

The Nebraska City - Fort Kearny Cutoff to the Oregon Trail

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Discover Historic Wagon Ruts

Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center is listed in the National Register of Historic Places because of the presence of trail ruts associated with the Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff to the Oregon-California Trail. This was one of Nebraska Territory's most important roads.



Opened in 1860 as the shortest route from Missouri River ports to Fort Kearny and points west, the road was established by military freight contractors Russell, Majors & Waddell with the help of other Nebraska City interests. This shortcut (also known as the Great Central Route, the Airline Route, and, later, the Steam Wagon Road) had the additional advantage of being an all-weather road because it was located principally along ridge tops. As a result, it became a popular year-round highway for commerce, immigration, and local traffic. The cutoff facilitated such rapid settlement and commercial development south of the Platte River that it is considered to have played a major role in the relocation of the capital from Omaha to Lincoln in 1867. The importance of the road for freighting began to wane in 1867 after the transcontinental railroad was completed through central Nebraska.

The Spring Creek Prairie ruts are important for several reasons. Foremost is their rarity, since most of the road has been obliterated by subsequent agricultural and urban development. Ruts have been preserved here because the ground was never plowed, a circumstance that preserved the prairie itself. The ruts are also significant for being along the oldest (1860-64) of the three major alignments of this road. Sources suggest that this section of road was used for transcontinental traffic through at least 1866 and perhaps beyond, after other improved alignments such as the Steam Wagon Road had been established closer to Lincoln. Mormons likely used this trail during the years 1864-66.

Finally, the ruts have further interest because they preserve traces of the wagon descent situation from the ridge tops. Four or five sets of descent ruts reveal a complex pattern to the roadway that probably developed from varying terrestrial conditions, the braking requirements of heavy wagons, and, to some extent, individual preferences for making the Spring Creek crossing. Travelers would leave the ridge road at this point to make the crossing, to obtain water, and possibly to camp overnight. From Spring Creek the road ran west and northwestward toward the Camden Crossing of the Blue River. Short sections of ruts are visible here and there in the unplowed pastures west of Spring Creek Prairie: In the tallgrass prairie immediately to the west, along the northern edge of the east half of the section, immediately to the south of Saltillo Road, and northwesterly to the west of Haines Branch.

For more information:

- *From the Missouri to the Great Salt Lake: An Account of Overland Freighting*, by William E. Lass
- “*The Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cut-Off as a Factor in the Early Development of Nebraska and the West*,” University of Nebraska Thesis by Charles Boyd Mapes, 1931
- *The Great Platte River Road*, by Merrill J. Mattes

