

5

History along the Greenbelt

Relics and storied places connect Boise to frontier past.

by Doug Copsey, with Todd Shallat

The Boise educates and irrigates. Suspended between engineering and nature—a floodway, a ribbon of settlement, a fishery, and a sewer for dangerous toxins—the river is also a cultural landmark. Its history connects the city to an ancient landscape. A historical appreciation of those gentle waters flowing can nourish our urban souls.

Stone-age nomads left their mark on the river’s valley in petroglyphs pecked into blackened boulders torn from the cliffs during ancient floods. Their descendants who settled along the river became known as Snakes for the snake figures on sticks once used to mark territory. Nineteenth-century fur traders mostly referred to them by their language, calling them Shoshone and Paiutes. Over time, the Boise Valley became a regional free-trade for travels from dozens of tribes. By 1810, mounted Paiutes called Bannock fished in the Boise River en route from Oregon to Yellowstone buffalo hunts. Sahaptini, or Nez Perce as the French traders called them, rode down from the North.

French, British, and American trappers rushed the Snake River basin for furs soon after Lewis and Clark. Scottish-Canadian Donald MacKenzie reached the Boise in 1811. Weeks later a greenhorn merchant named Wilson Price Hunt reported well-dressed Shoshone near the future town of Parma. Ragged and near starvation, Hunt traded for dogs and horsemeat. Hunt’s map called the river “Wood” for its cottonwoods and willows. “Wood” became *Boisse*, *Borssie*, or *Boisey* in French translations. An 1812 sketch map of southern Idaho named the river for American trapper John Reed. Another 20 years would pass before essayist Washington Irving created the legend that Captain Bonneville and his brigade of French trappers named the valley when they crested the foothills and shouted, “les bois, les bois,” meaning “the trees, the trees,” on seeing it for the first time.

Natives, highly mobile, migrated in and out the Boise, stopping near the future city for trade and trout. British trappers built small flood-prone trading posts—one near future Middleton, another on marshland near Parma where the Boise entered the Snake. From 1842 to 1862, during the era of the Oregon Trail, native spear-fishers sustained the wagon migration. Perhaps 300,000 whites with massive herds of cattle and



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

oxen passed through the Boise Valley. In 1849, when Idaho was part of the Oregon Territory newly annexed from Britain, U.S. troops surveyed the river. Five years later, near Middleton, a Shoshone attack on the Alexander Ward wagon train may have been British inspired.

Gold and the Civil War brought settlers to the Boise River. In 1862, on a mountain tributary of the Boise River, a gold strike ignited the boom. Perhaps 20,000 miners rushed to Boise Mountain in April of the following year. On April 4, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed the congressional act that created Idaho Territory. To police the new territory, and guard the gold, Major Pinkney Lugenbeel led a union



IDAHO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

President Lincoln carved Idaho from the Oregon Territory during the Boise Basin gold rush of 1863.

regiment, heavily armed, to a height on land overlooking the mule trail to the Boise gold rush. United States Fort Boise founded the namesake city that grew to become the largest on the Oregon Trail.

More than a hundred years later, the Ada County Centennial Committee's "History along the Greenbelt" program produced markers along the trail identifying

historical sites, and Chairman Jim Witherell undertook the task of researching and writing a reference book that could be used as a field guide for teachers. The stories he discovered are pictures of a culture still nourished by this shining ribbon as it carves its way through our lives today.

Mining and Irrigation

To begin at the beginning, mount your bicycle at Discovery State Park, just below Lucky Peak Dam. It was here that Arthur Foote built a house for his genteel wife, Mary Hallock Foote, who traveled to Kuna by stagecoach and arrived in Boise City in 1884. She was a proper Victorian from New York, with hoops and petticoats, but she quickly grew to love the rugged western country in which she found herself. Already a well-known author and illustrator in the East, her celebrity grew through the stories she told of the rough, picturesque life in the early mining boomtowns for publications such as *Century Magazine*.

Arthur had come here to implement the Idaho Mining and Irrigation Company's ambitious plan to build a 75-mile canal and 5,000 miles of laterals that would use Boise River water to irrigate some 500,000 acres of farmland. A financial panic in 1884 ruined some investors, others backed out, and Foote began surveying for a less ambitious irrigation network. At last, in 1890, the twice bankrupted canal project ran water from the Boise River to Nampa. But it quickly became apparent that a dam and reservoir were needed to increase the flow.

