

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. **Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).**

## 1. Name of Property

historic name Alcove Spring

other names/site number KHRI# 117-0000-00027, Archeological Site 14MH324

## 2. Location

street & number 4 Mi. N. of Blue Rapids on E. River Rd, east and west sides of the road  not for publication

city or town Blue Rapids  vicinity

state Kansas code 20 county Marshall code 117 zip code 67491

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

national  statewide  local

SEE FILE

Signature of certifying official/Title \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government \_\_\_\_\_

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Title \_\_\_\_\_ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government \_\_\_\_\_

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register  determined eligible for the National Register

determined not eligible for the National Register  removed from the National Register

other (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Action \_\_\_\_\_

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(Check as many boxes as apply.)

**Category of Property**  
(Check only **one** box.)

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	private
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - Local
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - State
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - Federal

<input type="checkbox"/>	building(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	district
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	site
<input type="checkbox"/>	structure
<input type="checkbox"/>	object

Contributing	Noncontributing	
0	0	buildings
2	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	1	objects
<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Total</b>

**Name of related multiple property listing**  
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

N/A

1

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions.)

TRANSPORTATION/Road-Related

LANDSCAPE/Natural Feature

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions.)

LANDSCAPE/Park

LANDSCAPE/Natural Feature

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions.)

N/A

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation: N/A

walls: N/A

\_\_\_\_\_

roof: N/A

other: N/A

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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## Narrative Description

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### Summary Paragraph

Alcove Spring is one of the best known Oregon and California Trail campsites, partly due to its location on the east side of the Big Blue River where wagon trains often had to wait for favorable crossing conditions. Its most famous feature is the spring itself, associated with a distinctive waterfall. It figures prominently in emigrant diaries, especially those of the Donner-Reed party who camped there in May of 1846. The spring was placed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1972, but only the seven acres surrounding the spring and waterfall was included. This amended document seeks to expand the nominated area to include two areas of trail swales on either side of East River Road, bringing the total boundary to 246 acres (exclusive of East River Road and its right-of-way). Along with the previously listed spring, the amended nomination includes three contributing sites, as well as one non-contributing object (the Kansas Society Daughters of the American Revolution's 1995 commemorative marker to Sarah Keyes).<sup>1</sup>

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### Narrative Description

Alcove Spring is located about nine miles south of Marysville, Kansas along the east side of the Big Blue River, at the point where wagon trains on the Oregon and California Trail would prepare for the crossing (Figure 1). The entire 246-acre property owned by the Alcove Spring Historical Trust and operated by the Alcove Spring Preservation Association is being nominated to the National Register, since the original (1972) nomination included only the spring and its immediate environs (Figure 2). Besides the spring, the property contains two distinct areas of intact swales in the western and northern portions of the property (Figure 3). Its owners have provided a gravel parking area and mown walking trails, so that the spring and trail swales may be visited with little impact to the landscape (Figure 4).<sup>2</sup>

#### *General Landscape*<sup>3</sup>

Alcove Spring is located within the Kansas Drift Plain division of the Dissected Till Plains section of the Central Lowland province of the Interior Plains division of North America.<sup>4</sup> The Dissected Till Plains are essentially a formerly glaciated northerly extension of the Osage Plains which cover all of the rest of eastern Kansas. Due to the glaciation, glacial drift either conceals or mantles much of the cuesta topography prevalent throughout the Osage Plains. The glaciated section is roughly bounded by the Big Blue and Little Blue rivers on the west and the Kansas River on the south. Bedrock in the western part of the Dissected Till Plains consists of Permian sedimentary rocks, while bedrock formations throughout the rest of the area are of Pennsylvanian age. The formations are made up of interstratified beds of limestone, sandstone, and shale, covered over by glacial deposits of varying thickness. Loess is also present, occurring as a thin upland mantle over most of northeastern Kansas but in thicknesses of up to 100 feet in bluffs along the Missouri river, but narrowing rapidly away from the river to a thin upland mantle over most of northeastern Kansas.

Local topographies of the Dissected Till Plains relate directly to the degree of glaciation that particular area underwent. The heavily glaciated Kansas Drift Plain (except for the loess-covered bluffs along the Missouri river) has a gently undulating erosional drift-controlled surface. In contrast the less glaciated

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<sup>1</sup> This granite and bronze marker replaced a circa 1950 marker that was installed at this site to commemorate the unknown location of Sarah Keyes's grave. Keyes was a member of the 1846 Donner-Reed party who passed away at Alcove Spring. The installation of a marker here was "Spurred by the centennial of the Donner party's stay at Alcove Spring." Arthur Barrett Chapter KSDAR's website, <http://kansasdar.org/arthurbarrett/History.html> (accessed January 17, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> A swale is a linear depression in the ground surface, often deep enough to have sloping sides. A swale is not an individual wheel track; rather, it is a broad depression created by large numbers of animal-drawn conveyances.

<sup>3</sup> The following three paragraphs are adapted from standard language used in reports written by Kansas State Historical Society, Cultural Resources Division, Archeology Department.

<sup>4</sup> W.E. Schoewe, "The Geography of Kansas, Part II: Physical Geography," *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science* 52, no. 3 (1949): 280, 291.

Attenuated Drift Border division, lying along the periphery of the Dissected Till Plains, is more rugged, with an erosional rock-controlled surface similar in most respects to that of the Osage Plains. Throughout most of the Kansas Drift Plain, inter-stream areas or divides remote from major drainages are smooth, broad, and well rounded; topographic distinctions are derived from the original uneroded ground moraine landscape left by the retreat of the glacial ice. Approaching the major stream courses, the country becomes more dissected, the surface is reduced to gentle slopes, and the valleys are wide and open. Adjacent to the larger streams the land is highly dissected, rough, and hilly. In many cases, the river bluffs are too rough for cultivation and the bedrock has been exposed by erosion.

Judging from early historical accounts and soil survey data, the vegetation of northeast Kansas at the time of initial white settlement consisted almost entirely of prairie, cut through by narrow ribbons of riverine forest. The potential natural vegetation of most of the area consists of tall grass prairie, composed of dense stands of tall and medium tall graminoids, predominately big and little bluestem. This prairie vegetation covered the western uplands with little or no forest vegetation. Moving east, the prairie/forest transition was marked by mosaic situations, in which prairie with islands of woods changed gradually into woods with islands of prairie. The forest vegetation, which followed water courses, was made up of medium tall to tall broadleaf deciduous trees, often containing dense undergrowth and many lianas, and occasionally interrupted by freshwater marshes with graminoid communities. Hackberry, cottonwood, willow, and elm were the dominant forest species;<sup>5</sup> although oak, black walnut, linden, sycamore, locust, hickory, pecan, and other hardwoods could also be found along with smaller forms such as Osage orange, persimmon, papaw, elderberry, serviceberry, chokecherry, and wild grape.<sup>6</sup> At the eastern margin of the Dissected Till Plains, and most pervasive on the Missouri River bluffs, the potential natural vegetation was medium tall multilayered broadleaf deciduous woodland, with various forms of hickory and oak being the dominant species.<sup>7</sup>

A large variety of animals were supported by these vegetation communities. The faunal assemblage of the Dissected Till Plains closely paralleled that of the Osage Plains to the south. Both areas contained such big game animals as bison, elk, deer, antelope, and black bear of forest<sup>8</sup>. Predators such as cougar, wildcat, timber wolf, coyote, and fox were present as well, along with raccoon, opossum, the gray, fox, and flying squirrels, beaver, otter, muskrat, badger, jackrabbit, cottontail rabbit, and various other smaller mammals. Wild turkey, prairie chicken, ruffed grouse, and quail were plentiful, while the larger streams yielded an abundance of edible fish and shellfish.

### *Individual Resources*

**1. Resource:** Alcove Spring

**Lat., Long.:** 39.748950, -96.676820 (WGS84)

**Classification:** *Previously listed*, contributing site

**Description:** Alcove Spring is located in the SE¼, NE¼ of Section 31, Township 3 South, Range 7 East. The area immediately surrounding Alcove Spring is rather rugged, consisting of steep slopes out of which grow evergreen and a hardwood trees. The spring flows from the walls of a limestone outcrop out of an orifice six inches in diameter. About 12 feet above the spring is a ledge of rock, having the appearance of an alcove, from which the "Naomi Pike Falls" cascades into a tree-shaded pool below. This water joins Alcove Spring in forming Sehon creek (or Alcove Spring creek) and moves westward down the valley where it empties into the Big Blue River. During the 1840s to 1860s when the area was used as a stopping place for emigrants and travelers, the creek was considerably wider and ran with a rapid current. Today the spring does not flow so regularly or with as much water as it did, but reportedly it never runs completely dry and during wet periods the alcove creates a miniature waterfall. Rehabilitation of the area was begun in 1961 by a group of Blue Rapids citizens. Dead trees, brush, and weeds were removed, and a parking lot and picnic area were provided. The property's main attraction remains the spring and associated waterfall. While somewhat diminished in flow and

<sup>5</sup> A.W. Kuchler, "A New Vegetation Map of Kansas," *Ecology* 55, no. 3 (1974): 600-601.

