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Petroglyphs at Buffalo Eddy on the Snake River.

Making the Idaho Landscape of 1863

by Adam M. Sowards

Landscapes emerge from history. Geologic history, of course, plays a formative role, furnishing the bedrock of our environmental past. But landscapes are more than volcanism and the migration of flora and fauna. Landscapes are cultural artifacts, for they include humans integrally. The Idaho landscape of 1863, then, must be understood in its historical continuum, as a place produced by nature and culture shaping one another over time and in place. In 1863—the inauguration of Idaho’s territorial period—the landscape represented the culmination of millennia influenced by Native peoples and the short but influential hand of Euroamericans. As are all places, Idaho in 1863 was a landscape in transition.

The indigenous people who called Idaho home since time immemorial lived in an inhabited landscape, a place animated by animal people and plant partners, a place where abundance and scarcity came in cycles with seasonal and climatic changes, a place where human and natural communities related in rituals of reciprocity. Ancient, but on-going, oral traditions stress how Animal Peoples prepared the world for Human Peoples, offered gifts and lessons, and, together, they mutually made the world. And so long as the stories still are told and traditions performed, they continue to make the world together.

Idaho’s Native populations—from the Ktunaxa (Kootenai) in the north to the Bannaqwate (Bannock) in the southeast—represented several cultural groups, but common notions of reciprocity and sharing guided Native peoples’ relationship with rest of nature. The Nimíipuu (Nez Perce) community would begin salmon season with rituals and a

Facing page: Meriwether Lewis noted the significance of camas to the diets of the Nez Perce, and, while in Idaho, gathered camas in bloom for his plant collection.

Done faithfully, these actions and countless others like them, repeated regularly over the generations, ensured that nature would provide continuously.

Nez Perce canoe, c. 1910, by Edward S. Curtis.



Curtis Collection #2916-10, Library of Congress

feast—*ka-oo-yit*—to thank the Creator for generosity and the salmon for returning and offering themselves to nourish the people. A Schitsu'umsh (Couer d'Alene) woman might offer a prayer and some tobacco before digging the year's first camas bulb. The Newe (Shoshone) gathered for communal hunts of antelope and rabbits—alternating to provide the animal populations recovery

time—and then celebrated with festivals including the Round Dance while individuals asked animals their permission to take them in a hunt.

Done faithfully,

these actions and countless others like them, repeated regularly over the generations, ensured that nature would provide continuously.

Just as culture structured Natives peoples' relationship with the Idaho landscape, so too did it control those Euroamericans who traveled through this landscape, some of whom even came to call it home. Although numerous nuances and variations make cultural definition tricky, three categories—science, religion, and economics—might be most important in defining and shaping Idaho's landscape as it evolved toward the territorial period.

The Corps of Discovery straggled through Idaho at one of the expedition's most difficult periods. Mazes of ridges and valleys blocked their way. Food ran out, and hunger stalked them. Only the hospitality of local Indians kept Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and their crew successfully moving through Idaho. First, Sacajawea's brother Cameahwait, a chief of a Lemhi band, provided necessary horses in August 1805 near Lemhi Pass. Then, the Nez Perce, whom they called the Chopunnish, furnished needed food on the Weippe Prairie a month later. Without the generosity of Native peoples and some good luck, the most significant explorers in American history would have struggled much more in Idaho's mountainous middle.

But they successfully traversed that landscape and did so with curiosity rooted partially in enlightenment science. Doing so, they began to analyze the landscape and how the inhabitants lived within it. For instance, Lewis noted the Lemhi River's "loose stones and gravel" in which salmon spawned, while later noting how the Nez Perce led "painful and laborious" lives as they were "busily occupied in fishing for salmon" all through the summer and fall.

While the Corps' judgment about painful and laborious lives smacks of their own cultural preferences, Lewis and Clark recognized people in place making a living with the landscape.