By 1905, after Congress established the U.S. Reclamation Service, the government town of Diversion Dam had an estimated population of 250. Mostly a tent city, it was dismantled when the dam was commissioned in 1909, only to be resurrected after the droughts of 1909–1910 proved the reservoir inadequate, and a larger site, dubbed Arrowrock, was selected farther upriver. The only remnant is a caretaker's house along the greenbelt just below the dam.

A private road leading to Barber Dam just off the bike path is all that remains of Silk Stocking Row, the first street in the town of Barber. In 1906, the Barber Lumber Company

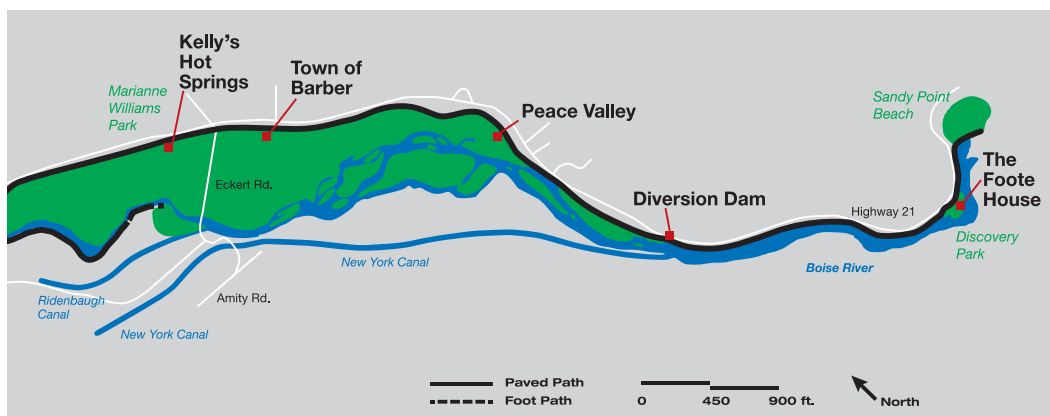


Arthur De Wint Foote
1849-1933

IDAHO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ran a two-band sawmill and a wooden plank dam, and the last milltown built in Idaho had 650 residents over 18 square blocks with steam-heated homes, a hotel, a community hall, its own municipal water system, a school system, and, in 1915, a sewer system. It was also rumored to be the moonshine capital of the valley.

Heading east for the next 2 miles, the bike path runs over an old railroad bed, originally the Intermountain Railway, incorporated to move timber from Grimes and Mores Creeks to the Barber mill. In 1910, the U.S. Reclamation Service built the Boise & Arrowrock Railroad, not only to haul timber from the mountains but to haul the hordes of tourists flocking to see the spectacle of Arrowrock Dam, the tallest in the world until Hoover Dam was built in the 1930s. A round-trip ticket cost



\$2.00, an average day's wage at the time. The Inaugural Special on October 4, 1915, carried 2,000 people in a single trip to witness the commissioning of the dam. During this time, four railroads came together at Eckert Road, and between 1912 and 1915, nearly 90,000 passengers changed trains.

About a quarter mile west, the largest of three hot springs in the valley poured out the mouth of the small canyon below today's Warm Springs Mesa. In 1870, mineral baths were considered a cure-all, and J.L. Stephens, a local physician, claimed them for a therapeutic spa. Four years later, a mud bath, steam plunge, dance hall, and café were added and things went swimmingly for another 15 years.

That's when *Idaho Statesman* editor Milton Kelly bought the springs, added a hotel, remodeled all the facilities, and held a grand opening for Kelly's Hot Springs to draw attention from the newly opened Natatorium, a short distance downstream. Besides being too far out of town, spa prices were more than most Boiseans could afford, so Kelly turned the resort into a private club and began serving liquor. Kelly's Warm Springs resort, it was alleged, became a member-only brothel. When the resort burned down the second time in 1911 – temperance groups were suspected of arson both times – the owners finally called it quits.

