

# Devil's Gate - Martin's Cove Area: Interpretive and Site Development Planning Meeting Notes

*August 20–21, 2019*



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In August 2019, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (“the Church”) hosted a two day interpretive planning meeting at the Mormon Handcart Visitor Center in Natrona County, WY. The purpose of the meeting was to bring together key stakeholders and landowners to generate ideas about how to collectively interpret the stories of the California, Mormon Pioneer, Oregon and Pony Express national historic trails within the Devil’s Gate - Martin’s Cove historic area. The meeting also considered site development and wayfinding options to help guide visitors around the area. Parts of the site are owned and/or managed by the Church, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the Wyoming Office of State Lands and Investments, so collaborative planning for interpretation is intended to create a coordinated experience for the public visiting any or all of the related sites. In attendance were representatives from the Church’s Historic Sites Division and Tom Sun Ranch management; Bureau of Land Management Wyoming State Office and High Plains District Office (Casper); Wyoming State Parks; Oregon-California Trails Association; National Pony Express Association; and the National Park Service - National Trails (administrators of the four national historic trails).

The meeting included site visits to the locations currently accessible to the public; evaluations and discussion of existing interpretation and facilities; activities to identify and prioritize key trail stories and where in the area they might best be told; and discussions of potential media types and adjustments to existing signage and facilities to improve wayfinding and overall experience for visitors to the area.



Activity map linking primary interpretive topics with area locations

## Primary Interpretive Topics

The following topics were determined, through a group prioritization exercise, to be the most important stories for the project area:

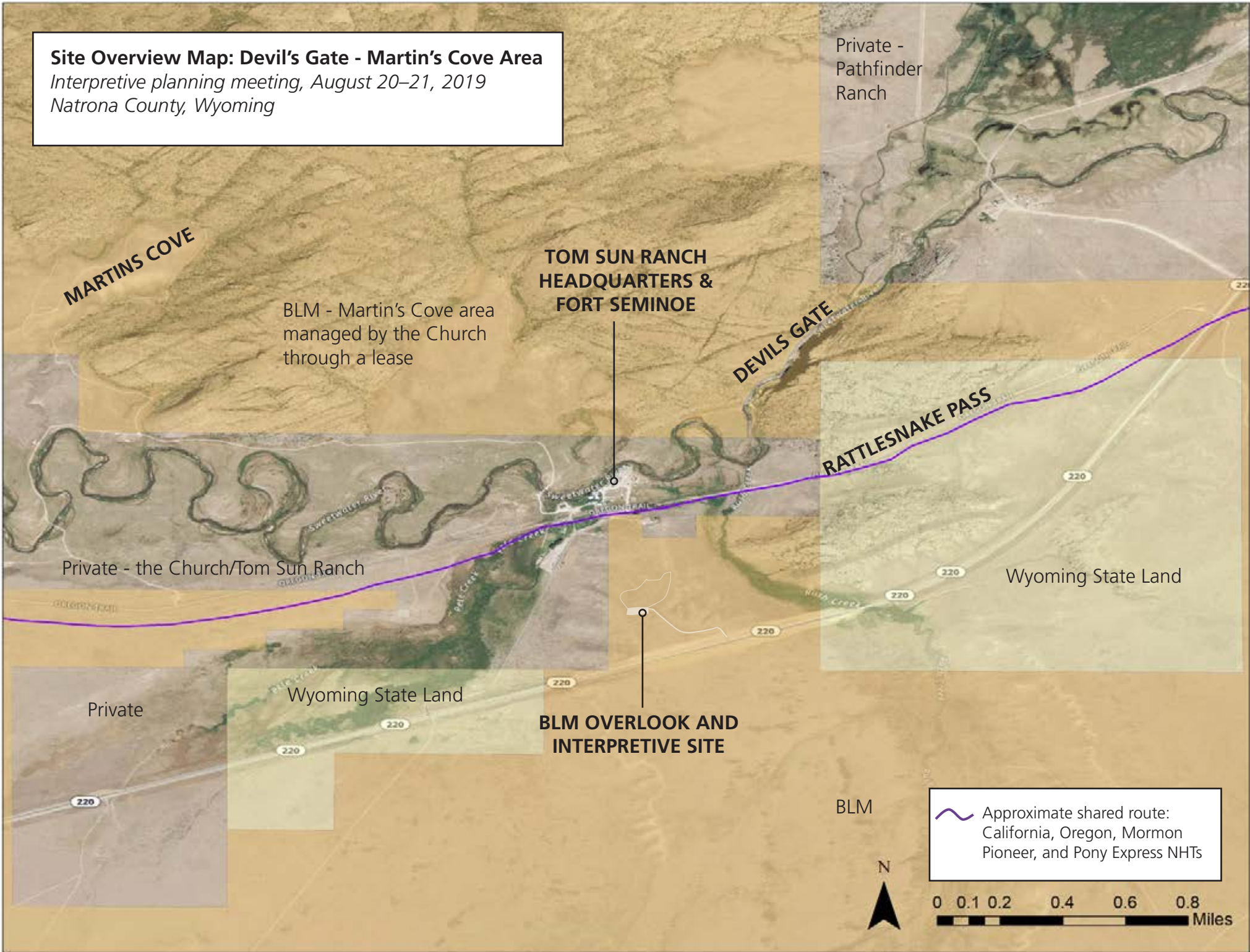
- I. *Landmarks — value to trail travelers then and today*
- II. *Martin’s Cove — Handcart company tragedy, today’s handcart reenactments*
- III. *Rattlesnake Pass — everyone passed through it!*
- IV. *Geography — role landscape played in determining trail route for indigenous, trail-period, and modern travelers*
- V. *Sun Ranch — large, historic, private, welcomes the public*
- VI. *Fort Seminoe — role of Fort during trail travel, involvement of American Indians*
- VII. *Water — Importance of fresh water; challenges posed by water*