The Corps' gaze lingered long enough on their return trip at Camp Chopunnish on the Clearwater River to make further and significant scientific observations. Lewis stocked his plant collection, while perceiving the value the Nez Perce placed on such root plants as small camas and cous biscuitroot. In describing these plants and others, Lewis recognized their intertwined cultural history,

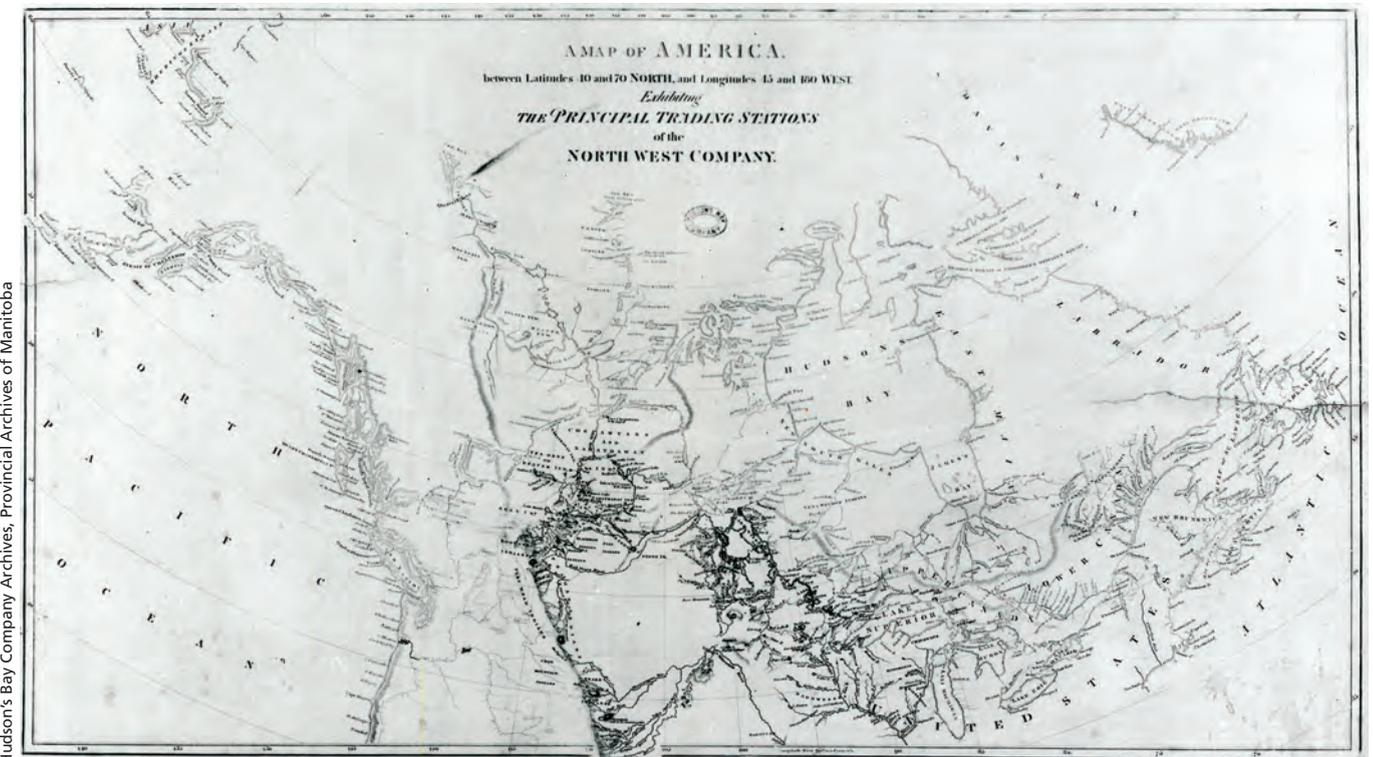


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noting women's roles in gathering and preparing the roots and the occasions when they might be consumed. Although the Corps did not see the landscape as animated with spiritual powers as indigenous groups did, they appreciated that a detached scientific observation of plants or animals would insufficiently capture their meaning.

If Lewis and Clark brought with them a science somewhat sensitive to human cultures, the next sojourners to Idaho had something else in mind: profit. Fur traders invaded Idaho's river valleys, raiding and ridding watersheds of

Below: The North West Company's David Thompson followed Lewis and Clark in the exploration of Idaho, establishing Idaho's first trading post on Lake Pend Oreille in 1809. The "Map of America," showing the Company's principal trading stations, dates from c. 1817. In 1821 the North West Company merged with the Hudson's Bay Company.



Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba

Peter S. Ogden led Hudson's Bay Company fur brigades in Idaho to trap beaver with a goal of creating a "fur desert."

their fur-bearing residents. If the language seems harsh, it is because the destruction perpetrated in the name of profit wreaked ecological havoc and noticeably changed Idaho's landscapes.

To stave off Americans who might set their sights on the far Oregon Country, the Canada-based British Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) sent traders known as the Snake River Brigades under the leadership of Peter Skene Ogden and then John Work to the Snake River Plain and nearby mountains with the express purpose of creating a "fur desert." During its first year, the company harvested 4,500 pelts. Eventually operating out of Fort Boise and taking over the American-built Fort Hall, they so successfully met their goals that trappers could only muster 665 a decade later after diligently plying their trade. Cumulatively, 35,000 beaver pelts left southern Idaho bound for eastern or European markets, mainly for fur hats. Market demand created the opportunity while the desire of British merchants to forestall American competition created the impetus to trap out the country.



Oregon Historical Society, #815ba18688

The results in the landscape were substantial. A keystone species in riparian zones, beaver affected much, and removing them had cascading effects. Six thousand ponds gone meant that water flowed faster, erosion increased along with stream sediment loads, and habitat for various other creatures diminished. And those were only the mostly direct consequences.

Indirectly, the fur trade wrought further devastation to Idaho. The trade brought trade goods that were attractive additions to indigenous economies and cultures. That tied Idaho's Native populations to markets far beyond Idaho that functioned with little regard for Idaho and with little influence from the residents of this far-flung corner of the continent. Native peoples had long traded, but the global market the fur trade represented brought an astounding new scale to them

that was beyond comprehension or ability to shape to a significant degree.

Along with new products and economic interdependencies came the Euroamerican traders. And along with them came pathogens. Actually, diseases arrived before Europeans did with the Shoshones being hit by smallpox, the deadliest of contact diseases, by the 1780s. Smallpox arrived from the south with the horses and guns the Shoshones wanted, demonstrating just how active and extensive Native trade networks were. In northern Idaho, smallpox and other diseases traveled with other traders up the Columbia River system and spread through the Coeur d'Alene and Nez Perce populations, also affecting them beginning in the 1780s. By 1850, indigenous populations had collapsed by as much as 90 percent. This depopulation stands, along with slavery, as America's greatest tragedy. Its consequences ramified again and again throughout Idaho's coming history.

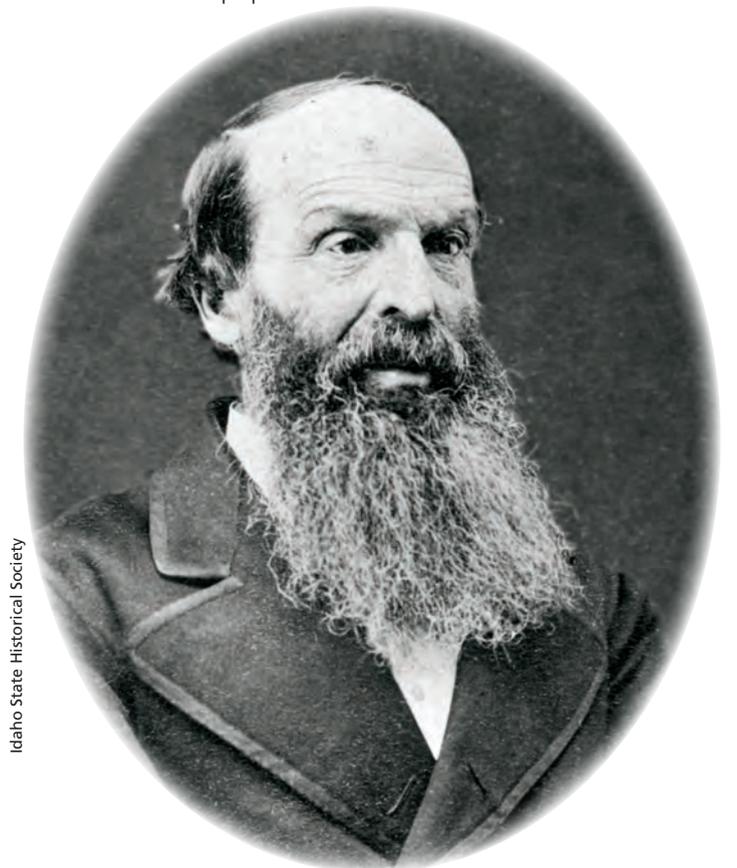
The cultural consequences are almost unfathomable to us in the 21st century. The young and the old—tribes' most vulnerable populations—faced the highest mortality rates. Their deaths held disproportionate tragedy: The elders held accumulated tribal knowledge, while the young held the tribal future. At a time when other economic, political, and cultural forces hampered their capacity to respond with full strength, recovering from the loss of so many family members severely stressed Native peoples.

