

## THE CASE OF THE MULLAN ROAD

Naming Features Along the Railroad and Road Surveys in the Northern Rockies

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Have you ever considered how important names are in every culture? Especially significant are the words assigned to such assorted landscape features as lakes, streams, hills, mountains, streets, and settlements. Once attached, they provide people with the means of navigating from point to point. In addition, from a historical perspective, they provide evidence documenting events that took place in the past. In some cases they show us what existed at a place before time took its toll on the landscape. A name tells us something about the people who gave a place its identity, and in a few cases names honor those who contributed to the region's development.

Here we examine names placed on a frontier transportation system—the Mullan Road. Built in 1859-62 under the leadership of a young military officer—Lieutenant John Mullan—the road connected Fort Walla Walla and Fort Benton on opposite sides of the Rocky Mountains, some 624 miles apart. The historical background that resulted in the road's construction and the text and cartographic records that document the naming process make this mid-19th-century project most interesting.

Aside from discovering the region's geographic and economic potential, 19th-century American explorers were also obsessed with finding a transcontinental connection between the oceans. Lewis and Clark sought but failed to find a "Northwest Passage." Instead, the people of their young nation were introduced to the vast geographic area encompassed by the Louisiana Purchase. As the century progressed the nation began to realize the region's potential for both settlement and economic development.

By the 1840s the values and objectives associated with the slogan, "Manifest Destiny," had captured the public's imagination. In consequence, over 200,000 settlers moved westward to pursue the dream of a better life. The exodus was further promoted by the discovery of gold in California. The relocation of a large number of people to the western coastal regions established a reason for the nation to create a functional east-west connection. The principal focus of this effort was the railroad.

But where was the railroad to be built? To answer this question Congress enacted and funded the Pacific railroad surveys in the early 1850s. The northernmost of these, directed by Isaac Stevens, was established to find a good railroad route along the Missouri River through the northern Rockies, and finally to connect with major settlements in Oregon and Washington territories following the course of the Columbia River and its tributaries. In the course of this survey he made many new discoveries.

Stevens's survey was significant in promoting an understanding of the region's geography. Unfortunately, the survey did not establish the precise route nor the means to construct an east-west railway connection. Before any railroad could be built, other work needed to be done. First, Stevens had to negotiate treaties with the Indians so that settlers could move into the region and road construction could begin. Stevens accomplished this in 1855. Second, the actual location of an overland connection needed to be plotted.

### **The Mullan Road**

This connection initially took the form of the military wagon road constructed between Fort Walla Walla, Washington Territory, and Fort Benton in Montana, but then a part of Nebraska Territory. This route became known as the Mullan Road, the construction of which was the obsession and passion of Lieutenant John Mullan, who had served under Isaac Stevens during the 1853-54 northern Rockies survey. Mullan's goal was to select the route for and build a road that would eventually become the route followed by a transcontinental railroad. He had, in effect, adopted the goals of Stevens who introduced him to the need and potential for such a railroad.

John Mullan recorded the results of this road-building project in a final report that he submitted to the War Department in February 1863. The report, which was included with the published congressional documents issued by the 37th Congress, was accompanied by four large fold-out maps and ten lithographic landscape views based on sketches by Gustavus Sohon. The published text and maps provide an invaluable source of geographical information summarizing data gathered by the various military expeditions that traversed the northern Rockies during the 1850s. Many geographical features were mapped and identified using either Native American names, descriptive characteristics, or in some instances commemorative impulses honoring specific individuals or events.

From reading the text it is apparent that Mullan and his staff were not major name-givers. There are only sporadic examples of names bestowed on newly encountered features. For example, Mullan reported: "Crossing the Coeur d'Alene a mile above the mission we lose sight of the river till reaching the Four-Mile prairie, a point four miles beyond, and again lose sight of it until we reach a point we called the Ten Mile prairie." Earlier he had made a similar observation, "We crossed these hills with moderate work, and at one fell upon another tributary of the Small Prickly Pear, which we called Hard Bed creek." Obviously, these are descriptive names for relatively minor features.

