

Historic Trails Research

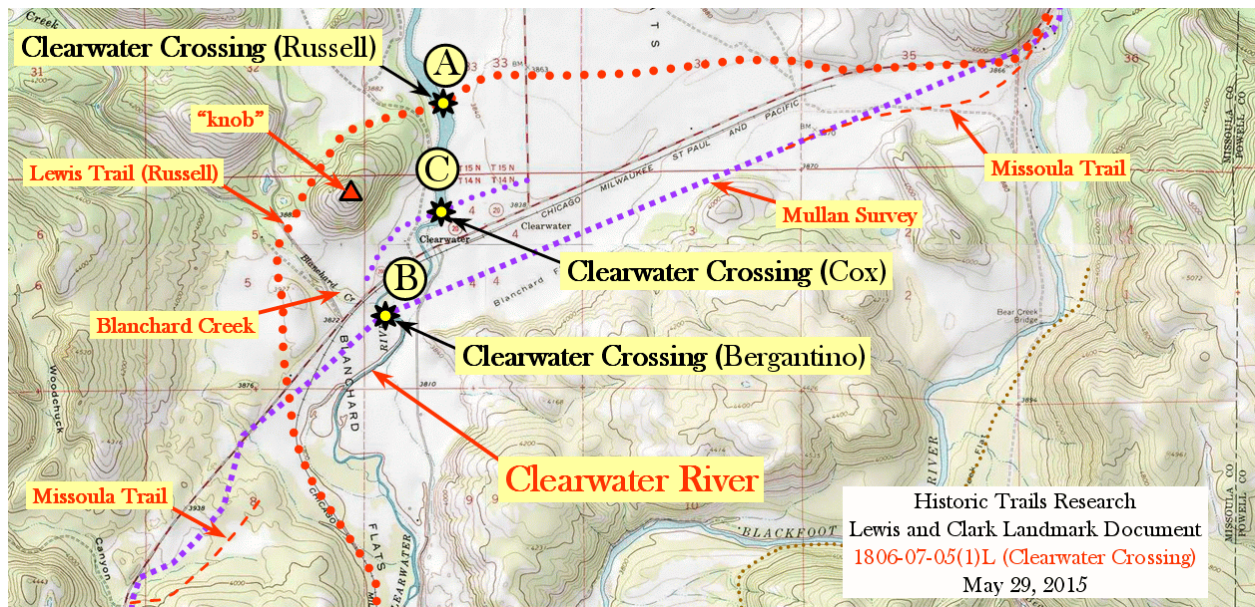
Lewis and Clark Landmark Document

Lewis and Party Crossing the Clearwater Tributary of the Big Blackfoot River

1806-07-05(1)L (Clearwater Crossing)

May 29, 2015
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Abstract – In July of 1806, Meriwether Lewis and a small group of men from the Corps of Discovery main party, traveled eastward from Travelers Rest Camp, following the main Indian trail up the Big Blackfoot River in Montana. On July 5, they crossed the Clearwater River. This document reports on the research for the location of the trail and crossing that they used. The crossing by Russell is based on the Journal accounts. The crossing by Cox is based on a wagon road swale found by field exploration. The crossing by Bergantino is based on his research map of the area. For purposes of interpretation of Lewis & Clark, one of the crossings by Russell or Cox should be used.



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History and Background

For the last 200-plus years, there has been an old Indian horse trail along the Big Blackfoot River in Montana. It connected the Missoula and Bitterroot Valleys to the plains of central Montana, east of the Continental Divide. Indian raiding parties, principally from the Mandan and Blackfoot tribes, used it to access the lands of the Salish and Nez Perce Tribes west of the Continental Divide. The explorer reports of bleached human bones at the entrance to Hellgate Canyon (Missoula), and the reluctance of Salish and Nez Perce to venture into the canyon, attest to the violence that could occur on the route. In July of 1805, Meriwether Lewis and a small group of men, from the Corps of Discovery, used this trail to explore eastward from Lolo, Montana to central Montana and the Great Falls area. Lewis would eventually have a deadly encounter with a group of Blackfeet men that resulted in the death of two of the Blackfeet. In 1831, John Work of the Hudson's bay company traveled the trail eastward with a fur trapping brigade of approximately 200 men, women, and children and a large number of horses¹. The fur brigade had deadly encounters with the Blackfeet, thus increasing the fear of anyone traveling the old trail. At some point, the trail started being called "the road to the buffalo" and this name has survived to the present time. The survey by John Mullan closely followed the Road to the Buffalo but it was a survey for a wagon road or railroad and not a survey of the old trail. The first GLO Survey plats sometimes documented the old Indian trails and the Missoula Trail used by early miners.