The consequences for the landscape also mattered. With Native peoples so reduced in numbers, they could no longer maintain active management over their own lands, could no longer fully tend to their re-

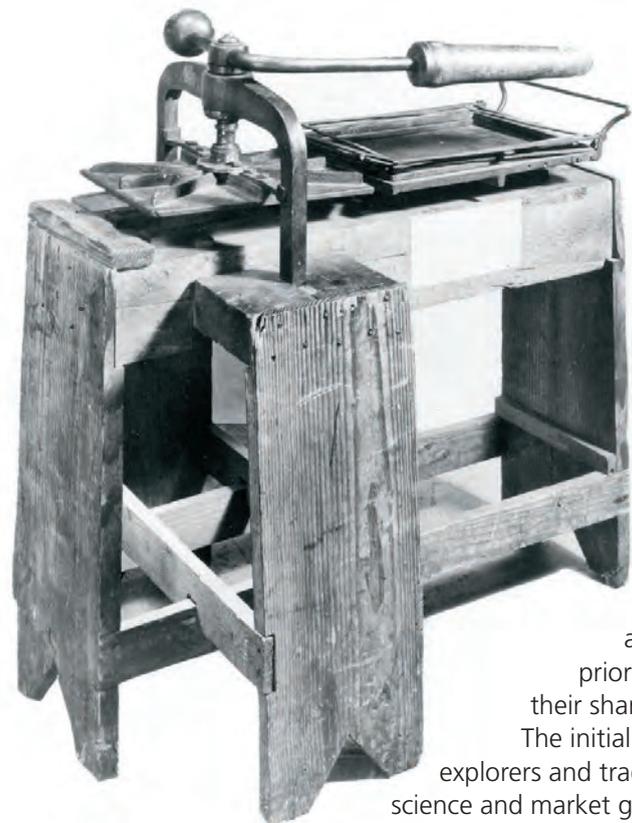
lations of reciprocity. Fires were not set. Fish were not caught. Animals were not hunted. Fields were not cultivated. Berries were not picked. Homes were not occupied. What Euroamericans found when they traveled to Idaho was an impoverished and emptied landscape. It was a place where centuries-old patterns of reciprocity between humans and the natural world had utterly collapsed.

What history books once called the "winning of the West," or more benignly the "settling of the West," truly was a re-settling process, with new populations displacing and refilling the landscapes in places like Idaho that had been largely depopulated. This can be overstated. Natives had not disappeared, but their influence certainly declined as a new popula-

Henry H. Spalding, missionary to the Nez Perce.



Idaho State Historical Society



National Park Service, Nez Perce National Historical Park

Henry Spalding operated the first printing press in the Northwest at his mission among the Nez Perce. The press is now in the collections of the Oregon Historical Society.

tion with a new set of priorities organized their shared space. The initial incursions of explorers and traders and their science and market goods produced excitement about Idaho. Their reports and word of mouth surrounding activities in the mountains and plains of the Far West encouraged more to come. Missionaries were next, and while missionaries cared more about harvesting souls than harvesting crops, their work represented significant shifts in the Idaho landscapes.

Eliza and Henry Spalding established in 1836 a Presbyterian mission on Lapwai Creek among the Nimípuu. The Jesuit Father Pierre-Jean DeSmet directed Father Nicolas Point to minister to the Schitsu'umsh at the Mission of the Sacred Heart on the St. Joe River, beginning in 1842, a mission later relocated to the Coeur d'Alene River with Father Joseph Joset presiding. In 1855, Latter-day Saints established the short-lived Fort Lemhi, or Salmon River

Mission, on the Lemhi River ("Limhi" at the time). In these far-flung diverse landscapes among disparate spiritual traditions, missionaries shared a commitment to convert Native peoples to one or another strand of Christianity.

