the *Mountaineer*, The Dalles OR, December 2, 1865).

The machinery for the steamer intended for the navigation of Pen D'Orielle Lake is nearly finished, and the enterprise will probably be carried forward to a successful completion. On this point, we observe that parties are mobing at Walla Walla to open the Mullan Road, being instigated to do so, we

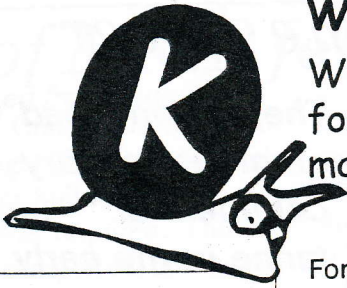
The Mullan Road was of great military and commercial importance in the early history of the Far West and of Montana in particular. It served for a time as a link in East-West communications.

point where a private company has established a ferry (Antoine Plante). We encamped on the left bank of the river (near an Indian village) where preparations were made for the crossing.

"In retrospect the Mullan Road was of great commercial and military importance to the early history of the Far West in general and of Montana in particular. It served for a time as a link in East-West communications." Historian Oscar O. Winther.

The Mullan Military Road is marked through the Spokane area by pyramid stone shaped markers, and at Plantes Ferry there is a larger marker and several points of interest. **MC**

are informed by the representatives of parties owning a ferry on the road. The citizens of Walla Walla will be acting wisely by "going slow" on this matter, unless they really wish to be a cat's-paw to the owners of ferries and toll bridges on the government road. It is pretty plain that one good road will answer for all the trade from this side, and if discoveries continue to be made across the heads of Flathead River, the Mullan Road cannot become the thoroughfare under any circumstances. **MC**



We won't give up, hope you won't give up on us!

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Cathryn (Kay) Strombo, Editor

For more information and/or tours of the Mullan Military Road in Washington, please feel free to contact Don Popejoy at (509) 483-3174. Don is on the Board of Directors of the Oregon/California Trail Association. He is currently writing a book entitled *The Columbia River Connection: Lewis & Clark and the Oregon Trail*, about Lewis and Clark in Washington State and using the Columbia River as a connection between the Corps and the Oregon Trail. Two other books, a history of the Mullan Military Road and history of the Spokane River, are in process.

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