<sup>6</sup> Waldo R. Wedel, "An Introduction to Kansas Archeology," *Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin* (1959): 14.

<sup>7</sup> Kuchler, 599.

<sup>8</sup> Wedel, 16.

surrounded by more trees and other woody vegetation than was present during the trail period, it retains much of its distinctive appearance that so captivated the emigrants (Photo 1). Emigrant inscriptions are still visible on the rocks around the spring (Photo 4).

2. **Resource:** West Trail Segment<sup>9</sup>  
**Lat., Long.:** 39.752876, -96.679266 (WGS84)  
**Classification:** Contributing Site

**Description:** The west trail segment is the more prominent of the two segments. It is located in the W $\frac{1}{2}$ , NE $\frac{1}{4}$  of Section 31, Township 3 South, Range 7 East to the northwest of the spring. The segment is between the county road (East River Road) and the Big Blue River flood plain. The approximately 600-foot (183-meter) long segment consists of six parallel swales that generally run north-south. The swales begin at the wooded area on the north side of this field and span a corridor of about 160 feet (49 meters). As they head south to converge near the mouth of Sehon Creek, they narrow to a corridor of about 70 feet (21 meters) (Figure 3). The segments are situated on a gentle downhill slope at an approximate elevation of 1170 feet (357 meters) and may as a result have been deepened through erosion. They are clearly visible both on aerial photos and on the ground (Figure 5 & Photo 2).

3. **Resource:** North Trail Segment  
**Lat., Long.:** 39.755087, -96.675962 (WGS84)  
**Classification:** Contributing Site

**Description:** The north trail segment is more difficult to discern. This segment is situated to the north of the spring in the SW $\frac{1}{4}$ , SW $\frac{1}{4}$ , SW $\frac{1}{4}$  of Section 29 and the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ , NE $\frac{1}{4}$  of Section 31, Township 3 South, Range 7 East in the uplands overlooking the Big Blue River valley. The approximate 630-foot (192-meter) long segment consists of two parallel depressions (fainter than swales) extending southwest from the railroad tracks marking the property's eastern boundary to the valley's upland edge (Figure 3). They are situated on a relatively level surface at an elevation of about 1260 feet (384 meters), and thus have not been deepened by erosion. Perhaps as a result, they are much less distinct than the west trail segment both on aerial photos and on the ground (Figure 6 & Photo 3). The best time for viewing this segment is shortly after the pasture has been burned. An abandoned county road margin runs east-west to the south of the segment.

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<sup>9</sup> A segment is a grouping of individual swales.

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Transportation

Exploration/Settlement

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**

1840-1860

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**

1846

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person**

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

n/a

**Cultural Affiliation**

n/a

\_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**

n/a

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

**Period of Significance (justification)**

The period of significance selected for this property includes the years the Oregon and California trails were active in Kansas, beginning in 1840 with the first pioneers headed to Oregon Country and ending by 1860 when the majority of emigrants departed from Nebraska river towns.

**Criteria Considerations (explanation, if necessary)**

n/a

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## Narrative Statement of Significance

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### Summary

Alcove Spring is nationally significant under Criterion A for its association with transportation and exploration/settlement along the Oregon and California trails and under Criterion D for its potential to yield information about both migration and wagon transportation in eastern Kansas. Post-trail development – both agricultural and road building – has impacted the environs, leaving just the spring and two trail segments intact. The site, which is owned by a non-profit foundation and contains a park commemorating the trail, retains a good degree of integrity in terms of location, setting, feeling, and association. Its period of significance begins with the initiation of traffic over this segment of the Oregon Trail in 1840 and ends in 1860 on the eve of the Civil War, which largely interrupted overland travel through Kansas by emigrants to the west coast.

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### Elaboration

#### *Trail Overview*<sup>10</sup>

The Oregon Trail began as a network of Indian trade and migration routes that crisscrossed the American West. British, French, and American fur trappers of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries found and followed those paths as they scoured the country for beaver. By the 1820s, caravans of pack trains, carts, and wagons were beating a rough “fur trace” from the Missouri River to the annual trappers’ rendezvous in the Rocky Mountains of today’s Wyoming and northern Utah. Pack trails ran west from the Rockies, following the Snake and Columbia Rivers to Hudson’s Bay Company headquarters at Fort Vancouver in the Oregon Country.<sup>11</sup>

When the first family of covered wagon pioneers joined a fur caravan heading to the Rockies from Missouri in 1840, the Oregon Country was jointly occupied by the fledgling United States and powerful Great Britain. Over the next several years, Britain watched uneasily as a low but steady tide of American emigrants surged along the developing, 2200-mile Oregon Trail and emptied into the Pacific Northwest. As the number of American settlers grew, so did the pressure for British withdrawal. In 1846 the two nations signed a treaty giving the U.S. control of lands between California and the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, today’s border between the United States and Canada.<sup>12</sup> The emigration swelled in the early 1850s as homesteaders flocked to Oregon to stake their claims under the Donation Lands Act. By 1860, some 53,000 covered wagon emigrants and hundreds of thousands of livestock had followed the Oregon Trail to the Pacific Northwest.<sup>13</sup>

The California Trail, too, began at the Missouri River and stretched more than 2,000 miles across plains and mountains, then branched out to end at various towns and camps in and beyond the Sierra Nevada. Much of that distance was part of a shared corridor with the Oregon Trail through Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, and eastern Idaho. Near today’s Soda Springs, Idaho, the 1841 Bidwell-Bartleson Party split away from the Oregon Trail and turned south to blaze a new emigrant route across the unmapped Great Basin and along the

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<sup>10</sup> Trail overview written by Lee Kreutzer, National Trails Intermountain Region, National Park Service.

<sup>11</sup> William E. Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous: Blazing the Trails to Oregon and California, 1812-1848*, vol. 1, *Overland West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 77, 80; Hulbert, Archer Butler ed., *Where Rolls the Oregon: Prophet and Pessimist Look Northwest*, vol. 3, *Overland to the Pacific* (Colorado Springs: The Steward Commission of Colorado College & the Denver Public Library, 1933), 52, 91, 105, 136, 149-154, 156-159; Bernard De Voto, *Across the Wide Missouri* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1947), 47, 59, 69; Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road: The Covered Wagon Mainline via Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie*, (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), 4; Merrill J. Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives: A Descriptive Bibliography of Travel over the Great Central Overland Route to Oregon, California, Utah, Colorado, Montana, and Other Western States and Territories, 1812-1866* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 1-5.

<sup>12</sup> Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 290-291.

<sup>13</sup> John D. Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 60, 84-85.

Humboldt River to California, part of Mexico at that time. Against all odds, the entire party survived the trip, and some of the successful pioneers set to work recruiting other emigrants to California. A trickle of over-landers followed over the next several years, developing a more direct trail across Idaho and Nevada to the Humboldt River and better routes through the Sierra Nevada.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of the 1846-1848 Mexican-American War and annexation of Texas, the United States gained a tremendous swath of territory that stretched from the Gulf of Mexico across the Southern Plains, Southwest, and Great Basin to the Pacific coast. Emigration to California continued at a dribble despite the change of government. Few Americans were tempted to make the arduous trip until news of the gold discovery at Sutter's Mill reached the East and opened the emigration floodgates. In the spring of 1850 some 44,000 Argonauts and entrepreneurs rushed along the California Trail to seek their fortunes in the gold camps. As a result of the influx, California gained statehood the following year, and by 1860 over 200,000 emigrants had followed the long trail west to the Golden State.<sup>15</sup>

Starting in 1847, Oregon- and California-bound travelers shared the trail corridor with some 60,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who followed the Mormon Trail across Nebraska and Wyoming to the Great Salt Lake Valley of Utah. Total emigration along the multi-trail corridor to Oregon, California, and Utah between 1840, when the pioneer Joel Walker led his family west, and 1869, when completion of the transcontinental railroad brought the overland trails era to a close, is commonly estimated at 350,000 to 500,000 persons.<sup>16</sup>

Across the three decades of the emigration, the trail experience evolved. As historian John Unruh observed, "The emigrant experience was ever changing; each travel year evidenced distinctive patterns, unique dramas of triumph and tragedy, new contributions to the mosaic of western development."<sup>17</sup> In the 1840s, emigrants were on their own once they left Missouri and entered "Indian Territory." During those years, many suffered extreme hardship and even death as they trudged across Nevada's Forty-mile Desert, struggled through the Sierra Nevada, dodged the fierce rapids of the Columbia River, or tried untested new routes across the western mountains and deserts. Military and trading posts were few along the way and usually had little food to spare; emigrants were unable to resupply if their provisions ran low. But as the emigration progressed, explorers, military expeditions, and other travelers gradually opened shorter, safer routes. Towns and road ranches sprang up along the way. Businessmen established ferries, bridges, and toll roads, hauled water into the desert to sell to thirsty travelers, and built trading posts where travelers could resupply or exchange worn out draft animals for fresh ones. Meanwhile, as the years passed, the vast buffalo herds that 1840s emigrants had encountered in eastern Nebraska retreated farther and farther west, dwindling to near-extinction; hungry campfires and livestock consumed the woodlands and grasslands along the trail; and once-friendly native peoples, alarmed by the never-ending march of emigrants and embittered by the usurping of their lands and resources, were driven to armed resistance. As a result of these changes, travelers of the 1860s experienced the overland trails much differently than those who had gone west in the 1840s.