Changing the ways Indians inhabited the landscape was of a piece with religious conversion. Whether Protestant, Catholic, or Latter-day Saint, missionaries wanted Native Idahoans to settle down. That is, to be proper Christians meant being proper farmers. Not recognizing that Native peoples already cultivated plants, sacred and mundane, in "unusual gardens" and tended wild plants throughout their homelands, missionaries imagined farms filled with familiar fruit trees and fields waving in wheat eventually ground by gristmills. Religious and agricultural instruction were a packaged deal meant to inculcate a love of property and productive labor among a population missionaries saw as troublingly itinerant, communal, and heathen—a project supported by the American government. When a federal official, Elijah White, traveled to Nez Perce country in 1842, he dictated eleven laws meant to guide and punish the Nez Perce. Tellingly, their main purpose seemed to be to protect missionaries' and other Euroamericans' property. For example, "Anyone harming crops or taking down a fence so livestock could come in would pay damages and suffer twenty-five lashes." But missionaries demanded progress on the ground. Within two years, the Spaldings reported that their mission had become a "model farm," and by 1839, they became the region's first irrigators. They were teachers and models of Christian cultivators.

Later, their daughter Eliza Spalding Warren reported on their success from the field: "The Indians were settled in homes; their crops of grain were 20,000 to 30,000 bushels a year; the cows brought by the missionaries had multiplied into numerous herds; the sheep given by the Sandwich Islanders had grown into flocks." This listing of impressive agricultural achievements preceded Warren's praise of their spiritual harvest, suggesting that making the Idaho landscape yield domesticated plants and animals may well have been the most significant change the Spaldings and other missionaries initiated.

None of this was easy. Due to terrain, aridity, or poor soil, not all of Idaho's landscape yielded easily to agriculture. Tensions

within and between tribal groups, sparked often by the increasingly disruptive presence of Euroamerican traders and missionaries, often made pockets of Idaho little more than nodes of violence. Nonetheless, missionary families had shown that agricultural success was possible, and their publicized letters to family and friends in the eastern United States attracted land-hungry agrarians ready to risk a continental crossing.

Beginning in the early 1840s, the Oregon Trail—that most storied road—crossed the Idaho desert for about 400 miles. Among the most heralded of Idaho's pioneers (even though they seldom stayed there), overlanders viewed the Snake River Plain in mostly negative terms, largely because of its very unfamiliarity. Esther Belle

Southern Idaho sagebrush country greeted Oregon Trail emigrants.



University of Idaho Library, Special Collections, #6-122-1

Right: Washington Territory's first governor, Isaac Stevens. Northern Idaho was a part of Washington Territory when it was established in 1853.

Below: Ezra Meeker's map of the Oregon Trail.

Hanna in 1853 gazed across the landscape and declared, "This ... region ... extends 150 or a thousand miles." If the scale was unimaginable, so too was its dreariness, as Hanna continued: "No one can imagine the barren and desolate appearance of this part of the country unless he could see it." It seems Idaho's landscape failed to inspire.

But not always. Some features of Idaho's landscape did capture emigrants' imaginations. Waterfalls were commonly praised, and strange features, such as the City of Rocks, could bring some positive relief. In 1850, Leander Loomis waxed poetic there: "This afternoon Some of us concluded to take a ramble among the rocky hills ... and if ever we saw nature display herself, in beauty

