

Mullan Pass/Helena

On July 16, 1860 Mullan's party reached the west base of the Rocky Mountains. On the morning of July 17 they crossed the continental divide at Mullan's Pass, and camped on the waters of the Missouri. It would take them only two weeks more to reach the steamship dock at Fort Benton, over two hundred miles to the east.



Last Chance Gulch, Helena.

Sun River/Great Falls

“When we reached the Dearborn River, we emerged upon the broad, swelling prairies of the upper Missouri. On the 28th, we proceeded to Sun River, crossing at a ford (at) the Indian agency of the Blackfeet.



from a sketch by Meriwether Lewis (1807)

At this point our work proper ceased, for the remaining distance of fifty-five miles to Fort Benton was over an easy and almost level prairie road, with no running streams.”

Fort Benton



Gustav Sohon's sketch of Fort Benton in the early 1860's
On August 1, 1860, Mullan and his crew arrived at Fort Benton on the Missouri River. The party began their return to Walla Walla on August 5 with their equipment on pack animals. Making repairs to the road as needed, they completed their journey home by early October.

The Completion of the Road

Following initial construction of the road in 1859-60, on May 13, 1861, Mullan and his crew set off again from Walla Walla to Fort Benton to make repairs and alterations to the road.

Their work included a new crossing of the Snake River at the mouth of the Palouse where Lyons ferry had begun operating, and also a new route across the Spokane River and north around Lake Coeur d'Alene to avoid the soggy southern route. The crew also built new bridges, and Mullan made minor route changes to eliminate stream fordings.

Mullan and his crew arrived at Fort Benton on June 8, 1862. They left for their return to Walla Walla on June 12, again performing repairs, minor rerouting and bridge replacement, and completing their final work in late August.

The Mullan Road Historic Site

Plans are currently underway for the development of a Mullan Road Historic Site at the corner of the original Fort Walla Walla military reservation on 13th Avenue at Abadie Street in Walla Walla.

The Mullan Road left the Fort Walla Walla complex on the hill where the U.S. VA Medical Center is now located, then proceeded north in the general area of what is now 13th Avenue.

The City of Walla Walla has moved to this site a granite marker originally placed at the prison, and Walla Walla 2020, in cooperation with the City, is developing interpretive signage as well as landscaping and a shelter to honor this first engineered wagon road in the northwest, which helped realize the longstanding dream of a Northwest Passage linking the continent from east to west.

More information on the project and the historic Mullan Road is available at www.ww2020/historic-sites.org, by email to ww2020@charter.net, or at 509-522-0399.

HISTORIC MULLAN ROAD



*From Fort Walla Walla on the
Columbia to Fort Benton on the
Missouri River*

Constructed 1859-1862



Historic Research & Plaque Project

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HISTORIC MULLAN ROAD

In March, 1858, US Army Lt. John Mullan was given the task of building a wagon road from the steamship dock at the old Fort Walla Walla trading post on the Columbia River across the Rocky Mountains to the steamship dock at Fort Benton on the Missouri River, by way of the new military fort at the town of Walla Walla.

The initial construction by Lt. Mullan and his crew began from Walla Walla in June of 1859 and was completed in October of 1860. In May, 1861, the crew began rebuilding and improving portions of the route.

In August 1862, the 655 mile road, including the previously existing portion from the Columbia to Walla Walla, was finally completed, providing a route for pioneer families, miners, soldiers, and military supplies between the two major rivers, and creating the first engineered highway in the northwest, now known as the Mullan Road.

In 1978, the American Society of Civil Engineers designated the Mullan Road a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark.

The construction of the road began at the Fort Walla Walla military garrison, now the site of the U.S. Veterans Administration Medical Center, and proceeded north in the vicinity of what is now 13th Avenue through the current grounds of the Washington State Penitentiary and on to a crossing of Dry Creek. Continuing north, the road crossed the Touchet and Snake rivers on its way to the Spokane River, where it turned east to the Missouri.



One of the few remaining gravel stretches of the Mullan Road



Old Fort Walla Walla

The Nez Perce trail used for millennia by regional tribes ran from the Columbia River at Wallula east to the Blue Mountains, where it turned northeast to the Clearwater country. This route became an early part of the Oregon Trail to the Whitman Mission and to the Hudson's Bay Company trading post at Fort Walla Walla on the Columbia.

Because there was already a wagon road from Old Fort Walla Walla east to the new U.S. Army military post in the town of Walla Walla, the actual construction of the Mullan Road began at the new Fort Walla Walla.



New Fort Walla Walla

Lieutenant Mullan and a crew of approximately 100 civilian workmen and 100 enlisted men left Walla Walla on June 25, 1859 to begin construction of the Mullan Road.

The first leg of the road was over rolling prairie, and required no clearing. After bridge repair at Dry Creek, the party moved on to a camp on the Touchet River where they built a new bridge. From there they continued two days to the Snake River.

Snake River To Spokane Valley

On July 4, 1859 the Mullan party crossed the Snake River at the mouth of the Tucannon River, then followed the Palouse River and its tributaries north to the Spokane plains.

Their road ran between frequent basalt outcroppings and across great rolling prairies.



Snake River crossing at Fort Taylor

To reach the east side of Lake Coeur d'Alene from the Spokane plains, Mullan and his crew built south of the lake and through the St. Joseph valley in 1859. Mullan later abandoned that road in favor of a route following the Spokane River north of the lake.

Hells Gate/Missoula

In April of 1860, the crew left their winter camp and began work up the Bitterroot Valley toward Hell Gate in the Missoula Valley.

"It was a severe piece of work, and cost us the labor of 150 men for six weeks," Mullan wrote. "Being rocky in most places, we were compelled to blast. By a premature explosion, one of our men, Sheridan, lost one of his eyes, and another, Robert P. Booth, was severely stunned... In the remaining stretch to Hell's Gate, amounting to sixty miles, we continued the road through much open timber... Our work to the Hell's Gate ronde was completed by the 28th of June."



Worden Store, Missoula