There are also a fair number of places recorded in text and on maps that commemorate personnel involved in the Mullan Road and the earlier railroad surveys, although the actual commemorative naming or justification was rarely mentioned. For example, Mullan reported, "Our men were set to work erecting such log huts as our wants demanded, and to the camp, I gave the name of Cantonment Jordan." Though he provided no explanation for this name, it is likely that he named it in gratitude for the assistance provided by Captain Thomas Jordan, who helped outfit the expedition. In the following example the justification for the naming of another camp was mentioned: "I started for the Missouri River on 23d of May 1862. Cantonment Wright, so called in honor of General Wright, a warm friend of our enterprise, was now abandoned."

While both of these names referred to temporary, man-made features, other commemorative names were associated with physical features, including Mullan Pass for himself, the leader of

the project; Stevens Peak for Isaac Stevens, the leader of the northern Pacific railroad survey and a leading advocate of the Mullan Road project; Sohon Pass for Gustavus Sohon, who served as guide, interpreter, and artist on both the Pacific railroad and Mullan Road surveys; and Weisner Peak for John Weisner, the astronomer on the Mullan Road survey. However, the actual naming of these features is not explained in the text.

The principal value of Mullan's report lies in the detailed and meticulous recording of place names that already existed, especially Native American names and names bestowed by prior explorers and settlers in the area. For example, in the area between Fort Walla Walla and Fort Taylor, Mullan recorded in his report:

*The creeks found in this length of forty-eight miles are the Dry creek, eight miles from Walla-Walla; the Touchet, twenty-one miles; the Red creek, thirty miles; and the Toukanon, forty miles. Already have each and all these valleys become the comfortable homes of the pioneer farmer and grazier, where the hand of industry, adding daily to the wealth and prosperity of the country, gives a new beauty, by the erection of school-houses and churches, those barometers of the intelligence and morality of a people.*

He made a similar observation on an area east of the Bitterroot Mountains:

"The 90 miles from the Bitter Root ferry to the Hell's Gate ronde affords a good road.... Many beautifully situated agricultural tracts are found throughout the region. The principal of these are the Nine-Mile prairie, the Nemote prairie, [and] the Skiotay...."

Consequently, the report becomes a valuable record of local place name usage during the 1850s.

### **Latah/Hangman's Creek**

One interesting example of the naming process for which Mullan's report provides substantial documentation pertains to one of the most famous cases considered by both the Washington State Board and the United States Board on Geographic Names—that of Hangman's Creek or Latah Creek. The event that the name Hangman's Creek documents had occurred just prior to the commencement of the road-building project. Consequently, Mullan's observations provide a commentary on a place name that was in transition, reflecting the tension of two cultures attempting to obtain or retain control of the landscape.

Prior to the Mullan Road survey we find only two instances where the Anglo culture recorded a name for this feature. Lewis and Clark, in their exploratory expedition of 1803-06, passed through this area and recorded the name as "Lautaw." The other instance is Isaac Stevens's Pacific railroad survey. On the three-part map covering Stevens's entire route, the name of the stream is recorded as Camas Prairie Creek, spelled with a **C**, while the larger scale map showing only the area from Milk River to the crossing of the Columbia uses Kamas, spelled with a **K**.

Interestingly, Mullan's report not only recorded these two names but also listed two more—Nedlwhauld Creek and Hangman's Creek. Specifically, on the accompanying map showing the area from Fort Taylor to Coeur d'Alene Mission, which is based on surveys conducted in 1858 under the direction of Colonel George Wright, all four names appeared on the map—Camass Prairie, Lahtoo, Nedlwhauld, or Hangman's Creek. As a foreshadowing of the modern-day place name controversy, this is one of the few instances on the Mullan Road maps in which multiple names are recorded for one location.