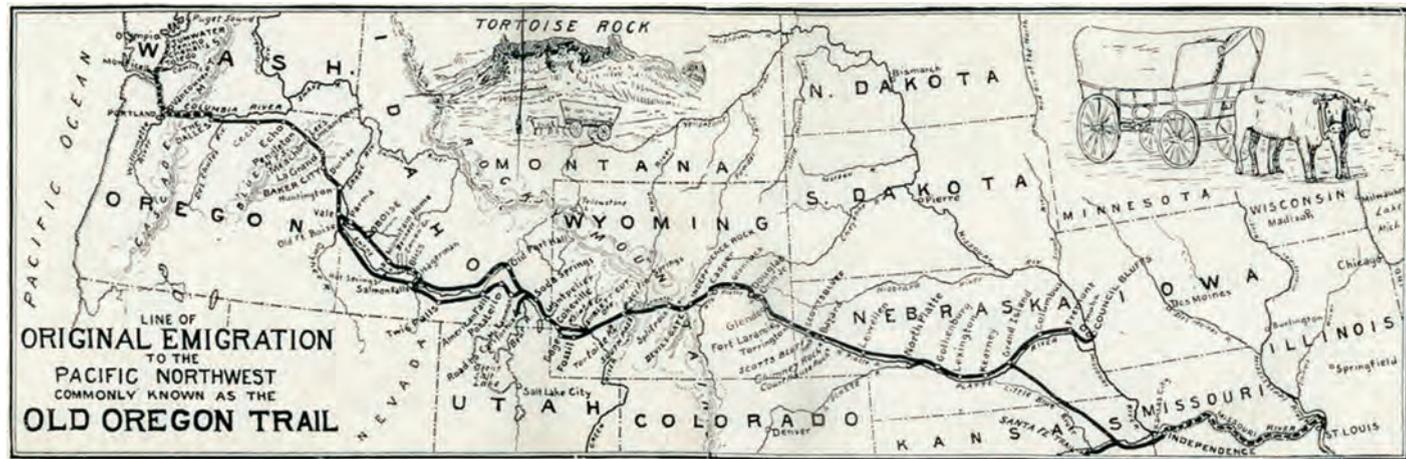


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Grandure, and, Boldness twas here." Such novelties broke up the mostly desolate landscape. Yet, positive aesthetic assessments generally came from a distance—say, from climbing a mountain and seeing the Snake River stretching out before (or behind) them. Day to day traveling seldom elicited praise.

One diary offers typical ambivalence. In 1849, Gordon C. Cone wrote:

A deep gloom hangs over my mind when I contemplate this vast country. Altho—mountainous as a general thing, yet there is sufficient plain land for cultivation, and the mountains would be admirably fitted for grazeing, but the want of rain in the summer season is the reason that no vegetation is



The Ox Team, or the Old Oregon Trail, 1917



Washington State Historical Society, #1918.114.9.36

found here, and for the same reason it can never grow here—consequently the country will never be settled, as a population could not subsist.

This excerpt reveals cultural values of overlancers particularly well. Like others, Cone saw the landscape through the prism of a potential future, a future that followed well-worn agrarian pathways. The landscape was judged against its capacity to support a human population with domestic animals. It is also typical by offering paradoxical praise. The land was "sufficient ... for cultivation" and "admirably fitted for grazeing," but it was too dry and ultimately made Cone

gloomy at prospects for settlement.

In the trailing dust of the emigrant trains, though, new communities did arise eventually, joining the populations around fur trade posts and missions. Doing so properly required a specific change to the landscape. Before American citizens could acquire legal title to land and build their communities on the solid foundations of private property, the U.S. government needed to extinguish Native title to the land through a long-established and constitutionally-based treaty process.

To accomplish this, Isaac I. Stevens, Washington's territorial governor and

Gustav Sohon captured the drama of mounted Nez Perce warriors as they arrived at Isaac Stevens' 1855 treaty council in Walla Walla.

Gibbonsville gold miners with their sluice box, 1880, Charlie Lual on the left, and the Wonderlick Boys. Prospectors discovered gold in the Gibbonsville District in 1877.



Lemhi County Historical Society

superintendent of Indian Affairs, convened the 1855 Walla Walla Council where, after complicated and contested negotiations, some of the Nez Perce signed a treaty that ceded millions of acres to the American government. Other tribes, like the Coeur d'Alene and the combined Shoshone and Bannock, had to wait for treaties signed after armed conflict or further presidential proclamations. (Others, like the Kootenai and Northwestern Band of Shoshone Nation, received federal recognition only in the late 20th century.)

The treaty landscape—or more accurately, the evolving treaty landscapes—was meant to secure the future of the region. For the federal government and immigrants, treaties opened up lands, making them available for private ownership where farms

could grow crops and good citizens—the connection being a long-standing assumption in the American republic. Euroamericans were free to extract wealth out of nature. For tribal members, treaties ceded millions of acres but also reserved lands and resources for Natives’ “exclusive use and benefit,” as the Nez Perce Treaty put it. They also maintained “the right of taking fish at all usual and accustomed places in common with citizens of the territory, and of erecting temporary buildings for curing, together with the privilege of hunting, gathering roots and berries, and pasturing their horses and cattle upon open and unclaimed land.” In other words, tribes would continue their subsistence and other cultural practices without outside interference. Without such assurances, no treaties would have been agreed to. The power of the nation—in its laws and its military—would inscribe this on the very land and protect these agreements.

