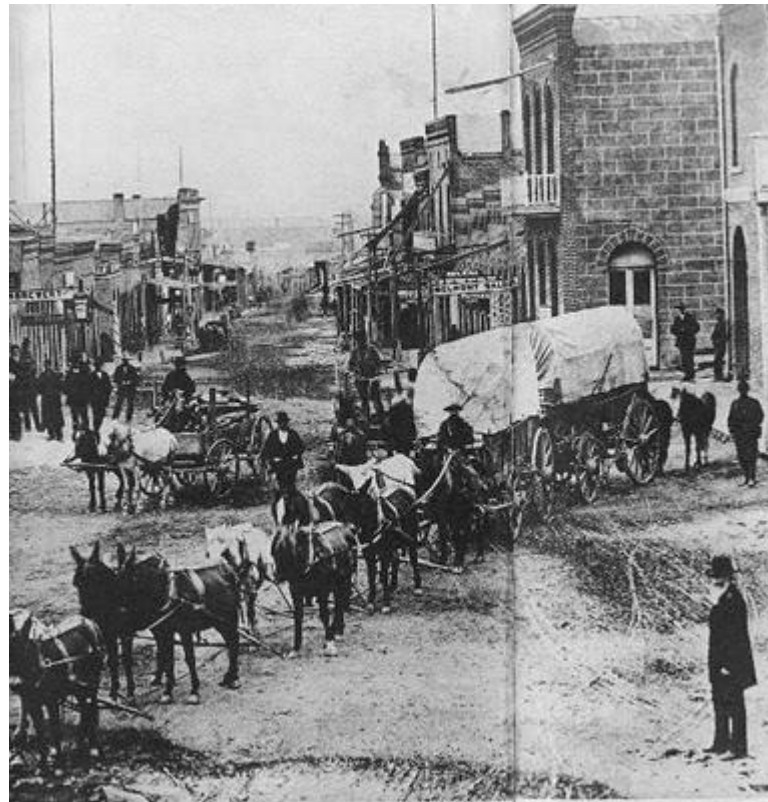


MULLAN PASS/HELENA

Crossing the Continental Divide to the Missouri



Freight wagons along Last Chance Gulch, Helena.

From *Helena: An Illustrated History*, by Vivian Paladin and Jean Baucus (1996).

On July 16, 1860 Lt. 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. The construction of their road to that point near present-day Helena, a distance of over 400 miles, had taken more than a year. It would take them only two weeks more to reach the steamship dock at Fort Benton, over two hundred miles to the east.

“Crossing the Rocky Mountain range at Mullan's pass and descending upon the Missouri slopes, a new climate and new character of country is at once encountered. The spurs of the mountains become lower and less timbered, the country more diversified with hill and dale, and the scope for a wagon-road location enlarged. The climate too, is warmer, the frosts at night less severe, and the great difference of heat between midday and midnight no longer noticeable,” wrote Mullan.

Helena wasn't established until 1864 when gold was discovered in the region. The town depended heavily on the Mullan Road for supplies and transportation to Walla Walla and the Columbia River. In 1866 a memorial by the Montana territorial legislature sitting in Helena reminded the U.S. Congress of “the necessity for a great national highway connecting the Missouri and Columbia rivers by a good and substantial wagon road,” pleading for the road to be improved. “What was a wilderness now contains a large and rapidly increasing population, producing millions of bushels of grain and millions of dollars per annum in gold and silver. The opening of this road is of the greatest, most vital importance to the people of Washington, Idaho, and that portion of Montana lying west of the Rocky mountains; and in a military point of view, its value cannot be overestimated.”

The memorial goes on, “From Jan. 1, to Nov. 15, 1866, 1500 head of horses have been purchased by individual miners at Walla Walla; 5000 head of cattle were driven from Walla Walla to Montana; 6000 mules have left the Columbia river and Walla Walla loaded with freight for Montana; 52 light wagons with families have left Walla Walla for Montana; 31 wagons with immigrants have come through from the States via the Mullan Road, a portion of whom settled in Walla Walla valley... not less than 20,000 persons have passed over the Mullan road to and from Montana during the past season; \$1,000,000 in treasure has passed down through Walla Walla and Wallula during the same period.”