



Oregon Trail FAQs

National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center

What You Didn't Learn from the Video Game

Who first traveled the Oregon Trail?

When we think of the Oregon Trail, we often picture covered wagons and pioneers heading west in the 1800s. But they weren't the first people in Oregon. **Indigenous peoples** had lived in the region for thousands of years, long before any wagons rolled through.

In the 1700s, **European explorers** began arriving and writing about Oregon's rich natural resources. Then came **fur trappers**, who followed animal migration routes — many of which later became parts of the Oregon Trail. **Missionaries** also traveled west, hoping to convert Native peoples to Christianity. Stories from these early travelers led others to imagine settling in the West.

What was the Doctrine of Discovery?

The **Doctrine of Discovery** was a set of rules created by the Pope in 1493. It said that Christian European countries had the divine (God-given) right to claim any land not already ruled by another Christian nation. This doctrine gave European powers a justification to take land around the world (including in North America) because they could say it was "unclaimed," even when Indigenous peoples already lived there.

What was Manifest Destiny?

Manifest Destiny built on the idea of the Doctrine of Discovery. It was the idea that European Americans had the divine right and duty to settle across the American continent. This belief was embraced across the country as a justification for westward expansion and the forcible removal of Native Americans from their lands.

What did Native Americans and emigrants trade on the trail?

Wagons couldn't carry enough food for the whole journey, so emigrants often traded with Native Americans. They exchanged items like **glass beads** and **coins** for **salmon, berries, furs, meat, and moccasins**. Indigenous women played a key role in this trade: they prepared goods and often decided what to ask for in return.

Who “Owned” Oregon in the 1800s?

In the early 1800s, both **Great Britain and the United States** claimed Oregon based on the Doctrine of Discovery. In **1846**, the **Oregon Treaty** officially designated the land as belonging to the United States. The treaty did not include the voices or rights of Indigenous peoples.

How did the Donation Land Claim Act impact immigration to Oregon?

The **Donation Land Claim Act of 1850** gave white settlers **320 acres of land**—or **640 acres for married couples**—in Oregon. This law was instrumental in encouraging tens of thousands of settlers to move west. In 1850, there were about **13,000 non-Native people** in the Oregon region. By 1870, there were more than **100,000**.

Upon arriving in Oregon, some immigrants searched for gold in places like **Baker County**, while others farmed, opened businesses, or worked in logging. They built towns, schools, churches, and local governments, changing the land and the ways it was used.

Was there conflict between Native Americans and emigrants?

Movies often show violence between pioneers and Native Americans, but **most interactions on the trail were peaceful**. Native Americans helped emigrants by trading, guiding, and even ferrying them across rivers. However, tensions grew over time. Emigrants brought **diseases** that killed many Native people. They also **overhunted** animals and polluted water sources. Emigrants and Native Americans often grew up hearing stories that taught them to fear each other.

After realizing the “limitless” land of the West was in fact occupied, emigrants, and later the federal government, began to force Native Americans off their lands. In some cases, Native tribes were pressured to sell their land; in other cases, it was taken from them by force. Many were moved to **small, distant reservations**. Later, some returned—but often to work for non-Natives on land that had once been their homeland. Government-run **boarding schools** were also established for the purpose of assimilating Native Americans into white American culture.

Today, indigenous Americans continue working to preserve their cultural heritage and practices. However, their ways of life and relationships to the land were forever altered by the impacts of westward expansion.