Or not.

Elias Davidson Pierce, a peripatetic lawyer, soldier, prospector, legislator, farmer, and trader, led a group of nearly a dozen miners onto the Nez Perce Reservation. Although he attempted to gain permission from the Nimípuu, it was not forthcoming. In early fall of 1860, at Canal Creek in the Clearwater River watershed, the Pierce party discovered gold. Pierce City was founded in December on the reservation in plain violation of the law. By summer, 3,000 people had ascended into the foothills searching for more precious gold. Lewiston started in June 1861 and became the chief supply center. Spinning out from that epicenter, prospectors soon found gold at Elk City and

Florence and Boise Basin. A gold rush to Idaho was on.

All the main strikes but Boise Basin were on Nez Perce land. Such legalities mattered little, though, for the U.S. government obliged the Euroamerican pursuit of wealth. The government abrogated their valid 1855 treaty with a new one eight years later, one that reduced the Nez Perce Reservation by 90 percent and cleared the way for clear title for the Euroamerican miners who had knowingly encroached on Nimípuu land illegally.

This was in 1863, just three months after Idaho had officially become a U.S. territory. And it is a fitting end to this story. The convergence of territorial status and the Nez Perce Treaty of 1863 should remind us how intimately tied up dispossession of Native lands is with the expansion of the American state.

Too, it can remind us of some fundamental changes that Idaho’s landscape was undergoing. The landscape was no longer inhabited solely by Coyote and Fox and Salmon; no longer was the land seen only as a vibrant, animate force and partner to the Nimípuu or Bannaqwate or Ktunaxa. Instead, it had become a contested commodity, a reduction the result of new peoples with new values and new powers.

The treaty process codified this change and continued the process begun with Lewis and Clark (who brought science) and the fur traders (who brought profit motive) and missionaries (who brought an agricultural religion) to deaden the landscape. A living landscape with which people related intimately became diluted to something that was valuable mainly by whether one

could extract wealth from nature’s bounty. This commodification alienated the landscape from its historical and cultural moorings, setting it on a new course. Although humans had changed Idaho for millennia, the simplification of nature to a collection of commodities—a significant intellectual and economic transformation—revolutionized the pace and consequences of landscape changes to come.

Today, Idahoans are rightfully proud of their magnificent landscape as a keystone feature of the state’s identity. They were in 1863, too, when Idaho’s landscape seemed almost limitless and full of potential to the increasing Euroamerican population. A report issued that year by Captain John Mullan, who had lately been constructing a military road across northern Idaho, captured some of that enthusiasm:

The valley of the St Joseph’s is a beautiful gem, embedded in a noble range of mountains.

Viewed from an elevation, on a summer’s day, the scenery and effect is grand and picturesque—the river winding

from side to side in graceful curves, while copses of willow, cottonwood, and alder fringe its banks, and silvery lakes dot here and there the green sward in which it is



