

The Dalles

At The Dalles, the Columbia River rumbled through a narrow gorge. The Dalles became a critical stop for the emigrants. That's because it was here that the trail ruts came to a complete stop, blocked by the Cascade Mountains. Unfortunately, the Willamette Valley, the emigrant's destination, was still 100 miles further on. In the Trail's first years, there was only one solution: float the wagons down the Columbia River.



Because of the swirling rapids, the trip down the Columbia was especially treacherous. Many emigrants soon realized they could not navigate the hazardous river themselves, so they hired experts-- Native Americans.

Even with Native American help, floating the Columbia was risky. Commercial ferrymen also set up shop, but their prices were outlandishly high. Even if an emigrant was willing to pay the steep fee, there were not enough ferry boats available to handle the flood of wagons rolling in. So here at The Dalles they waited for days--or weeks. As a result, a city was born.

The Barlow Toll Road opened in 1845, offering emigrants an alternative to the Columbia River route to Oregon City. The wagon ride along the toll road took a long route around Mount Hood, but it was a much safer method than rafting.

Emigrant Parthenia Blank:

"The appearance of the river here changes--and from being a rapid, shallow and narrow stream, it becomes a wide, deep and still one, in some places more than a mile wide and too deep to be sounded. The banks are precipitous and rocky, and several hundred feet high in some places. Passed down to an immense pile of loose rocks across the stream, over which the water runs with great rapidity for six miles."

Emigrant Lindsey Applegate:

"One of our boats, containing six persons, was caught in one of those terrible whirlpools and upset. My son, ten-years-old, my brother Jesse's son Edward, same age, were lost. It was a painful scene beyond description. We dared not go to their assistance without exposing the occupants of the other boat to certain destruction. The bodies of the drowned were never recovered."