The Natatorium, built 1892, was one of the largest indoor spas in the United States, rising six stories and covering 150,000 square feet. Its 400-foot well produced a stable flow of 800,000 cubic feet per day at a constant 112 degrees. There were 50 dressing rooms, parlors, billiard rooms, cafés on three levels, and a formal dining room. A cover slid over the 65 × 125 foot pool so it could serve as a dance floor and roller skating rink. By this time, entrepreneurs had developed the river's floodplain by investing in electric streetcars. The "Nat" soon became a permanent terminus for the Boise Rapid Transit, bringing bathers from all over the city down the bumpy, dirt road called Warm Springs Avenue to Boise's most luxurious entertainment spot.

The most successful of these entrepreneurs was a real estate investor from Kansas City named Walter E. Pierce, who had gotten himself elected Mayor of Boise. When he announced plans to build a boating park on the river west of Collister Street, competitors at the Nat beat him to the punch, naming their private park after Chicago's famous White City fairgrounds. Boise's White City opened in the summer of 1907 with a roller coaster, a miniature railway, carousel, photography studio, an outdoor dance pavilion that also doubled as a roller rink, and a boating pond that was later replaced with a penny arcade and concession stands.

After absorbing 40 years' worth of mineral steam, the wooden structure around the pool had rotted, and a 1934 windstorm collapsed part of the roof. The building was torn



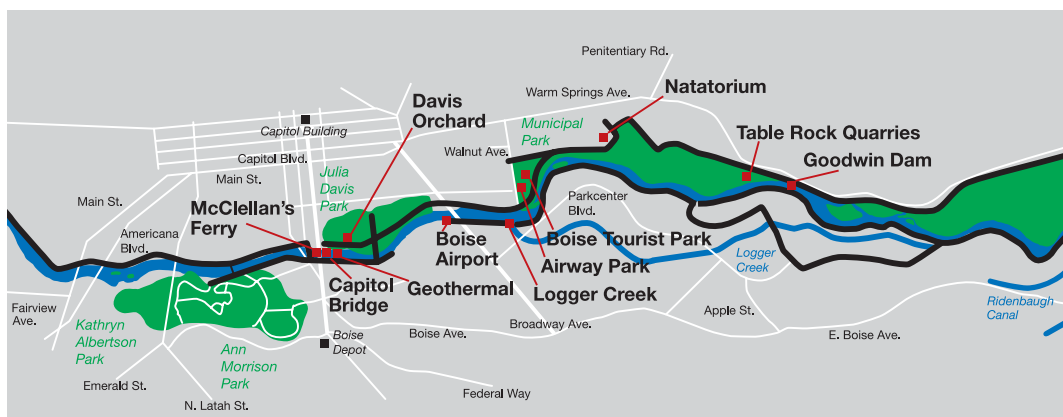
BOISEARCHITECTURE.ORG

The Natatorium on Warm Springs Avenue, built in 1892

down, but the pool, being the only one in town, was purchased by the city and still operates. White City survived until WWII, when the aging wooden roller coaster was condemned. The property was purchased by the Boise School District, and Adams Elementary School stands there today.

Amusing the Masses

A short ride farther downriver brings you to Municipal Park, originally purchased in 1910 by the Boise School District to build a sports stadium that never materialized. In 1918 the Boise Commercial Club leased it as a campground for the steady stream of “auto tramps” seeking work on Idaho farms. There was a communal kitchen with 14 hotplates, a washing machine, a playground, and two cement slabs for washing cars. The only charge was a 25 cent per car donation to pay for electricity. The first seasons saw more than 6,000 carloads of campers.



After 1918, when Idaho paved the Lincoln Highway, motor tourists flooded Municipal Park. Annually, the park received an estimated 20,000 carloads. Many car-campers stayed more than a week, prompting the city to add a bathhouse. Vagrancy forced the city to close the park to camping in 1938.

Baseball took center stage at the close of the Great Depression. In 1939, where the Idaho Fish and Game Department now stands at Park and Walnut, Airway Park

began as a crude stadium with a couple of admission boxes. It became home to a fully franchised, Class C, professional Pioneer League team called the Boise Pilots. Spokane sports mogul Haydn Walker bought a controlling interest that year and built a new, 3,000-seat stadium. It was increased to 5,000 seats after WWII, and when the Pittsburgh Pirates came to town for an exhibition game in 1958, more than 7,000 fans crammed inside to watch their team get trounced 17-6. By that time the Pilots had become the Braves, an affiliate of the Milwaukee Braves, and attendance continued to increase, topping 36,000 in 1957. The league finally folded in 1963 and a year later, Fish and Game picked up the property.