This multiplicity of names is further reflected in the textual report. The first mention of the stream was during the summer of 1859, with the primary emphasis on the name "Nedlwhauld," and only mentioning the other names as variants. In his commentary for July 1859, Mullan first mentioned the stream in the following passage:

*It was a question with me whether we should follow the main valley of the Palouse or strike across the high prairie country and go by the way of the upper tributaries of this stream; by the former we pass to the south of the direct line to the Coeur d'Alene, near the Nedlwhauld, and by the latter to the north of the Pyramid butte.*

In reporting the activities for several days following, he clarified the identification of this stream: "On the 14th of July...we found a good location for the road, requiring light work in places, for about sixteen and a half miles, where we reached the Lahtoo or Nedlwhauld creek, which empties into the Spokane."

In addition, he explained the origins of the name Hangman's:

*We camped this day on the banks of the Nedlwhauld, and at the same point where General Wright hung Qualtian, the noted Yakima chief, and several other Indians; from which fact the stream is known to many as Hangman's creek. Poor creatures! Their doom, although in this instance a just one, is nevertheless, pitiable; had the white man been to them more just, fate had proved less harsh.*

As the survey party left this area there were two further references to the stream as "Nedlwhauld." It is fairly apparent from these references that during the early stages of the road-building project the preferred name of the stream was Nedlwhauld and the other three names were mentioned only as variants.

However, there was an obvious change by the end of the project. During the summers of 1861 and 1862, as Mullan retraced the route through this area, he referred to the stream as Hangman's Creek as he did in his final "Itinerary of the Route" published at the end of the report. There was no mention of the other three names at this point. This was also the case on the comprehensive map showing the entire route from Fort Walla Walla to Fort Benton, which was published with the final report in 1863. Again, the stream was identified only as Hangman's Creek.

### **Sohon Pass**

Another example of the naming process is the designation associated with one of the most critical features encountered on the Mullan Road project—*i.e.*, the pass selected to cross the Bitterroot Mountains. The original name—Sohon Pass—was readily accepted during the four-year construction phase and was widely used throughout much of the remainder of the 19th century. However, the name fell into disuse by the 1890s and was mistakenly renamed St. Regis de Borgia Pass, an associative name derived from the stream that heads in the vicinity of the pass. According to one source this name originated with the early missionary-explorer, Father Pierre Jean DeSmet. However, no map or diary evidence supports this view. DeSmet did travel through the region, and it is possible he named the river of the same name that empties into Clarks Fork at St. Regis, Montana. However, DeSmet made no mention of it in his 1851 manuscript map.

The location and identification of an easily accessible pass through the Bitterroot Mountains was extremely important for the road-building project because the Bitterroots were seen by the

early surveyors and explorers, notable among them Lewis and Clark, as one of the major obstacles in developing a transcontinental connection. In all probability, the military wagon road should have utilized a route at a lower elevation following the river, known today as Clarks Fork. Ironically, Mullan decided that this portion of the route posed a problem because of spring flooding. He further felt that a more northerly location would be subject to greater snowfall. Consequently, he favored a route farther south, choosing a corridor that utilized the Coeur d'Alene and St. Regis de Borgia rivers.

The two rivers were separated by a major ridge of the Bitterroots. Several passes were eventually discovered through the range, but the one originally identified as Sohon Pass was selected for wagon and pack train passage. The other pass, identified on this map as Stevens Pass but probably the one known today as Lookout Pass, was envisioned as the route to be followed by a railroad. However, because of its higher elevation, the survey party planned to construct a tunnel with a long gradient up the slopes of the ridge.

For approximately 50 years Sohon Pass was used for travel through the Bitterroots. It was eventually abandoned because an easier route was found through the mountains. The northern slope of Sohon Pass was characterized by switchbacks and steep grades, which made wagon or stagecoach travel difficult. The Northern Pacific Railroad did, in fact, construct a branch line more or less along the same path envisioned by Mullan's party. Much of the railroad followed the route of old U.S. Highway 10. Both routes utilized nearby Lookout Pass. The railroad company never did construct a tunnel through the ridge to ease its grade.