Historic Journals and Maps

For this research, the Journals of Lewis and Clark 1806, the John Work journal 1831, the John Mullan survey map, and the GLO survey plats of 1885 and 1888 were used as primary sources. The Mullan and GLO maps are included at the end of this report. The journal excerpts are given below.

Meriwether Lewis (July 5, 1806)

Set out at 6 A. M.— steered

N. 75 E. 6 ½ M. passed a stout C. N Side at 2½ M. another just above. saw an old Indian encampment of 11 lodges of bark and ?? on S. side at 3½ M. killed a deer.

N. 25 E. 12 (10?) M. passing a small creek at one m. on S side on which there is a handsom and extensive Valley and plain for 10 or 12 ms. also another creek 12 yd. wide at ½ a mile further on N. side and another 8 yds. wide on N. side at 5 ms further one & ½ m. short of the extremity of this course arrive at a high prairie on N. side from one to three miles in width extending up the river. halted and dined in the mouth of a little drane on the left of the plain where there was a considerable quantity of quawmash. saw a gang of antelopes here of which we killed one the does at this season herd with each other and have their young. the bucks are alone there are many wild horses on Clarkes river

¹ Work's journal gives an accounting of the number of horses. He left Wallah Wallah with 289 head and returned with 215 head.

about the place we passed it we saw some of them at a distance. there are said to be many of them about the head of the Yellowstone river.

East 6 m. to the entrance of Werner's Creek² 35 yds. wide through a high extensive prairie on N. side. hills low and timbered with the long leafed pine, larch, and some fir. the road passes at some distance to the left of the river and this course is with the river³.

N. 22 W. 4 miles to a high insulated knob⁴ just above the entrance of a Creek 8 yards wide which discharges itself into Werners Creek.

N. 75 E. 2 ½ M. to the river passing through an extensive and handsome plain on Werner's Creek, crossing that creek at 1 m. and leaving a high prairie hill to the right separating the plain from the river. saw two swan in this beautiful Creek.

East 3 m. to the entrance of a large creek 20 yds. wide Called Seamans' Creek passing a creek at 1 m. 8 yds. wide. this course with the river, the road passing through an extensive high prairie rendered very uneven by a vast number of little hillucks and sinkholes⁵. at the heads of these two creeks high broken mountains stand at the distance of 10 m. forming a kind of Cove generally of open untimbered country. we encamped on the lower side of the last creek just above it's entrance. here a war party had encamped about 2 months since and concealed their fires.

31 m.

Patrick Gass (July 5, 1806)

We had another beautiful morning, set out early and proceeded on the same course as yesterday through a rough country, with a number of branches or small streams flowing from the hills. We killed one deer, and about 11 o'clock came to a valley three quarters of a mile wide, all plains, where we halted to dine and to let our horses feed. The hills upon each side are handsomely covered with timber of the fir kind. While we rested here one of hunters killed a cabre or antelope. At 1 o'clock we proceeded on again up the valley.

² Werner's Creek is now called the Clearwater River. This journal entry would seem to indicate that the trail Lewis was following went straight eastward across Ninemile Prairie to the mouth of the Clearwater River.

³ The Big Blackfoot River travels in a nearly east direction on the south side of Ninemile Prairie. This journal entry implies that the trail went in the same direction.

⁴ The peak of the "high insulated knob" is only 2.8 miles from the mouth of the Clearwater River. The reported distance of 4 miles could imply that the trail went around the west and north side of the knob.

⁵ Lewis is describing the area to the south and southeast of Ovando, Montana. It is now called the Nevada Valley.