Not just the experience but the trails themselves changed, as well. For example, Independence and Westport, Missouri, at the eastern edge of the frontier, were the original Oregon and California trailheads. There emigrants could purchase supplies, wagons, and livestock and make repairs before merging with the great freight caravans rolling west along the Santa Fe Trail into Kansas. Near the present-day town of Gardner, the Oregon-California trail corridor branched off to follow the "Independence Road" across northeastern Kansas toward Nebraska's Platte River. Through the 1840s and 1850s, new military roads were developed to

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<sup>14</sup> George Stewart, *The California Trail: An Epic with Many Heroes* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), 18, 27-28; Doyce B. Nunis, Jr., *The Bidwell-Bartleson Party: 1841 California Emigrant Adventure: The Documents and Memoirs of the Overland Pioneers* (Santa Cruz, CA: Western Tanager Press, 1991), 39, 125, 149; Dale L. Morgan, *The Humboldt: Highroad of the West*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 67-78.

<sup>15</sup> Stewart, 217; Unruh, 84-85; William E. Bagley, *With Golden Visions Bright Before Them: Trails to the Mining West, 1849-1852*, vol. 2, *Overland West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 15, 17-18, 388.

<sup>16</sup> Mattes, *Platte River Road Narratives*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Unruh, 321-322.



connect Fort Leavenworth, Kan., to Fort Riley in central Kansas, Fort Gibson, Okla., and Fort Kearny, Neb., and emigrants quickly adopted these and other new trails in making their way to the Platte River. Also during those years, especially following outbreaks of cholera, emigrants began outfitting and “jumping off” onto the trails farther and farther north, gradually shifting the bulk of the emigration traffic upriver to Fort Leavenworth, St. Joseph, Nebraska City, and Omaha/Council Bluffs.

By the close of the 1850s, the Nebraska river towns had largely replaced Independence, Westport, Fort Leavenworth and St. Joseph as outfitting and jumping-off places, and the flow of Oregon-California traffic across Kansas had nearly dried up.<sup>18</sup> Riding a steamboat up the Missouri River to Nebraska City and Council Bluffs saved emigrants several difficult stream crossings and many days of driving across northeastern Kansas. Starting farther north also enabled travelers to avoid the Kansas-Missouri border troubles of the mid-1850s and allowed them to take advantage of substantial trail improvements made by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to help its Mormon emigrants cross Nebraska.

Farther west, significant new alternates were developed, including Sublette’s, Hudspeth’s, and Goodale’s cutoffs across Wyoming and Idaho, the difficult Hastings Cutoff through Utah’s Wasatch Mountains and over the Great Salt Lake Desert, the Raft River route to the Humboldt, and several Oregon dry-land alternatives to the dangerous Columbia River passage. New wagon roads punched through the Sierra Nevada and commercial ferries, bridges, and other improvements increasingly aided the emigration as the years passed.

But the greatest improvement to western emigration by far was completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. The driving of the ceremonial golden spike that linked the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads at Promontory Summit, Utah, was a stake in the heart of the covered wagon era. The laborious, dangerous overland trip that once took five to six months, killed hundreds of thousands of draft animals, and tested the endurance of the most determined emigrants could now be made safely in a matter of weeks. Some emigrants who could not afford train passage continued to use the old Oregon and California trails, but long-distance wagon traffic gradually dried up. The last documented westbound covered wagon on the Oregon-California Trail crossed Wyoming in 1912.<sup>19</sup>

The mid-nineteenth century emigration of hundreds of thousands of people, rich and poor, free and slave, along the Oregon and California trails is unparalleled in world history. The trails they traveled opened the door for the Pony Express, the transcontinental telegraph, the transcontinental railroad, and parts of the modern interstate highway system, all of which followed the Oregon and California trails corridor. The overland emigration fulfilled the nation’s “manifest destiny” to stretch from Atlantic to Pacific, spurred economic development and security, and directed the course of American history. At the same time, however, it disrupted hundreds of indigenous cultures, destroyed traditional lifeways that had developed over millennia, and contributed to extinctions and significant shifts in native plant and animal populations. Today’s West is largely the product of the California and Oregon emigrations and the events that flowed from those movements. Extant trail remnants, including wagon swales and ruts, stream crossings, graves, campgrounds, and associated forts, are touchstones to that iconic place and period in the nation’s history.

The national and regional significance of the Oregon and California trails has been identified through the work of many lay and professional historians and defined in numerous scholarly publications.<sup>20</sup> Congress designated the Oregon and California National Historic Trails in 1978 and 1992, respectively, and the National Park Service in 1998 published a combined comprehensive management and use plan/environmental impact statement for the Oregon, California, Pony Express, and Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trails.

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<sup>18</sup> Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road*, 104-105.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Hurlburt Scott, *The Oregon Trail Through Wyoming*, (Aurora, Colorado: Powder River Publishers, 1958), 87-100, 122, 135.

<sup>20</sup> See attached bibliography for a sample of these sources.

In Kansas, approximately 165 miles of wagon route are designated as part of the Oregon National Historic Trail and 290 miles are designated as California National Historic Trail. For a short distance from Missouri into eastern Kansas, the Oregon and California Trails followed the same corridor as the earlier Santa Fe Trail, also a designated National Historic Trail.<sup>21</sup> Many more miles of historic wagon route, once traveled by emigrants to the far west, exist across Kansas, and many of these routes are currently under study for possible addition to the Oregon and California National Historic Trails.

### *Alcove Spring*

From the early 1840s to at least 1860, Alcove Spring was a major stopping point for many travelers on the Independence Road—a route of both the Oregon and California trails. The fresh, cool water source made the site attractive as a camping or nooning site because it provided a comfortable place for travelers to rest and recuperate before continuing northwest toward Nebraska's Platte River. Many travelers encamped for several days, waiting for a safe opportunity to cross the Big Blue River at the Independence Crossing, about one-half mile to the west.<sup>22</sup>

Even before the establishment of the Oregon and California trails, Alcove Spring was used as a stopping point by frontiersmen bound for the Rocky Mountains. Early records recorded in March 1827 indicated that James Clyman, accompanied by William L. Sublette, and a large pack-train passed through this area between the Red Vermillion crossing in Pottawatomie County and the Blue River. They had been on their way from the Wind River Mountains to St. Louis with the furs of William Ashley and the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.<sup>23</sup> Clyman ran pack trains with William L. Sublette, Jedediah S. Smith, and Ashley beginning in the 1820s and is one of the first frontiersman and mountain men to go west and enter into the fur trade.<sup>24</sup> He continued working with the fur trade up through the mid-1840s, running pack trains of furs from the Rocky Mountains back east.<sup>25</sup> John A. Sutter, who would later become famous for discovery of gold at his mill in California, was part of an 1838 American Fur Company caravan bound for the Rocky Mountains. The party consisted of around 50 persons and followed a route through northeastern Kansas that went through Alcove Spring.<sup>26</sup>

The first known emigrants to encamp at Alcove Spring were members of the Western Emigration Society in the spring of 1841.<sup>27</sup> This 69-member party was composed of pioneers heading to California—the

<sup>21</sup> Kansas State Historical Society, *Historic Resources of the Santa Fe Trail* revised National Register of Historic Places multiple property documentation form (Topeka, KS: Kansas Historical Society, 1994, revised 2012).

<sup>22</sup> About May 31, 1846 the William Henry Russell Company reached the Independence Crossing in Marshall County on the Blue River. The company was held up from crossing by high water. Edwin Bryant discovered Alcove Spring and noted the distance of the spring to be one-half mile east of the crossing [ford]. Source: Louise Barry. *The Beginning of the West: Annals of the Kansas Gateway to the American West, 1540-1854* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1972), 585.

<sup>23</sup> Barry, 139-140.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 109, 115.

<sup>25</sup> Between 1844 and 1846, Clyman apparently visited Oregon and California. After spending some time in Oregon, he journeyed down to California in 1845. He left California in 1846, reentering Kansas on July 13. His journal entry that day indicates that he passed through the Alcove Spring area on his return trip back to the east. Clyman was no stranger to the west. Though, this appears to be one of his first trips as far west as Oregon and California. Source: Barry, 627.