University of Idaho Library Special Collections, #3-0055b

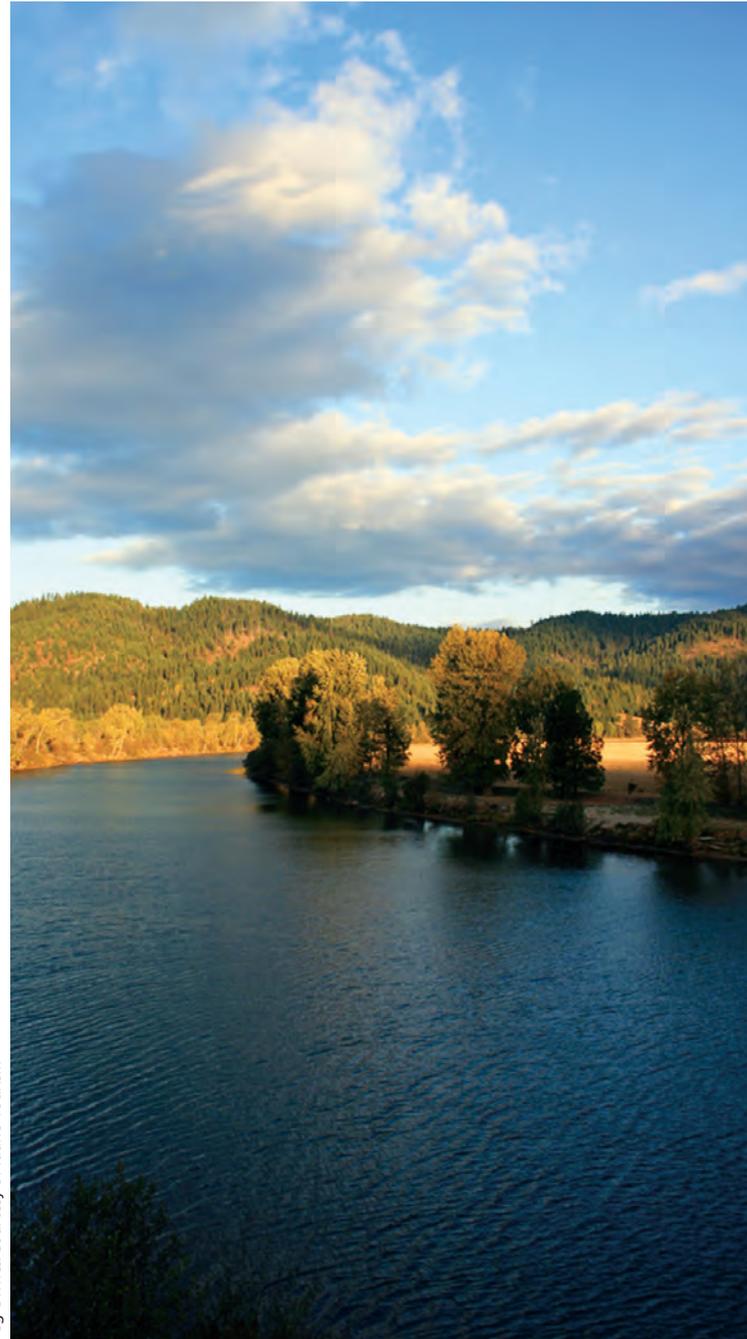
While trespassing on Nez Perce Indian lands, Elias D. Pierce led the party that discovered gold in Idaho in 1860, setting off a chain of events that led to the formation of Idaho Territory in 1863.

...Idaho’s landscape ... had become a contested commodity, a reduction the result of new peoples with new values and new powers.

clothed. The spurs that form its either boundary, gently rising to an elevation of a thousand feet, are densely clad with one of the finest growths of fir and pine to be found in the mountains; and, enlivened, as it is, with here a camp of hunters and there the light bark canoe of the Indian, forms one of the most beautiful scenes it was our fortune to meet with in the Rocky Mountains.

A special place, to be sure. And a view that well represents the complexities of the 1863 Idaho landscape. Here was an engineer, a harbinger of state-sponsored modernity, taking time to wax rhapsodic about nature's beauty. This was time away from his enterprise of constructing a military road through indigenous land, an act that escalated tensions between Euroamericans and local tribes and helped facilitate more movement of Americans into the region. The hunters and canoe-bound Indian in this idyllic scene would soon find their lives constricted by the landscape changes already initiated and those looming near to the horizon.

Homes would be made and remade there and all through the territory long before and after 1863. All who have called it home, all who have struggled to make a home in Idaho have reckoned with this landscape. Native peoples continue to hold precious their relationship to this place. So do others. Although the mountains and plains, the birds of prey and elk, the rivers and forests can seem straight from nature's hands, they are more than that. They are the products of history and choices. The landscape of



Peg Owens/Courtesy of Idaho Tourism

1863 carried the weight of history, a history that included basic natural processes along with historical forces of death and dispossession, profit and plunder, care and cultivation. We can, should, and will celebrate the

landscape of 1863. But we would be wise to temper our reverie with humility and with our eyes wide open to the profound and sometimes tragic ways Idaho had already changed by that momentous date.

Author's Note

I am grateful for the helpful comments and support of Rodney Frey, Keith Petersen, and Kelley Sowards. Although countless sources have influenced my interpretation of western environmental history, I wish to direct readers to work that has contributed most directly to this essay; I have marked those sources from which I have quoted with an asterisk(*):

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