When we had gone about nine miles we came to and crossed a river⁶, about 35 yards wide, which flows in with a rapid current from some snow topped mountains on the north, where the valley is two or three miles wide⁷. Having gone about four miles further we came to the head of the valley, where the hills came close upon the river for two miles. After we had passed these narrows we came to another large and beautiful valley four or five miles wide, and all plains, except some timber on the river banks. In the evening we encamped on the bank of a handsome creek which comes in from the north, bold stream of 15 yards wide.

John Work (October 24, 1831)

Monday, October 24. Raw, cold weather, snow showers, sharp frost in the night.

Moved camp and marched two and one-half hours, eight miles N. E. through woods to a plain, the road good, good feeding for the horses. One elk, a beaver and a bear were killed. The people who arrived yesterday returned.

Four of our people, A. Finlay, M. Finlay, M. Plante, and A. Plante, quit the party and returned with them, contrary to my wish. These men are half Indians, and so whimsical that they cannot be relied more upon than Indians. Leaving me thus, and weakening the party in a dangerous country is rascally conduct, they had promised to remain with the party two years. They are too lazy to keep watch. Beaver were taken.

Mullan Map

The Mullan survey map, while not perfect, is very good for the purpose of determining the approximate location of the Road to the Buffalo. Mullan was not surveying the old trail so his results cannot be interpreted as a representation of its location. He was doing a wagon road and railroad survey for the future. Mullan was trying to maintain accuracy for all the survey points. The wagon road survey line can be aligned with modern topographic maps to give us an accuracy of about one-tenth of a mile.

GLO Plat Maps

The GLO plat map given in this report was constructed from the overlay of three different survey maps, Two from Montana-T14N-R14E and one from Montana-T15N-R14E. These maps, from 1885 and 1888, show two segments of the Missoula Trail, a very short segment labeled "Indian Trail," and two homestead cabins. Also shown is an access trail to one of the cabins. The composite GLO map is included in this report.

Research

On the morning of July 5, 1806, Lewis and his party left their camp at Angevine Park, along Montana Highway 200, and traveled up the Big Blackfoot River on the north side. The "stout creek on the north side at 2 ½ miles" is the westernmost Twin Creek. He reported an

⁶ The Clearwater River.

⁷ The south and west area of this valley is now called Blanchard Flats along the Clearwater River.

Indian camp of 11 lodges in the south side of the river at 3 ½ miles. The party continued up the north side of the river for approximately 14 river miles to their noon halt at a part of the Ninemile Prairie that had a small creek and camas field. At a reported six miles eastward beyond their noon halt, they arrived at the mouth of the Clearwater River.

They went north up the valley of the Clearwater River (called Werner's Creek in the Journals)⁸ for what was reported to be 4 miles to a "high insulated knob" just above a creek 8 yards wide (now called Blanchard Creek) that flowed into the Clearwater River. The distance to Blanchard Creek is 2.5 topo miles and to the peak of the knob is 3.0 topo miles.

At the time of the writing of this report, information about the Clearwater River Crossing has been generated by at least three researchers: Steve F. Russell of Ames, Iowa; Ron Cox of Seeley Lake, Montana, and Robert Bergantino of Butte, Montana. Refer to the maps and satellite photo for the following discussion about trail crossings.

Point-A is the crossing location determined by researcher Steve F. Russell using the Lewis and Clark Journal accounts. Referring to the topographic map, a trail distance of 4.0 topo miles would place the Werner Creek crossing at Point-A – northeast of the "knob." It is unknown if there is any trail tread evidence at this point because the river is so spread out now as compared to the time when Lewis crossed it. This crossing is too far north to be interpreted as the crossing of the Mullan Survey and likely too far north for the Missoula Trail.

Point-B, is the crossing location determined by researcher Robert Bergantino. The trail distance from the mouth of Werner Creek is 2.5 topo miles. This trail and crossing location were determined by Steve F. Russell to be the same as shown on the John Mullan survey map. Russell also believes that the Missoula Trail (1884) crossed at Point-C, and not Point-B, since Mullan only established a survey line and not an actual trail.