<sup>26</sup> John A. Sutter arrived in Westport, MO in 1837. Born in Switzerland in 1803, he came to the U.S. in 1834. In Westport, Sutter became a prominent businessman by purchasing businesses and real estate. After two years of doing business, he lost most of his enterprises and decided to invest in a move to the Pacific coast. Arriving in California, Sutter purchased a Mexican land grant, allowing him the opportunity to build a fort and plant several fields of wheat at present-day Sacramento. [See: *Kansas City Journal*, (Kansas City, MO), 30 January 1879; Barry, 344-345. For information about the gold discovery, see Erwin G. Gudde, *Bigler's Chronicle of the West: The Conquest of California, Discovery of Gold, and Mormon Settlement as Reflected in Henry William Bigler's Diaries* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), 87-90.]

<sup>27</sup> In 1841 after having departed from Westport, MO, the expedition did not stay in one place much more than just a single night by the time they had reached the Platte River in central Nebraska. (Barry indicates they spent two nights at Soldier Creek.) On May 12, the group departed Sapling Grove in present day Johnson County, KS and reached the Platte

first company of travelers to do so—and a small group of missionaries.<sup>28</sup> While at the spring, traveler John Bidwell wrote, “we found, to our great joy, an excellent spring of water and an abundance of grass.”<sup>29</sup> The group was initially led by mountain man Thomas Fitzpatrick. At Soda Springs in Idaho, the company parted ways. The missionaries continued to their destinations among American Indian groups; about half of the Western Emigration Society decided to continue west to Oregon, and the remaining 32 men, one woman, and a child headed south for California.<sup>30</sup> This latter group traveled without a guide across the unmapped Great Basin to California. Known to history as the Bidwell-Bartleson Party, the group elected John Bartleson as captain, and John Bidwell became the secretary. The emigrants ran into difficulties along the way, abandoned their wagons west of present-day Salt Lake City, and continued on foot across the Great Basin. The party made it to California with no loss of life.

In 1842, U.S. Topographical Engineer Lt. John C. Fremont was ordered to lead an expedition to the Rocky Mountains. As Missouri U.S. Senator Lewis F. Linn explained in a speech on August 8, 1842, the purpose of Fremont’s “expedition was to examine and report upon the rivers and country between the frontiers of Missouri and the base of the Rocky Mountains; and especially to examine the character, and ascertain the latitude and longitude of the South Pass, the great crossing place in those mountains on the way to the Oregon.” On June 10, 1842, Lieutenant John C. Fremont and his first exploring expedition of 27 individuals left Cyprian Chouteau’s trading house on the Kansas River in present day Wyandotte County, Kansas. Other members of Fremont’s first expedition were: Kit Carson, the caravan’s guide; Charles Preuss, assistant topographer; Lucien Maxwell, hunter; and “22 Canadian and Creole-French voyageurs.” Also accompanying the group were two youths, Randolph Benton and Henry Brant, son and grand-nephew of Missouri U.S. senator Thomas H. Benton (who was also Lt. Fremont’s father-in-law). About this expedition, Fremont reported, “We were all mounted, with the exception of eight men, who conducted as many carts, in which were packed our stores, with the baggage and instruments, and which were drawn by two mules. A few loose horses, and four oxen, which had been added...completed the train.”<sup>31</sup> Traveling along the Oregon Trail, Fremont’s Expedition crossed the Kansas River at Papin’s Ferry and the “Big Vermillion” (Black Vermillion) in Pottawatomie County before arriving at the Independence Crossing of the Big Blue River on June 21 where they encamped for about a week. Fremont noted that they “were near a small creek, where was a fine large spring of very cold water.”<sup>32</sup> Fremont would eventually conduct four more expeditions to the West between 1843-1853.

Alcove Spring is perhaps best known for its association with the ill-fated 1846 California-bound Donner-Reed Party, led by George and Jacob Donner.<sup>33</sup> Unable to ford the rain-swollen Big Blue River due to flooding, the party camped at Alcove Spring from May 26<sup>th</sup> until 9:00 PM May 31<sup>st</sup>.<sup>34</sup> The caravan had to wait to cross at the Independence Crossing, one-half mile west of Alcove Spring, until the wagons, oxen and horses could safely land on the west bank of the river. During their wait for the waters to recede, the emigrants constructed a

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River on June 1. The distance to the Platte River, by way of Alcove Spring, took them 14 days. A calculation of the distance following their route shows this portion of the trip to have been about 192 miles; thus, it appears that the expedition travelled 14-16 miles a day in 1841 through northeast Kansas. See Barry, 428-429.

<sup>28</sup> Barry, 428.

<sup>29</sup> Nunis, 42.

<sup>30</sup> Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 429.

<sup>31</sup> At Washington, DC on March 1, 1843 Fremont presented a report of his first expedition, “*A Report on an Exploration of the Country Lying between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains, on the Line of the Kansas and Great Platte Rivers*”, to Colonel J. J. Albert, Chief of the Corps of Topographical Engineers. This report can be accessed at: <http://ftp.ibiblio.org/pub/docs/books/gutenberg/etext05/8expr10h.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> Barry, 451-453. Citation covers paragraph.

<sup>33</sup> The Donner-Reed Party did not come to be known as such until after George Donner was elected captain at the Little Sandy River in Sweetwater County, Wyoming, on July 20, 1846. Although a key figure in the train, James Reed was not an elected leader of the party. Following the fateful accident on October 5 that left another wagon driver, John Taylor, mortally wounded, James Reed left the group by order of the majority and to ensure the safety of his family. Reed and Snyder had fought during a disagreement over how the teams of oxen and wagons should ascend a dangerous hill (Stewart, 63-67). The party is historically referred to as the “Donner Party” and sometimes as the “Donner-Reed Party.”

<sup>34</sup> Bagley, *So Rugged and Mountainous*, 584-85.

crude ferry they named the *Blue Rover*. This craft consisted of two dug-outs carved from the trunks of cottonwood trees and framed together so that the wheels on each side of the wagons rested in each canoe. The craft was pulled back and forth across the river by heavy ropes secured to both banks. The crossing was about 50-yards wide with a gravel bottom on the east side. The wagons entered the water on the gravel bottom.<sup>35</sup>

In his memoir *What I Saw in California* about his journey to California in 1846, Edwin Bryant described Alcove Spring as being “as cold and pure as if it had been melted from ice. It gushed from a ledge of rocks, which composes the bank of the stream, and falling some ten feet, its waters are received into a basin fifteen feet in length, ten in breadth, and three or four in depth. A shelving rock projects over this basin, from which falls a beautiful cascade of water, some ten or twelve feet. ... Altogether it is one of the most romantic spots I ever saw.”<sup>36</sup> Emigrant George McKinstry, stalled by the same 1846 Blue River rampage that delayed the Donner-Reed Party, wrote in his diary that fellow traveler Edwin Bryant named the spring, and that he (McKinstry) carved that name into the limestone nearby.<sup>37</sup> The inscribed initials of James F. Reed are still legible on a rock at the spring. Reed's 70-year-old mother-in-law, Sarah Keyes, died during the party's stay at the site and was buried somewhere near the spring. Her gravestone has since been lost, and the exact location of the grave is unknown.

In 1849 a Forty-niner named David Dewolf headed west to California. Along the way he was one of many in his company to keep a detailed diary describing their stops along the way. As his party crossed through Kansas, Dewolf explained that they crossed the Big Blue River without issue along this stretch of the Oregon and California Trail. Dewolf also notes that after their successful crossing of the Big Blue, they came across “a fine spring of water which comes out of a perpendicular rock about eight feet high.” At the time he referred to it as Cover Spring and described it as “a most beautiful place.” However, historian Louise Barry has identified it to be Alcove Spring that he makes reference to in his diary.<sup>38</sup>

### *Archeological Potential*

Archeological prospection, geophysical survey, and metal detector survey of similar trail properties have been shown to reveal associated artifact assemblages, sometimes buried and sometimes not, that can inform on the use of the trail during its period of significance. Though only small-scale surveys and remote sensing projects have been undertaken at Alcove Spring, there is every reason to believe that the presence of such an assemblage is possible. This property and its immediate landscape have the potential to yield important information to understanding the use and nature of this section of the trail, including patterns of use and change over time, evolving emigrant patterns, and cultural interactions. Study of both remnant trail swales and adjacent archeological features can provide valuable insight into the evolving patterns of historic development in this region. This site likely contains data which may be vital to any wider study of 19th-century settlement, exploration, and transportation. Further investigation could address key questions regarding transportation variability and change. Excavation could also provide additional social data including better estimates of the frequency of use during various phases of history, the role played various ethnic and social groups, and the nature of trail users, material culture, and the production, distribution, and consumption of commodities.<sup>39</sup>

Alcove Spring contains a particularly well-known landmark (the spring and waterfall) along with a presumed campground location and two areas of intact ruts isolated from other trail segments. Despite recent disturbance, this property has the potential to yield additional information. Its location is particularly well

<sup>35</sup> William E. Smith, “*The Grave of Sarah Keyes on the Oregon Trail*,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 5 (May 1936): 208-09.

<sup>36</sup> Edwin Bryant, *What I Saw in California: Being the Journal of a Tour*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1849), 62.

