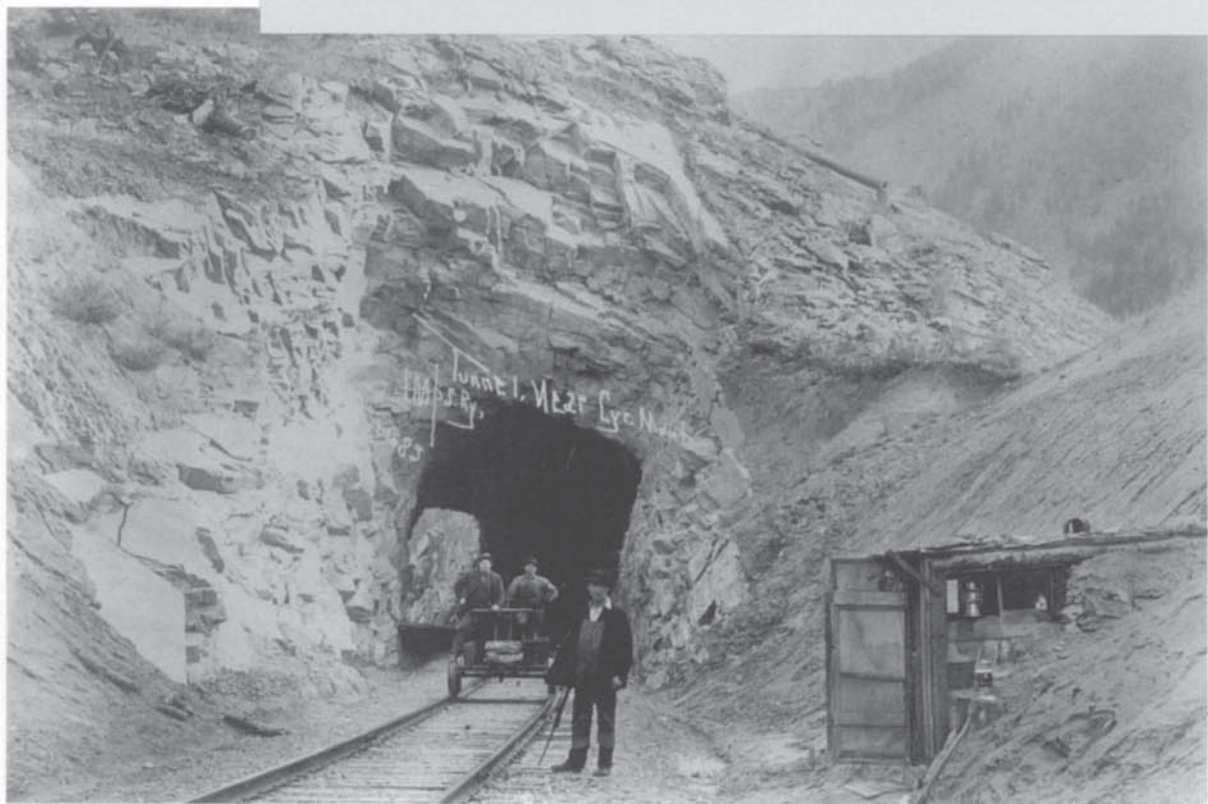


The Montana Traveler



Courtesy Chuck Mead

Mullan's Point of Rocks Preserving Transportation History

by Jon Axline

Few people remember the Mullan Road today, but in its heyday it was a much traveled route through western Montana, northern Idaho, and eastern Washington. An essential thoroughfare for travelers and freight wagons entering early-day Montana from the west, the Mullan was the first engineered road built in the region. Completed in August 1860 under the direction of Lieutenant John Mullan of the U.S. Army's Topographical Engineers, it was a 624-mile route that connected Walla Walla in southeastern Washington with Fort Benton, Montana, head of navigation for the upper Missouri River. Much of the road has disappeared, victim to overlays of newer transportation routes, but recently the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) began preserving a two-mile stretch of it in northwestern Montana. Called the Point of Rocks, this portion of the road, plus a 252-foot tunnel

An inspection crew pauses at the western portal to the Milwaukee Road tunnel west of Alberton, Montana, in 1914. The tunnel is now part of an interpretive trail dedicated to the memory of the Mullan Road, which in the 1860s ran above the tunnel.

nel built for the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad (the Milwaukee Road) in 1907-1908, is to become an interpretive trail.