Point-C, is the crossing location discovered by researcher Ron Cox⁹ based upon field explorations for the swale of a wagon road or trail crossing of the Clearwater River. The trail distance for Point-C, from the mouth of Werner Creek, is 3.1 topo miles. The Cox photos of this swale are included in this report. Russell believes this is definitely a wagon road swale that is, at least, 100 years old and most likely the crossing of the Missoula Trail and could also be the crossing of the old Indian trail used by Lewis.

The following is a summary of the evidence for each trail crossing:

1. No known documentation exists for what we believe to be the original *Road to the Buffalo* and we have no concrete evidence that it was exactly followed by Lewis, or Mullan or the Missoula Trail. However, we can strongly infer that it was well established and could have been followed, in most locations, by all of the documented trails.
2. The Lewis and Clark trail and crossing, Point-A, as documented by Russell, has not been verified by field explorations. The current locations are based only on the Journal entries of Lewis.

⁸ Russell believes they went up the west side since they did not report crossing the Clearwater River until having traveled an additional 4 miles.

⁹ Personal Communication, May 28, 2015.

3. The Mullan survey line and crossing, Point-B, were probably never used as a trail or the Clearwater Crossing. It is also somewhat possible, due to map inaccuracies, that the Mullan crossing is Point-C, although the Mullan map shows the crossing south of Blanchard Creek.
4. The Point-C crossing has excellent on-the-ground evidence of a well-used river crossing and is located where it could be a candidate crossing for both the Road to the Buffalo and the Missoula Trail.

Research Summary

The location at which Lewis crossed the Clearwater River is either at Point-A or Point-C. Further field research is needed to determine which. Point-B has been eliminated as a possible crossing for Lewis. The Road to the Buffalo crossed at either Point-A or Point-C. It is highly likely that the Missoula Trail Crossed at Point-C.

Additional Comments

John Mullan did not build a wagon road over Lewis & Clark Pass and down the Big Blackfoot River. Instead, he routed it over Mullan Pass, which is on the Continental Divide 5.7 airline miles north of today's MacDonald Pass. Mullan Pass was a much easier crossing than Lewis & Clark Pass.

Although, by inference, we believe that both Lewis and Mullan were following the old Road to the Buffalo, and that it was also incorporated into the Missoula Trail, we have no direct evidence of this. However, it seems very likely that the vast majority of travel in this area used the old Indian trail, except, perhaps, for small deviations here and there.

The journal of John Work for 1831 does not provide any helpful information for determining the location of the Clearwater Crossing. In fact, the journal is so confusing that it is questionable which day he passed by the Clearwater River.