<sup>37</sup> George McKinstry as quoted in Dale Morgan, *Overland in 1846: Diaries and Letters of the California-Oregon Trail*, Vol. I. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 209.

<sup>38</sup> Barry, 847.

<sup>39</sup> Adapted from *Historic Resources of the Santa Fe Trail*, F116. Citation covers paragraph.

known, yet it has not been mapped or defined with precision. For example, the location and depth of the surviving swales relative to the surrounding landscape could yield significant information regarding the nature of preservation relative to variables such as slope and underlying geologic structure. While it is generally accepted that swales are deeper and more visible in areas where slopes are steep, careful mapping could provide supporting data. Despite its high visibility among Oregon and California trails sites, no systematic archeological survey of the Alcove Spring property has been undertaken. While small-scale systematic remote sensing investigations have been conducted, they have failed to yield conclusive evidence of subsurface cultural features (such as the Sarah Keyes grave) known from the historic record to be present on the property.<sup>40</sup> More intensive archeological investigations at this property (including metal detector investigations and additional remote sensing) might produce period trail period artifacts and cultural features. Their distribution, if plotted precisely, could yield additional significant information regarding issues (in addition to those mentioned above) such as campground use, discard patterns, and wagon repair activities.

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<sup>40</sup> Robert K. Nickel and Catharine A. Nickel, *Magnetic and Ground-Penetrating Radar Surveys at Alcove Spring, Marshall County, Kansas*. Report Submitted to the Alcove Spring Preservation Association (2007). Copies on file with the Cultural Resources Division, Kansas State Historical Society.

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**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other
- Name of repository: Kansas Historical Society

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): n/a



**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreage of Property** 246 acres  
(Do not include previously listed resource acreage.)

**Provide latitude/longitude coordinates.**  
(Place additional coordinates on a continuation page.)

**Latitude/Longitude Coordinates** **See map for additional coordinates.**  
Datum if other than WGS84: \_\_\_\_\_  
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1	<u>39.759740</u> Latitude:	<u>-96.677954</u> Longitude:	3	<u>39.747589</u> Latitude:	<u>-96.679491</u> Longitude:
2	<u>39.751961</u> Latitude:	<u>-96.682310</u> Longitude:	4	<u>39.747598</u> Latitude:	<u>-96.665657</u> Longitude:

**Verbal Boundary Description** (Describe the boundaries of the property.)  
The property comprises 246 acres in parts of Sections 29, 30, 31, and 32 of Township 3S, Range 7E in Marshall County, Kansas, exclusive of East River Road and its right-of-way. The nominated property is bounded on the east by a railroad grade, on the south by the half-section line of Section 32, and on the west by an abandoned road bed, the terrace edge overlooking the Big Blue valley, and by the north-south county road. This area encompasses the spring and two areas of intact trail swales. It is entirely owned by the Alcove Spring Historical Trust.

**Boundary Justification** (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)  
The nominated property contains all of the surviving intact features associated with Alcove Spring.

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title KSHS Staff

organization Kansas Historical Society date Spring 2013

street & number 6425 SW 6<sup>th</sup> Ave telephone 785-272-8681

city or town Topeka state KS zip code 66615-1099

e-mail cultural\_resources@kshs.org

**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.  
A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Continuation Sheets**
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

---

**Photographs:**

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

**Name of Property:** Alcove Spring  
**City or Vicinity:** Blue Rapids vicinity  
**County & State:** Marshall County, Kansas  
**Photographer:** Rick Anderson  
**Date Photographed:** September 2010, unless otherwise noted

Description of Photograph(s) and number:

- 1 of 7. View northeast at the Alcove Spring and waterfall.
- 2 of 7. View west at the lowland (western) area of intact ruts associated with Alcove Spring.
- 3 of 7. View northeast at the upland (northern) area of intact ruts associated with Alcove Spring.
- 4 of 7. Top of the waterfall above spring, on the north side, looking northeast (October 2010).
- 5 of 7. West trail segment, looking south.
- 6 of 7. Rock inscription at spring.
- 7 of 7. Landscape to the north of the spring (October 2010).

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**Property Owner:**

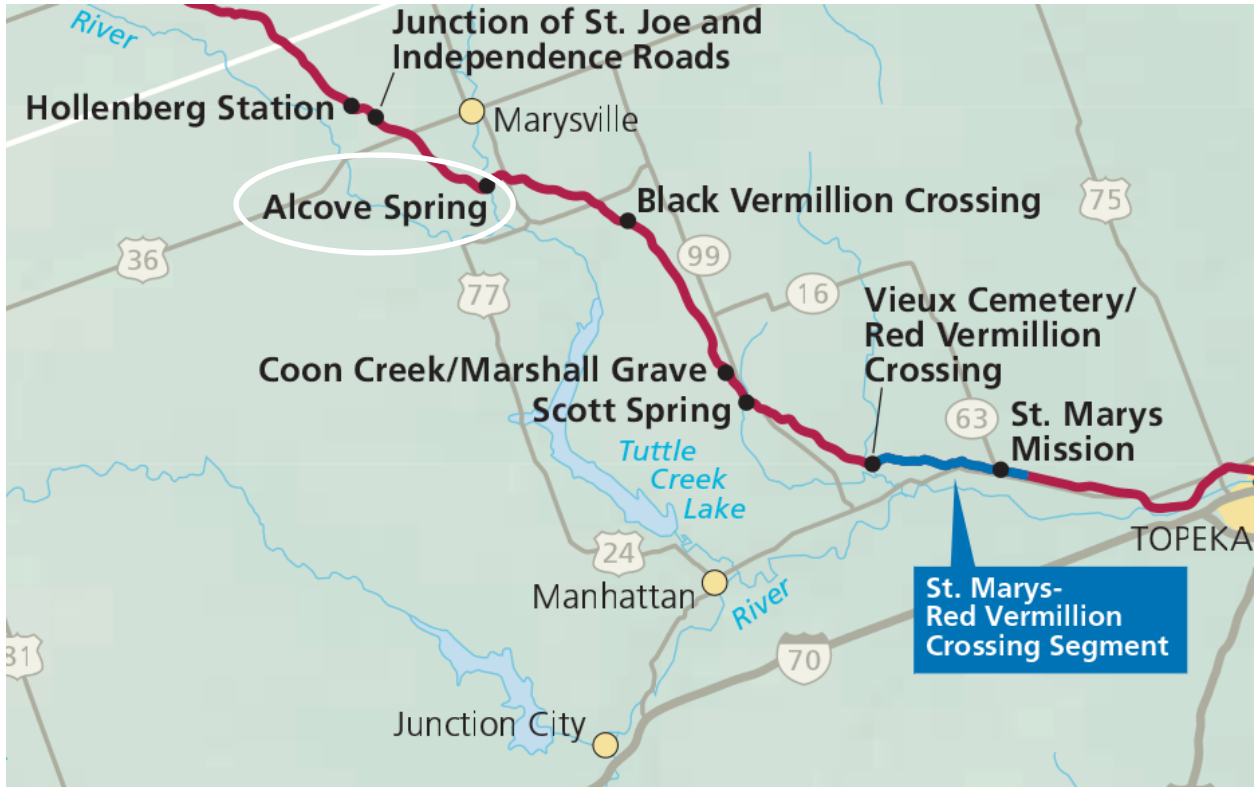
(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Alcove Spring Historical Trust: c/o John Schwartz, Trustee  
street & number 21 Public Square, PO Box 157 telephone \_\_\_\_\_  
city or town Blue Rapids state Kansas zip code 66411