The Mullan Road lacks much of the excitement and romance that characterized other pioneer wagon roads in Montana. No hostile Indians contended its use, road agents did not terrorize it, and Fort Shaw was the only military post constructed along its route to protect travelers. Still, it was one of the most scenic and heavily used thoroughfares during Montana's territorial years. Originally intended as a military road, the Mullan's real importance was as a public highway over which passed thousands of people and tons of freight, some on the backs of camels, destined for the Montana gold camps.

When Lieutenant John Mullan first arrived in Montana in 1853 with Washington governor Isaac Stevens, his charge was to find a transcontinental railroad route.

Mullan's interest quickly turned to constructing a military wagon road, however, and in 1858 with Stevens's help, he convinced Congress to appropriate \$100,000 for its construction. Work began in July 1859, and the 110-man work crew and a military escort, moving west to east, crossed the Bitterroot Mountains over Look-out Pass late that same year before wintering at Cantonment Jordan on the St. Regis River near modern-day Superior, Montana.

The following April, Mullan's expedition found its passage blocked by a mountain spur that extended down to the edge of the Clark Fork River. With nowhere else to go, Mullan pushed the road through two places he later called the "Big Side Cut" and "Point of Rocks." Blasting passages through a number of rocky defiles, civilian and military men alike labored six weeks on the six miles of cuts. After finishing the most difficult section, Mullan went on to complete his road to Fort Benton on August 1, 1860, and five days later led Major George Blake and 292 soldiers back over it to Fort Walla Walla—the only time the army used the road as intended.


Over the next two years, Mullan improved the road in hopes it would become a military thoroughfare. By late 1864, however, the road was heavily traveled by freighters, miners, and other emigrants traveling from mountain mining camps to Fort Benton and back. In 1869 the territorial legislature designated it Montana's first public highway, but a disappointed Mullan, a staunch promoter of agricultural development, believed the road never achieved its full potential.

Later emigrants to Montana often traveled up the Missouri River or north from Salt Lake City, rendering connections from the west less important. When the Milwaukee Road, Montana's third transcontinental railroad, constructed its line along the Clark Fork River west of Missoula in 1909, it obliterated much of the original Mullan Road but bypassed several hundred feet of it at Point of Rocks. In the early 1910s, Missoula County built a new road on the south side of the river, and the Point of Rocks portion of the Mullan Road was abandoned to all but the most determined motorists. The wreck of a Model T at the bottom of one hill testifies to its hazards even in the early twentieth century. Construction of Interstate 90 through the

Clark Fork River canyon in western Montana some fifty years later further isolated the Point of Rocks section and thus saved it from destruction.

Located about two miles west of Alberton, the Point of Rocks segment appears much as it did in 1862. The road is easy to follow as it winds its way up and around the mountainside above the river. The expedition's handiwork is everywhere apparent, from the black powder-blasted rock cuts to hand-laid rock retaining walls. That the road is never far from the abandoned railroad or the interstate highway does not diminish

its connection to 1860s Montana. Little is required to imagine the wagon trains that once passed over it nearly 140 years ago, yet the layering of transportation routes is obvious. From one point the sojourner can look out across the grades of two transcontinental railroads (the Northern Pacific and Milwaukee), the old Yellowstone Trail, U.S. Highway 10, and Interstate 90.

The MDT became the segment's owner in late 1999 through mitigation exchange for other construction it undertook on historic railroad grades in western Montana. In time, a two-mile loop with interpretive markers, benches, and other improvements will be developed. Until then, one can walk this part of the Mullan Road by taking Exit 75 off Interstate 90, twenty-nine miles west of Missoula at Alberton, turning left on the frontage road (old U.S. Highway 10), and proceeding northwest about two miles to an abandoned gravel pit west of the road, just past the remains of a railroad bridge. Turn left into the pit and follow the two-track road through it to a spot marked by a sign. Walk a half mile down the abandoned railroad grade to a sign directing you to the old road. Be sure to follow the orange flags along the one-mile route. The Point of Rocks segment winds high above the Clark Fork River with many steep hills and precipitous descents before the old railroad grade returns you to the parking area. For a detailed map, contact me at the Montana Department of Transportation, 2701 Prospect Avenue, Helena, Montana 59620-1001. 

JON AXLINE is a historian for the Montana Department of Transportation. Among other projects, he is working to preserve the Mullan Road site.