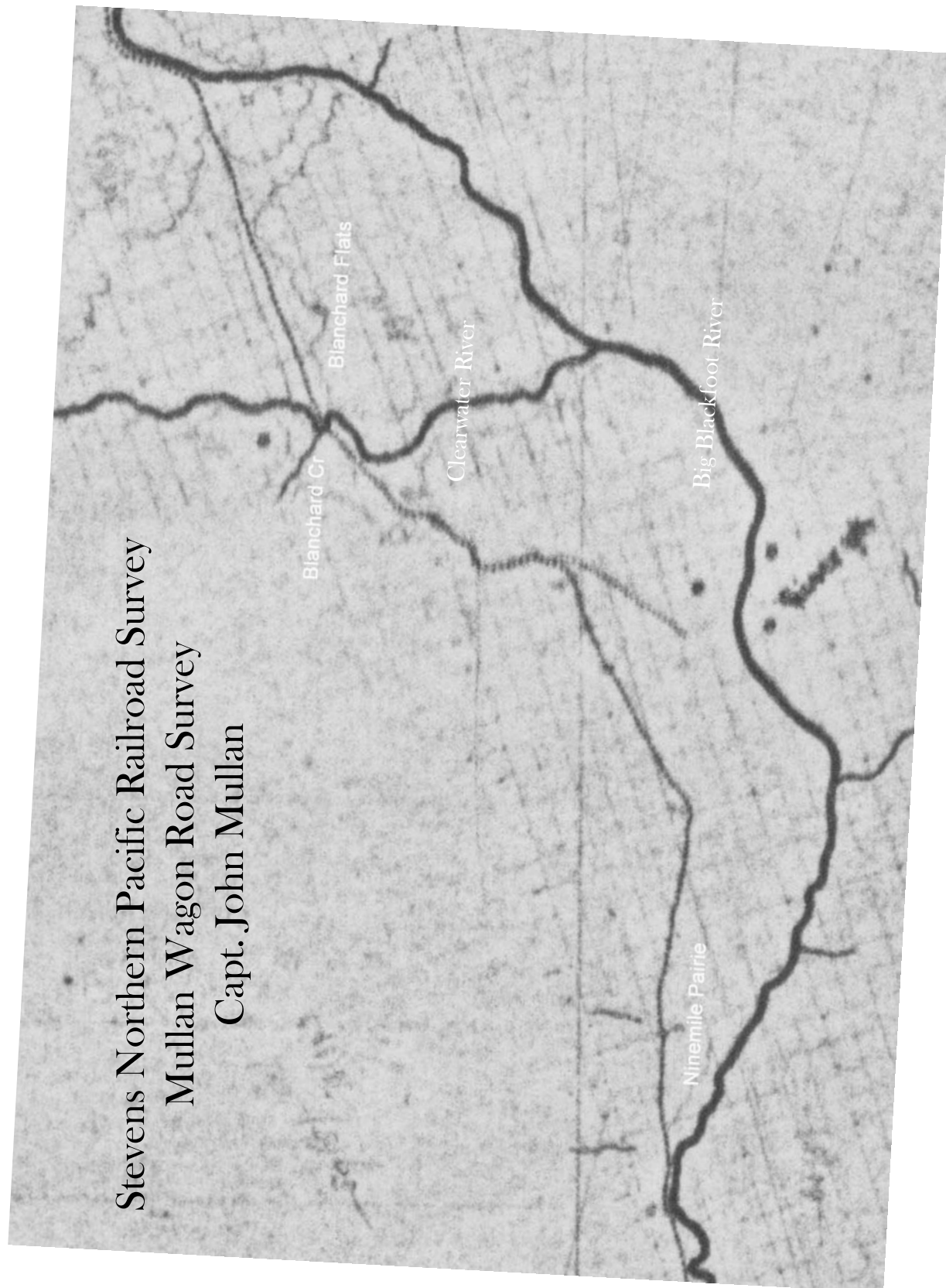
Postscript

By its very nature, research (especially trail research) is always a work in progress because it relies so much on inference and the quality of the data on which that inference is based. I encourage people to contact me if they have feedback about this research or wish to contribute data for it. I can be contacted by email at: SFR@IASTATE.EDU. I live in Ames, Iowa and am retired from Iowa State University.