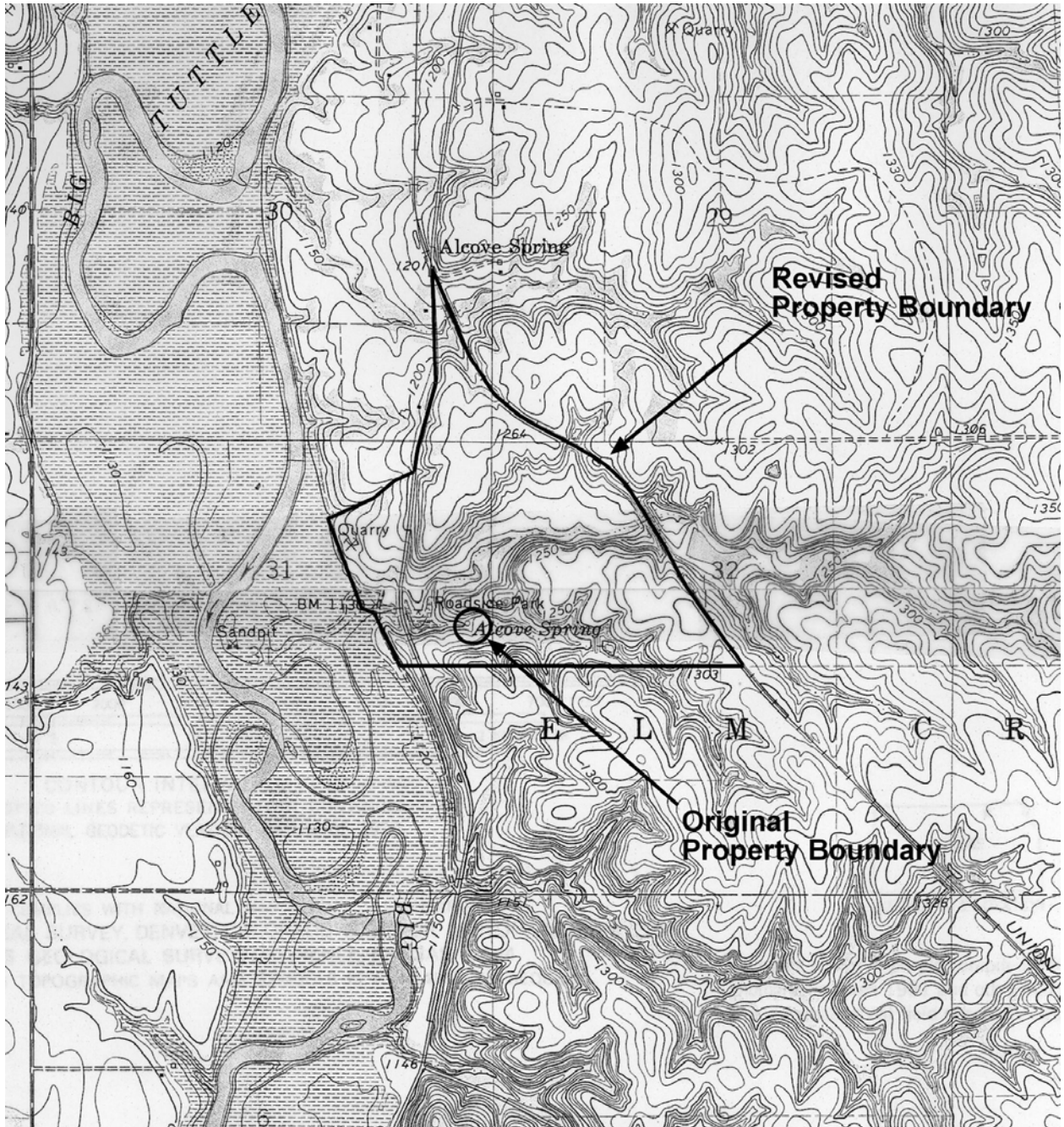
**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

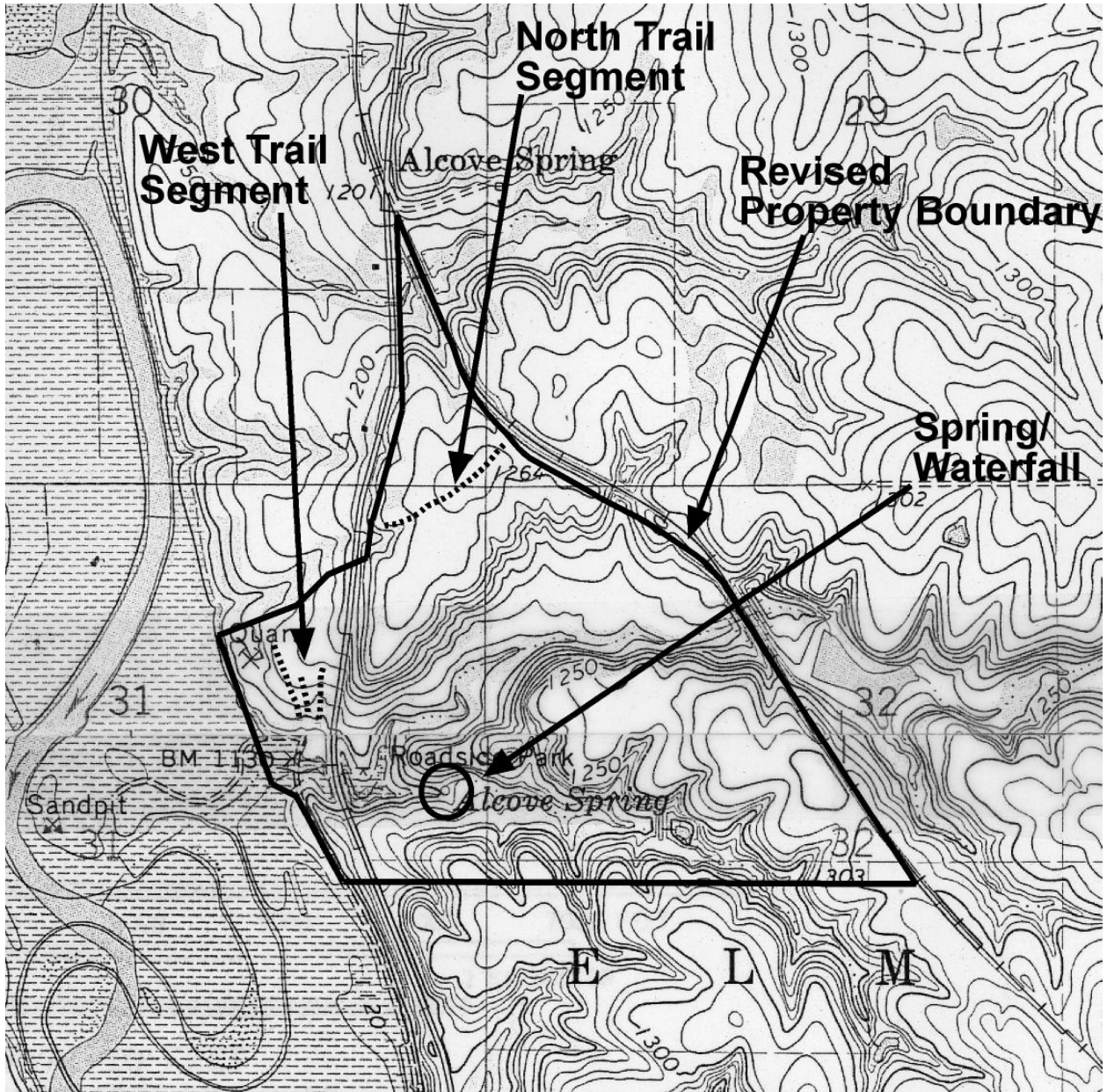
**Figure 1: Location of Alcove Spring along the Oregon Trail route in Kansas.**  
U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service (NPS) Oregon National Historic Trail Map  
([http://www.nps.gov/oreg/planyourvisit/upload/HFC%20OREG\\_map2007a.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/oreg/planyourvisit/upload/HFC%20OREG_map2007a.pdf))



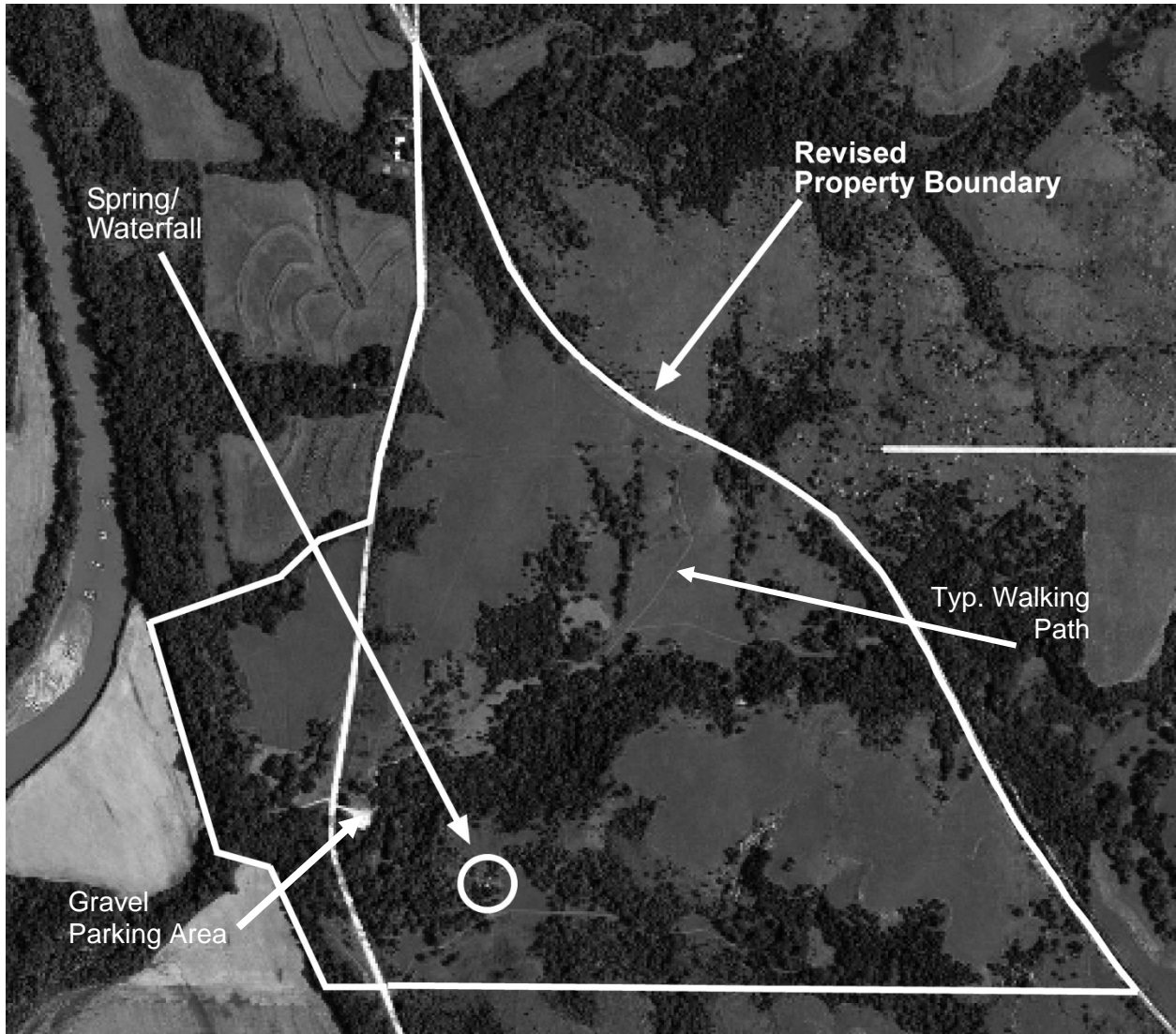
**Figure 2: Locations of the original and revised National Register property boundaries**  
(U.S.G.S. Blue Rapids and Marysville 7.5' Quadrangle Maps)