Today, passage through the Bitterroots has been eased by the construction of a fast, four-lane highway—Interstate 90. As travelers whisk up its slope they are unaware of their passage across the remains of the early wagon road. The railroad branch has been abandoned—a result of declining revenues from transporting timber and mining products into and out of the Coeur d'Alene valley and its famous mining district.

Gustavus Sohon, for whom the pass was originally named, was then a man of at least regional notoriety. In addition to the Pacific railroad and Mullan Road surveys, Sohon was attached to Stevens's treaty expedition of 1855 and Colonel Wright's campaign of 1858 on the Columbia Plateau. Sohon's assignments in these different endeavors were diverse. He was responsible for exploring the Coeur d'Alene region and the lower Snake River valley below its juncture with the Palouse. He also mapped the course of the Snake and Columbia rivers between The Dalles and Fort Walla Walla.

In addition, he was a gifted artist. His work documents the landscapes and peoples that these explorers and surveyors encountered in the region. For example, Sohon created images of such features as the Mullan Road in the Rockies, Coeur d'Alene Mission, and Bird Tail Rock. Together, these drawings represent our first graphic image of the physical and cultural landscape that existed in the northern Rockies during the 1850s.

Sohon's greatest accomplishment, however, was as an interpreter and diplomat. He was a gifted linguist, speaking English, German, and French fluently. In addition, he quickly learned Native American languages, including that of the Flatheads and Nez Perce. This ability prompted Stevens and Mullan to employ him as an interpreter whenever needed, but especially during Stevens's 1855 treaty expedition. Sohon's humanity and interpretive skill facilitated treaty negotiations. Yet, for all his valuable work, nothing remains to commemorate his role in the

social and economic development of the region except an obscure pass that was erroneously misnamed at the turn of the century.

Early American exploration efforts in the northern Rockies beginning with Lewis and Clark were directed toward establishing a viable east-west route across the continent. They were only partially successful in achieving their objective. A road was built, but it was poorly constructed and deteriorated rapidly due to seasonal flooding that resulted in the destruction of bridges and roadbeds. Nevertheless, the route surveyed by Stevens and Mullan eventually became the type of connection they envisioned. Numerous transcontinental connections now exist along portions of the routes investigated by these men. First, railroads follow major segments of the routes—initially by the Northern Pacific, Great Northern, and Milwaukee Road. With consolidation and abandonment, these routes have been succeeded by the Burlington Northern Sante Fe and Montana Rail Link. Second, several interstate highways follow the route—most notably Interstate 90, now known as the Captain John Mullan Highway.

An examination of names used historically and currently for features encountered along the survey routes reveals several facets of the naming process. First, early explorers made a concerted effort to record and use names bestowed on features by the region's initial inhabitants. However, many of these names were quickly abandoned to make use of simpler pronunciations, provide new descriptive terminology more easily recognized by the new settlers in the area, or commemorate people or events significant in the exploration and early settlement of the area. When the Mullan Road party first encountered Latah Creek, they recorded its several Native American names, but within four short years—by the time the road was completed—the stream was known as Hangman's Creek, reflecting a contemporary incident in which several Indians were executed after the cessation of hostilities on the Columbia River plateau. Secondly, well-established names fell into disuse or abandonment because the settlement features or transportation routes with which they were associated changed location or significance. Whereas in the 19th century Sohon Pass was a major feature along the Mullan Road, today it is a relic.

The published reports, maps, and original field notes that were generated as part of the railroad and military road surveys conducted during the 1850s have now become a valuable resource for studying the naming process in the northern Rockies. They are especially important because they document—in detail—local place name usage during the period of intensive exploration and the beginning of Euro-American settlement and economic development of the area.

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