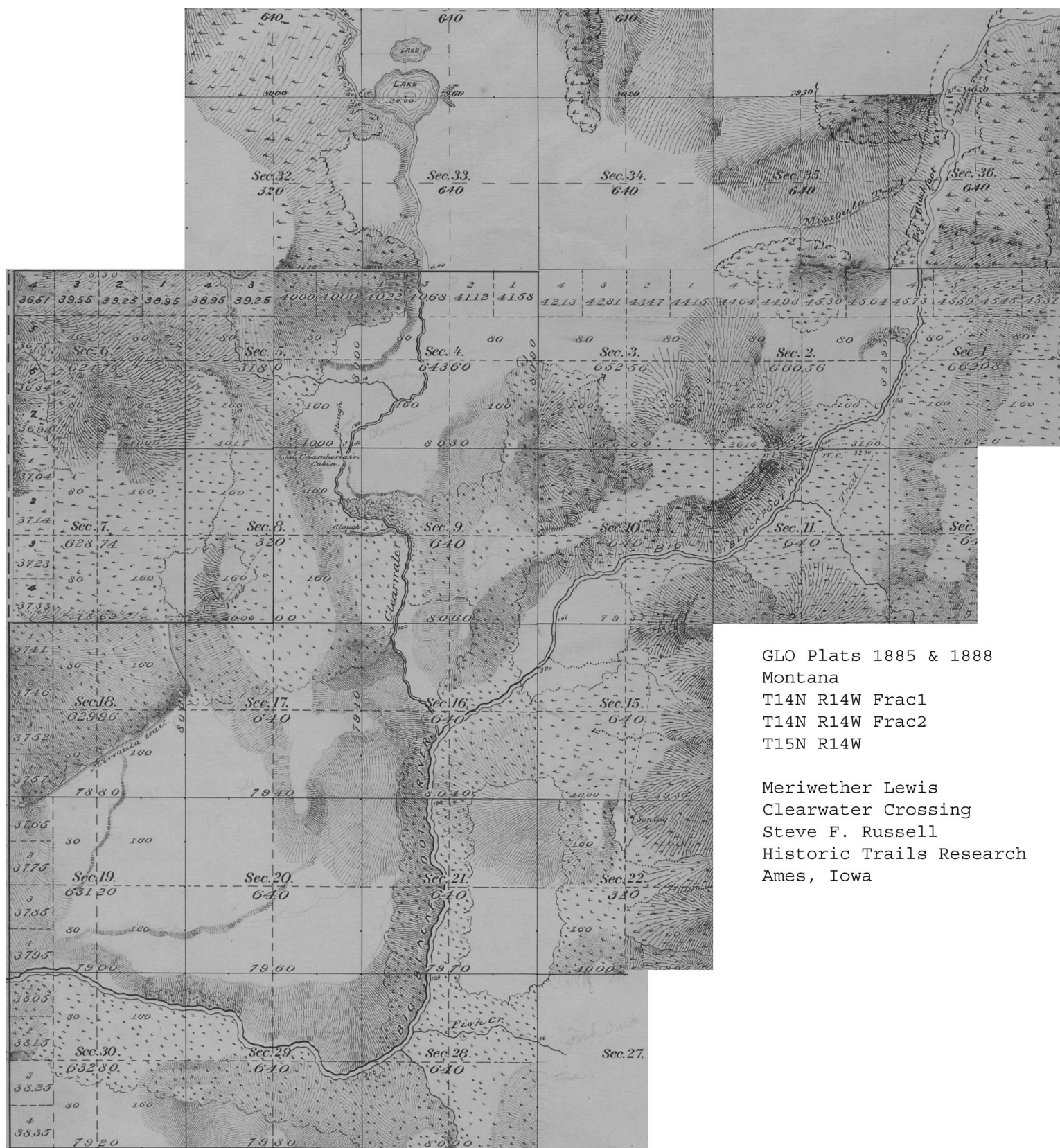
I also am very grateful for all the people who have helped me in my trail research.