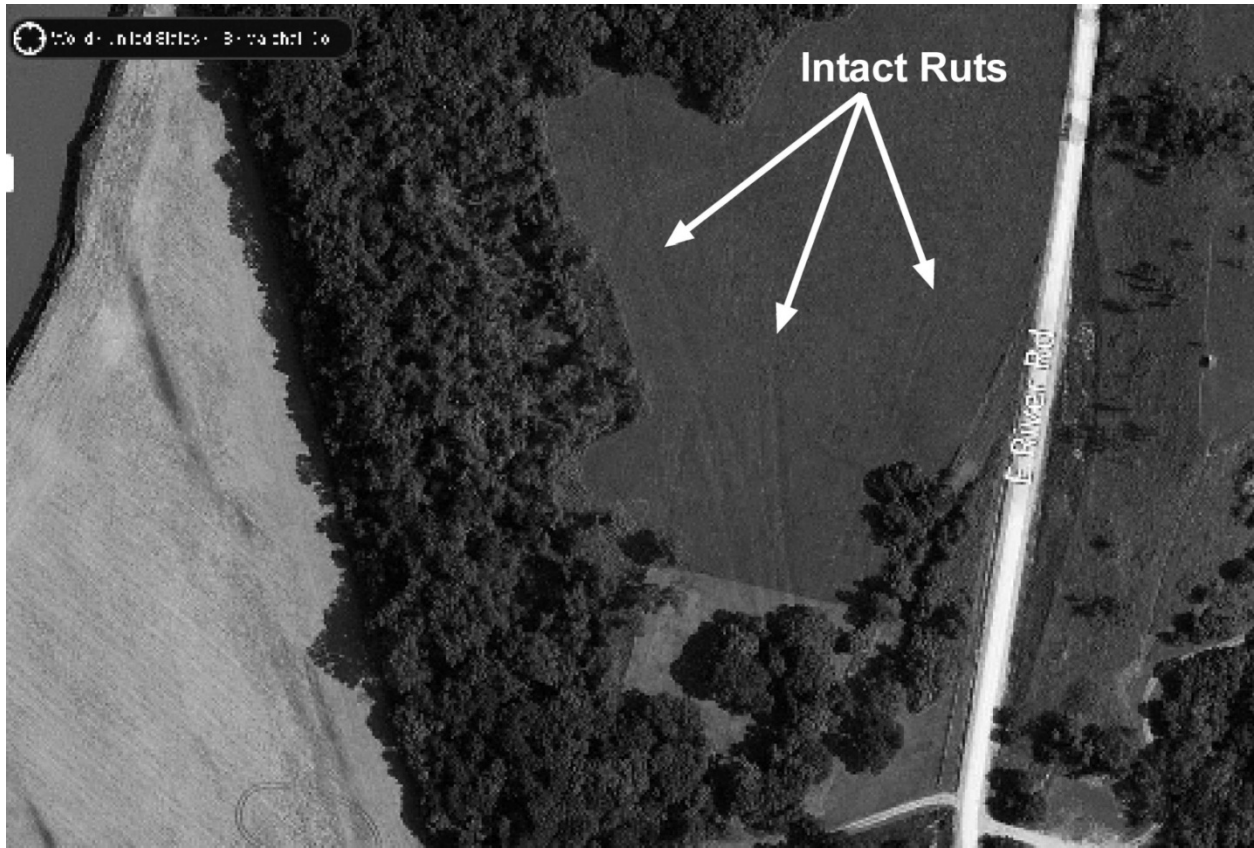
**Figure 3: Location of the revised Alcove Spring National Register property boundary along with the spring/waterfall and two areas of intact ruts.**  
(U.S.G.S. Blue Rapids and Marysville 7.5' Quadrangle Maps)



**Figure 4: Aerial View of the revised Alcove Spring National Register property boundary.**  
(2012 Bing Aerial Imagery)



**Figure 5: Aerial View of the lowland (western) intact ruts associated with Alcove Spring.**  
(2012 Bing Aerial Imagery)



**Figure 6: Aerial View of the upland (northern) intact ruts associated with Alcove Spring.**  
(2013 Google Aerial Imagery)