As the greenbelt crosses under Broadway Avenue, Albertson's Stadium, home of the Boise State Broncos, looms along the south bank of the river, but in 1926 this wedge of bottomland was a city dump. That same year the federal government created a new airmail route from Elko to Pasco via Boise. The only airport at the time was a private strip on the first bench, but it was unsuitable in wet weather and too far from the city.

The City Council decided to use the Broadway land and purchase an adjoining 30 acres known as the Booth tract, but that left them with no money to build the airport. The Chamber of Commerce agreed to buy the needed materials, and the American Legion volunteered the labor for buildings and runway construction. Mail service was inaugurated on April 6, 1926. When Congress passed airline passenger subsidies in 1930, United Airlines bought the mail operation and put Boise on a route that included Salt Lake City, Portland, and Seattle. Even though the airline built a new, 145 × 85 foot brick and glass terminal building, Boise outgrew Booth Field virtually overnight, and in 1936 the City Council relocated the airport to its present site.

Long before Boise entered the air age, Thomas Jefferson Davis filed one of the first homestead claims in Idaho Territory on the opposite side of the river. In 1863, his initial 320-acre claim included sections of what is now downtown Boise and the bottomland along the north bank of the river between



IDAHO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

First airmail flight from Boise, April 6, 1926, with Governor H.C. Baldridge and Boise Mayor Walter F. Hansen

Broadway and 8th Street, where he planted 7,000 fruit trees, creating the Davis Orchard. In 1871 he married Julia McCrum, and on her death in 1907, he donated 40 acres of the orchard to the city as a public park in her memory.

The city spent years reclaiming flood lands along the north side of the river, and by 1915 Julia Davis Park had become a popular destination. But across the river, near the future site of the Morrison Center, abandoned car bodies and other refuse from that extensive reclamation project had become an illegal dump. A renovation program in 1926 put a concrete pillar and iron gate at the 8th Street entrance, shortened the road to exit onto Myrtle Street, and added the bandshell. Over the years the Davis Estate donated more land, and so did Morrison-Knudsen Company, which owned the pond at the east end, and the park grew to its present size, except for a few acres lost when Capitol Boulevard came through in 1931.

IDAHO HISTORICAL SOCIETY



John McClellan's ferry at the foot of 7th Street, Boise, about 1864

When Boise was first settled, the lands now occupied by Boise State University (BSU) and Ann Morrison Park were shifting flood-prone islands in the 600-foot meandering channel. In the summer of 1863, William Thompson, a physician, and freighter John McClellan both claimed land on 8th Street for the city's first wagon ferry. Expensive and, said

a traveler, “a miserable one-horse affair,” the ferry charged 25 cents per person and another 75 cents for a horse. Loaded pack animals were 25 cents each; loose animals, 12 cents; sheep or hogs, 5 cents; and a wagon with team, a whopping \$2.25. In 1867, the partners opened a toll bridge and doubled the prices. As Boise grew, more and more citizens complained about having to pay to cross the river. In 1911 the city and the Oregon Short Line built a rail and pedestrian bridge.

Around 1880, when displaced Chinese railroad and mine laborers began to turn to market gardens for their income, Tom Davis leased them land where BSU now stands. It was of little value, being across the river and accessible only by toll bridge or boat, and frequent flooding often destroyed crops. So Davis offered 800 acres of pastureland about a mile downriver that had been an army hay field during the early days of Fort Boise, and by 1890 upward of 1,000 immigrants were working an area along the south bank of the river known as the New Chinese Gardens.

The backyard Victory Garden that emerged during WWI ruined the demand for vegetable markets. The Chinese protested in 1918, saying their livelihood was endangered, but by that time non-Chinese produce was flooding the market, brought in by truck from outlying areas. Residential development moved in, and by 1937 the newspaper speculated there were only two or three gardeners left. The final blow came in 1949, when a state law introduced slot-machine gambling. Boise businessmen incorporated the area as Garden City and opened several casinos. Until the law was repealed in 1953, the area was known as Little Reno.