Steve F. Russell
May 31, 2015

APPENDIX A. MAPS & PHOTOS

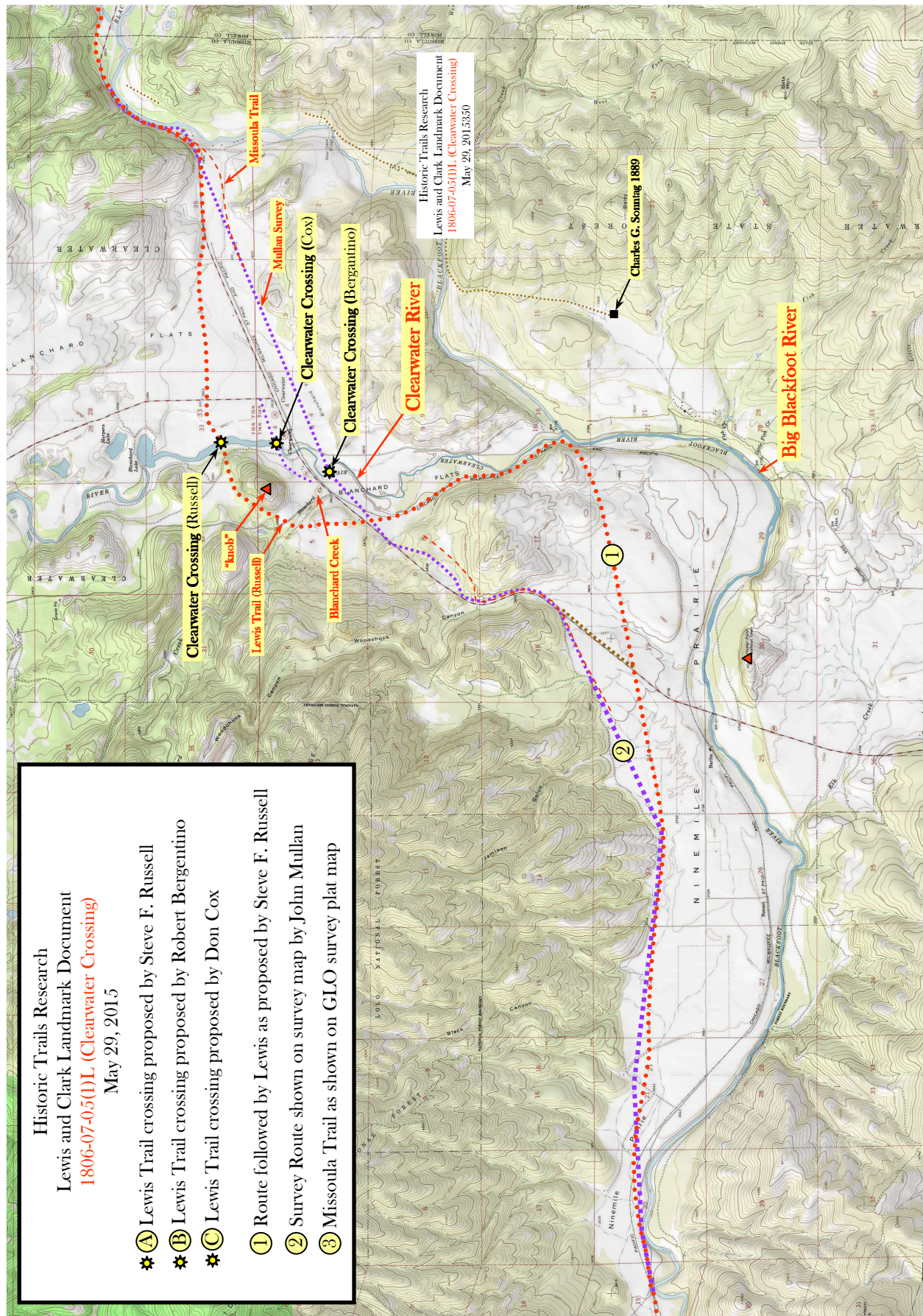


Map 1. John Mullan Survey

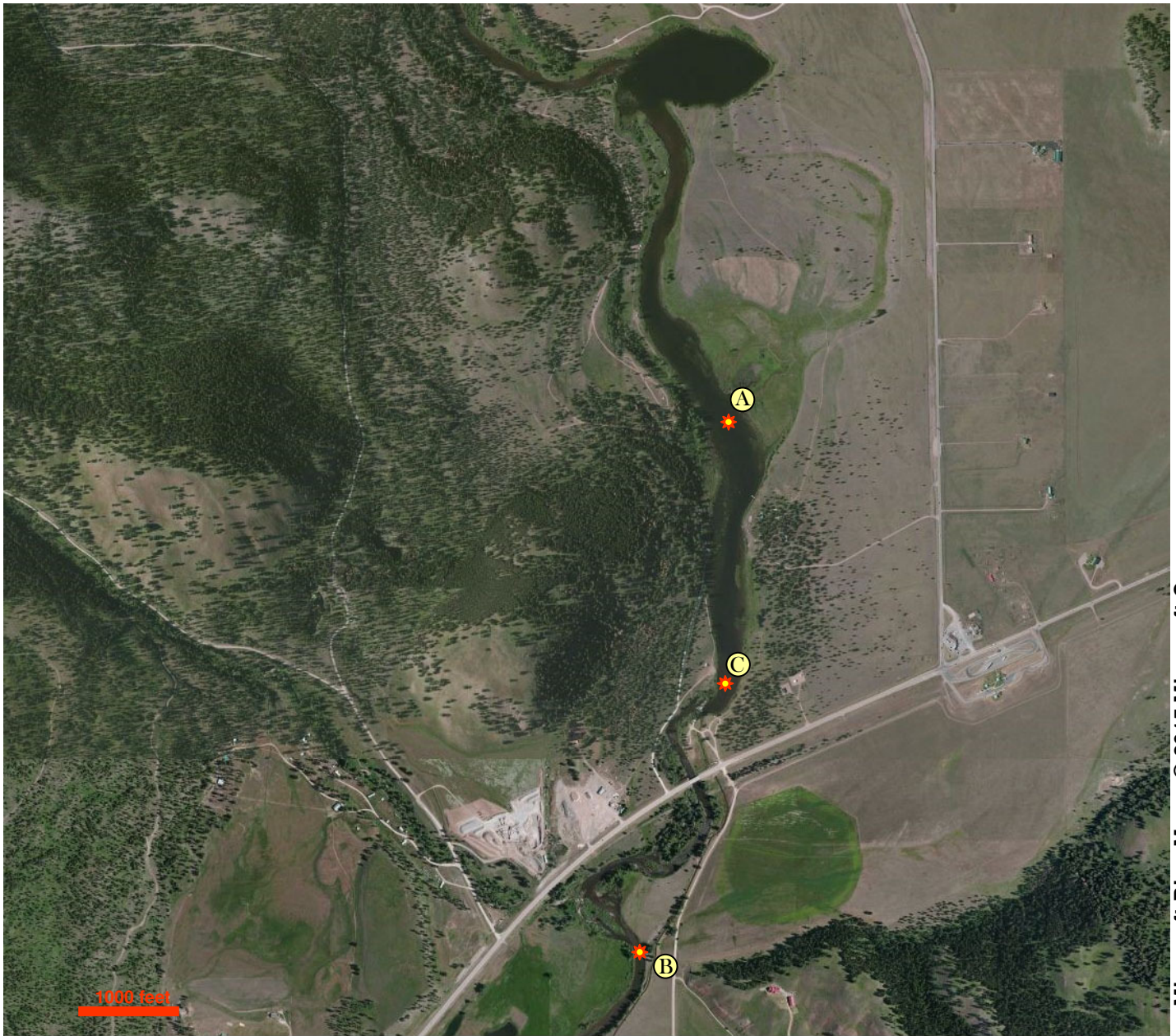


GLO Plats 1885 & 1888
Montana
T14N R14W Frac1
T14N R14W Frac2
T15N R14W

Meriwether Lewis
Clearwater Crossing
Steve F. Russell
Historic Trails Research
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Map 3. Topographic Map Showing Trails, Crossings, and Landmarks



Microsoft Bing Maps, © 2015 Microsoft Corp.

Photo 1. Satellite Photo of the area showing the three candidate Clearwater Crossing points.



Photo by Ron Cox © 2015

Photo 2. Crossing at Point-A. Impoundment of the river has made it much wider than during the time Lewis crossed it and the water may have covered any possibility of finding an erosion trace. In this photo, there is no evidence of a swale and no evidence that it was ever used as a crossing. View is looking eastward from the northeast side of “the knob.”



Photo by Ron Cox © 2015

Photo 3. Crossing at Point-B. This is the point where the Mullan Survey Trail crossed the Clearwater River. In this photo, there is no evidence of a swale and no evidence that it was ever used as a crossing. View is looking toward the west bank. This crossing is favored by Robert Bertantino as the location where Lewis crossed.



Photo by Ron Cox © 2015

Photo 4. Crossing at Point-B. Photo 3a – Looking eastward from the Mullan Survey Trail crossing.



Photo by Ron Cox © 2015

Photo 5. Crossing at Point-C. River crossing swale made by wagons and horses. This is the crossing found by Ron Cox and, by inference, he believes it is the crossing of the old Road to the Buffalo. View is looking westward.



Photo by Ron Cox © 2015

Photo 6. Different vantage point for the swale shown in Photo 1. The width and depths shows that it was heavily used and is the wide that indicates wagon traffic in addition to horse & rider traffic.