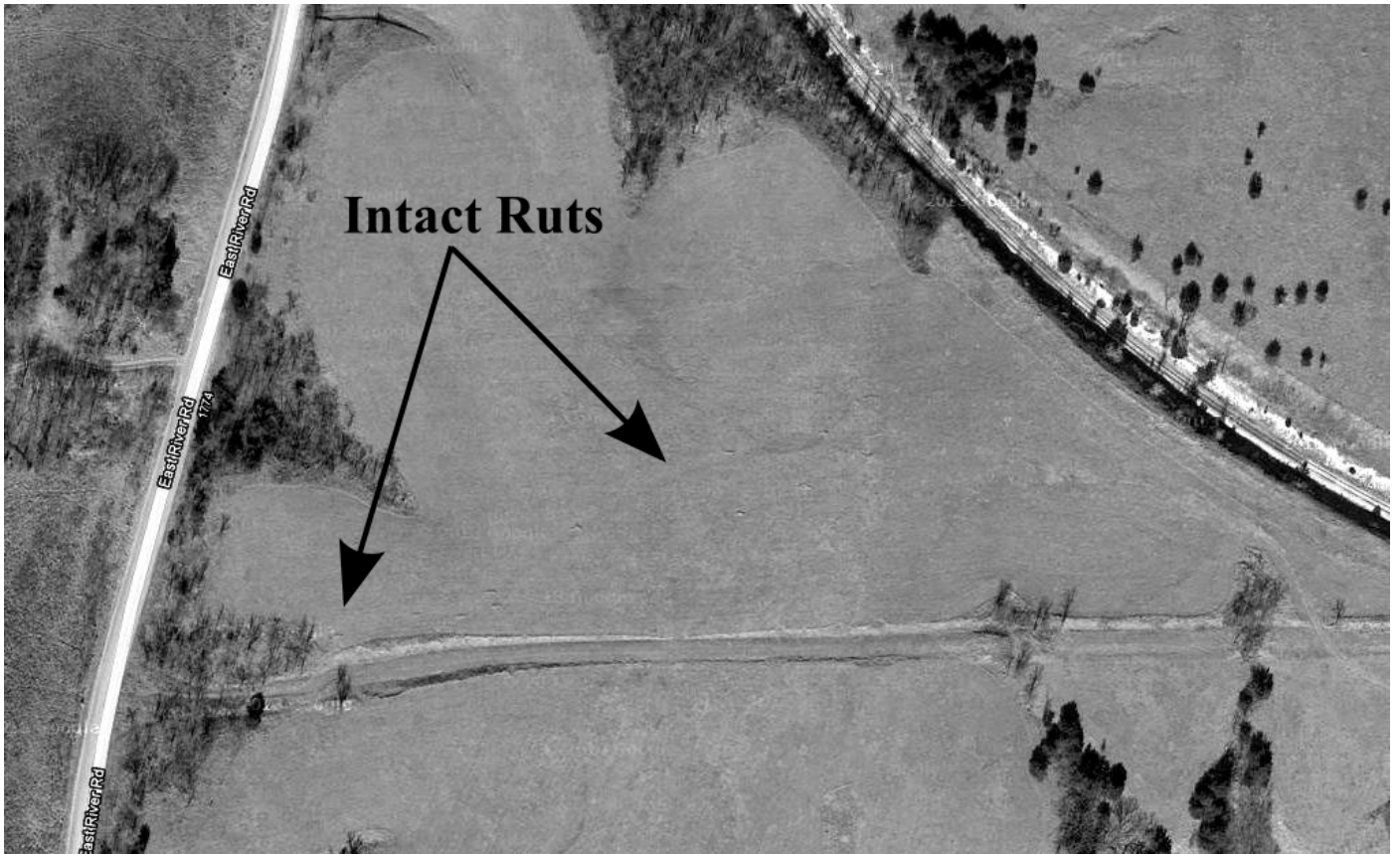
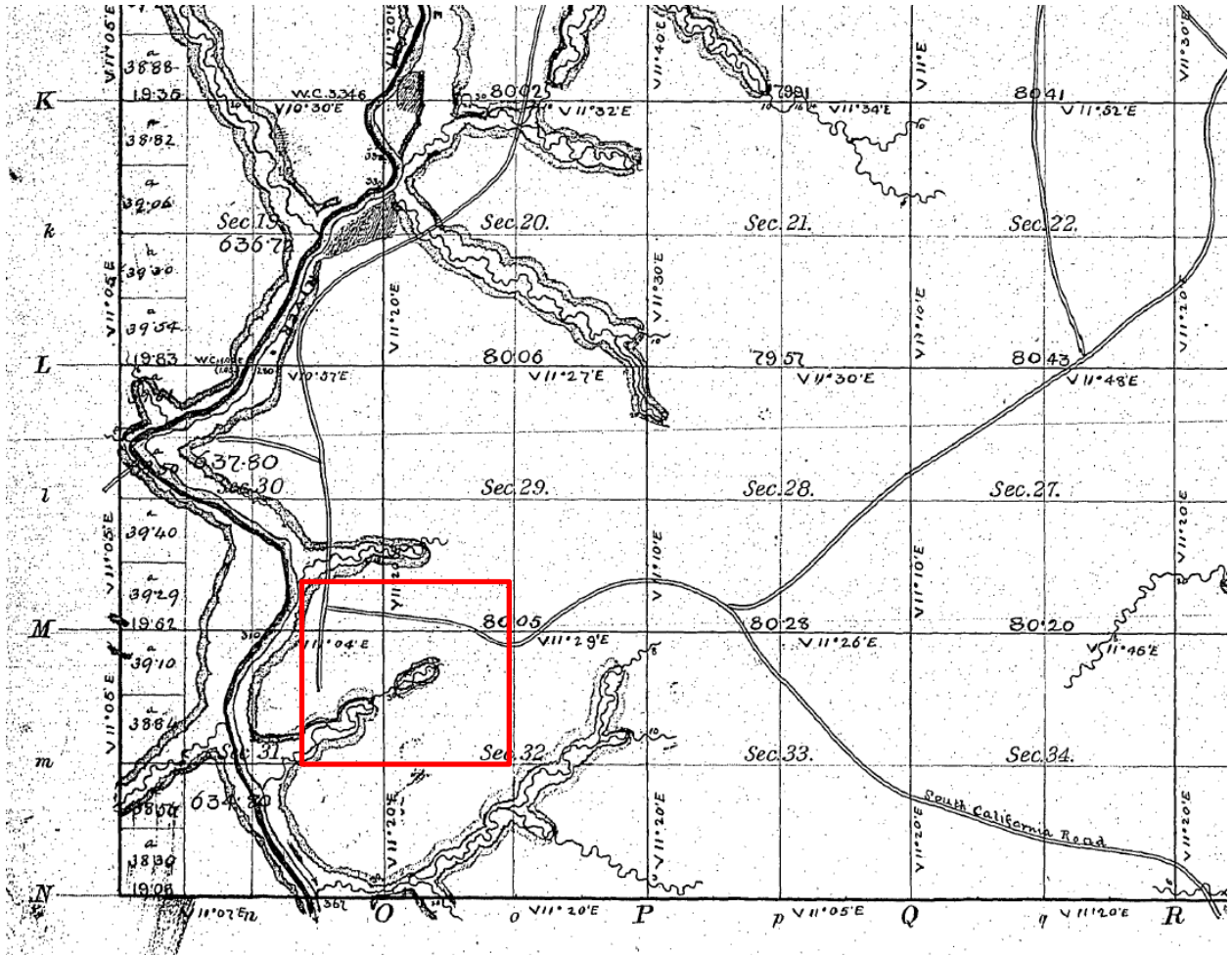




Figure 7: 1858 General Land Office survey of Alcove Spring area (within box).

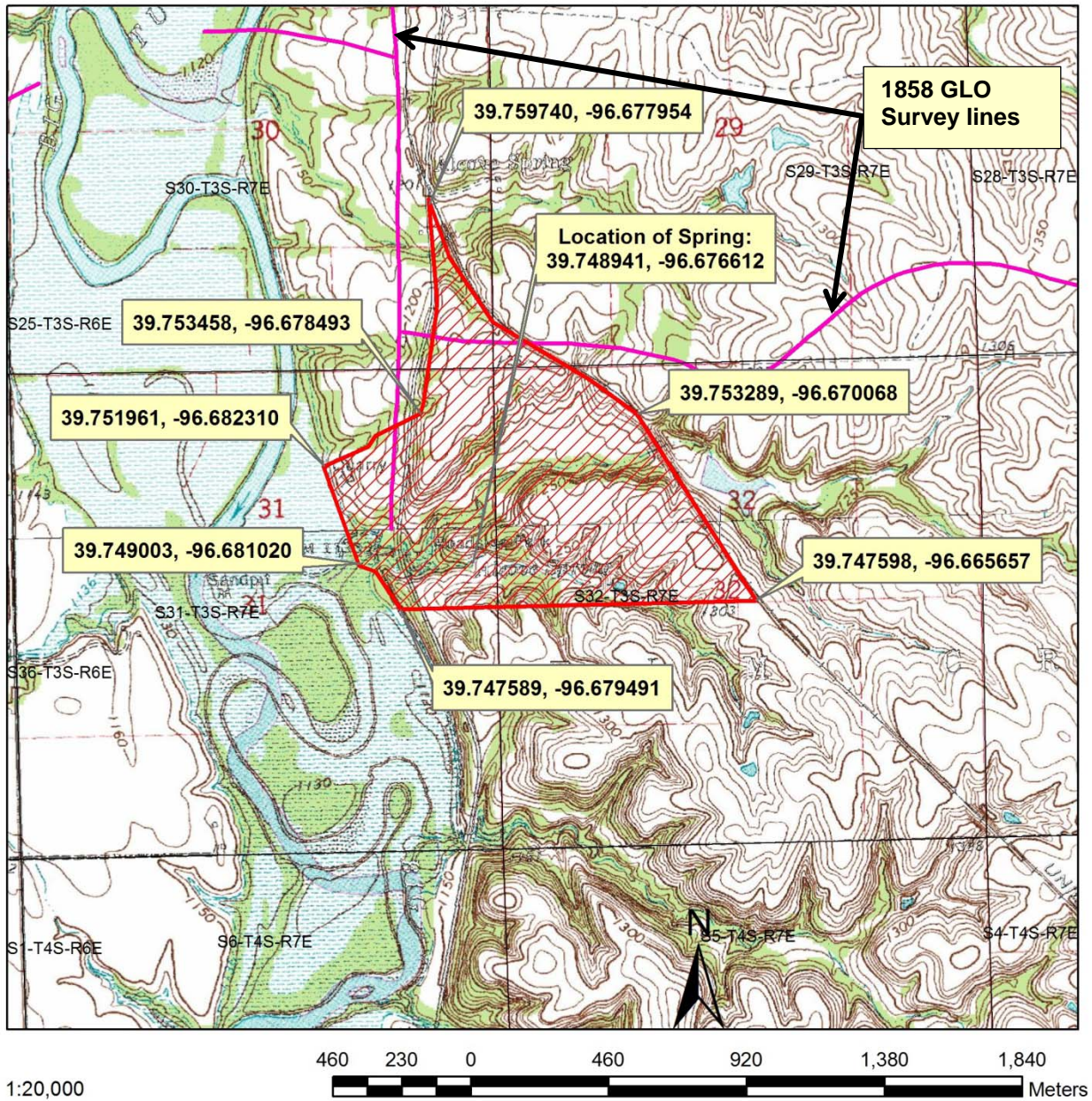


**Photograph Key.**



Numbers correspond to photographs.  
North is up.

**Boundary Map.**



Alcove Spring (Boundary Amendment)  
Blue Rapids vicinity, Marshall County, Kansas  
1858 General Land Office survey lines shown cutting through boundary.

Site boundary is within hatched area.  
Total boundary area: 246 acres  
(Exclusive of East River Road & its right-of-way)

Map Datum = WGS84

**Contextual Map.**  
Arrow indicates location of Alcove Spring.