Old Soldiers

After the Civil War ended, a fraternal organization known as the Grand Army of the Republic managed to secure a small pension for veterans and invented the concept of Soldiers Homes to care for aged, destitute, or disabled veterans. Idaho Territory had no militia during the Civil War, but when it became a state and gained ownership of federal endowment lands, the Grand Army of the Republic immediately began



Chinese gardener stands by his Model T in the 1920s

IDAHO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

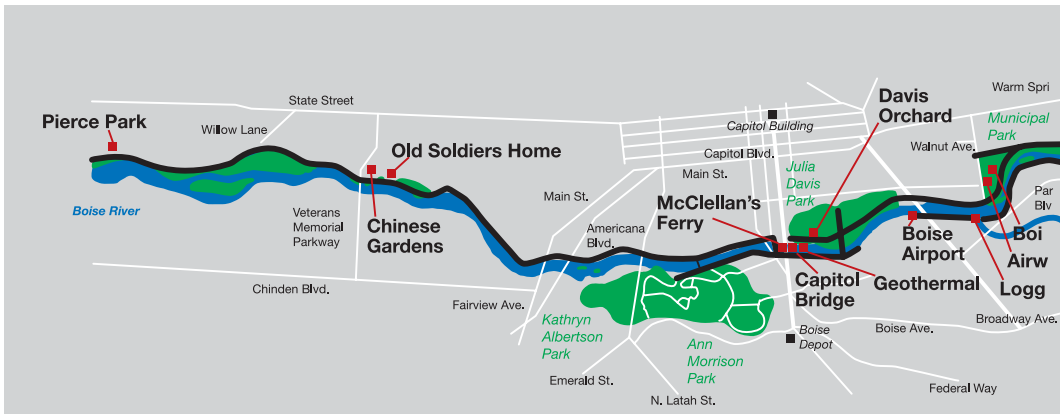


The Idaho Soldiers Home on the future site of Veteran's Park

IDAHO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

a campaign for an Idaho Soldiers Home. Three Boise businessmen anonymously donated 40 acres of land along the north bank of the river on Valley Road, now State Street, and raised almost \$5,000 from the public for construction.

The cornerstone was laid on May 23, 1894, and 10 veterans were admitted as soon as the first two of three stories were completed. After WWI, the home had 120 residents, a barracks was added, and the dispensary was replaced by a small hospital. It served veterans of six wars for 71 years, but after WWII the State began to shift responsibility for the home to the Veterans Administration, and a public move began to close the building as a relic. Today the Boise River Greenbelt winds past the original 38-acre campus in the midst of a 200-acre Veterans Park.



West of the park, the river flows past the Plantation Golf Course. Not dissuaded when his rivals built White City at the Natatorium, W.E. Pierce opened his own amusement park here on Labor Day 1907. Second only to White City, it had a baseball field, a bandstand, refreshment stand, tennis courts, and croquet plots. Two years later an artificial lake 250 feet wide and 3 feet deep was dredged out for rowboats, and in 1912, a dance pavilion rounded out the facilities. Like its rival on the east side of town, a Boise & Interurban Railway station was close by.

Ironically, through a series of mergers, Pierce lost control of the park, only to purchase the Natatorium and White City a few years later and compete with his namesake. By 1928 the park was obsolete and the property was purchased by the Plantation Company, which kept the dance pavilion and, in 1932, built a golf course.

The river below its namesake city drains a board-flat patchwork of farmland, becoming a nutrient-rich dark green to its confluence with the Snake. More than 20 major canals tap the river for agriculture. Leveed for farms and subdivisions, the river is no longer the braided stream made famous by Washington Irving. Culturally, nevertheless, in its paths and historical markers, memories of that river remain.



GERRY SLABAUGH/FLOICKR

Boise River irrigation at Joplin Farm, Nampa



DOUG COPSEY is a writer, director, producer, and current president of the Idaho Writers Guild. He has written screenplays, essays, and magazine articles, as well as a history of the Idaho Shakespeare Festival (*With Our Good Will – 30 Years of Shakespeare in Idaho*), which he founded. He is currently at work on his second novel.

TODD SHALLAT, Ph.D. (Carnegie Mellon University), directs the Center for Idaho History and Politics at Boise State University. He specializes in the history of science, technology, and the environment.