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**Site Overview Map: Devil's Gate - Martin's Cove Area**

*Interpretive planning meeting, August 20–21, 2019  
Natrona County, Wyoming*





## BLM Overlook: Existing and Proposed Interpretive Topics

Equipped with seven primary interpretive topics developed on the first workshop day, participants split into two groups and discussed current and future exhibit topics along the BLM overlook trail. NPS staff reviewed both teams' ideas and selected the most common ideas that best matched the landscape views. The additional discussion topics reflect other ideas mentioned by the groups.

### I *Currently "Martin's Cove" and View of Split Rock*

- Primary topic: Martin's Cove—best view of that area—Martin's Cove made the best shelter available (solar heat radiating off the rocks, partial protection from wind, etc.)
- Additional discussion topics: Landmarks' role in wayfinding, with excellent view of Split Rock in distance (and South Pass beyond), view of Sweetwater River valley, view of Devil's Gate from east side of trail, and a view towards Martin's Cove. Invitation to visit the ranch.

#### Recommendation:

- Focus information about visiting sites at location II and landmarks at III.
- Introduce the Martin's Cove handcart tragedy and the reenactment here, but save most of the details for within Martin's Cove itself, or down the now dead-end road headed west from the ranch, where the view into the Cove is fantastic. Visitors primarily interested in this story can get more details at the Cove itself, at the visitor center, or by participating in the handcart reenactment.

### II *Currently "Sun Ranch"*

- Primary topic: Sun Ranch; Invitation from BLM, Church/Sun Ranch, and State of Wyoming to visit, including map and descriptions/

images of sites accessible from the Ranch. One possible trailhead for a route leading down to the Ranch could be located near this wayside.

- Additional discussion topics: Land ownership, alternate possible place to cover Devil's Gate (similar but distinct view from III, see below.) Probably not the best 180° view as limited visibility of old highway through Sun Ranch area. Discussion of multiple panels facing both directions for the full view of the trail but this probably best located at III also.

#### Recommendation:

- Since this site lacks the distinct views that the other locations have, and the group clearly wished to invite people to do more, this location is best used to introduce the ranch, all the landowners, and welcome people to visit. Since the fort is not visible from anywhere on the trail the invitation to visit might also mention or picture sites unseen as an enticement to do more.

### III *Currently "Hardship"*

- Primary topic: Landmarks. Possibly the best 180° view from Rattlesnake Pass along the Sweetwater River to Split Rock . Discussion of the beauty of this site, 19th century landscapes.
- Additional discussion topics: If access trail to Sun Ranch were to connect to the loop trail here, could be a good connection to Sun Ranch interpretation, or to Devil's Gate if proposed trail were to provide a better view of the gate. "Devil's Gate selfie trail." Also could tell Rattlesnake Pass story here.

#### Recommendation:

- Use the sweeping views from this location to focus on the landmarks

visible today, used for decades by trail travelers, and used for time immemorial by indigenous populations. Discuss the importance of these landmarks, such as Split Rock being the lead-up to South Pass. Possibly use two waysides here, oriented east and west to focus on landmarks and the (mostly) 19th century landscape visible in both directions.

#### IV Currently “Emigrant Road”

- Primary topic: Rattlesnake Pass. Best view of the pass as well as old road coming into the ranch and clear view to Devil’s Gate and marshy area to south.
- Additional discussion topics: Geography/Geology, the swamp, and trade offs in trail route choices. Good place to mention that you can visit in Rattlesnake Pass. Also discussion about social trail and location of fence, see “h” page 5.

#### Recommendation:

- Take advantage of the best view of Rattlesnake Pass to share the story of all trail traffic passing through this narrow gap. A fantastic graphic image could be created showing a mass of humanity and animals disgorging from the pass and spreading across the meadow or camping (need to confirm historical accuracy of this).

#### V Currently “Following the River”

- Primary topic: Geography and Water. Using the wetland below to connect to the reason for choosing Rattlesnake Pass rather than going around further to the south where the highway is today. BLM may have access to an old picture of this same marsh to make the connection between current conditions and historic conditions.
- Additional discussion topics: Travel across the landscape – modern and historical, with views both east and west. National Historic Landmarks, National Register, and the National Trails System Act all come together in this project area. Discussion about whether the walk from the proposed new beginning point (d) was too far before one is provided an exhibit or other destination. Idea from BLM that it’s actually best to make



people do the extra walking at the beginning as opposed to a long slog back to parking at the end of the loop. Some discussion about need for orientation and context (suggestion that it would be useful here by some participants, but feeling was general that a map of the loop/of the site belonged back at the beginning of the trail.)

#### Recommendation:

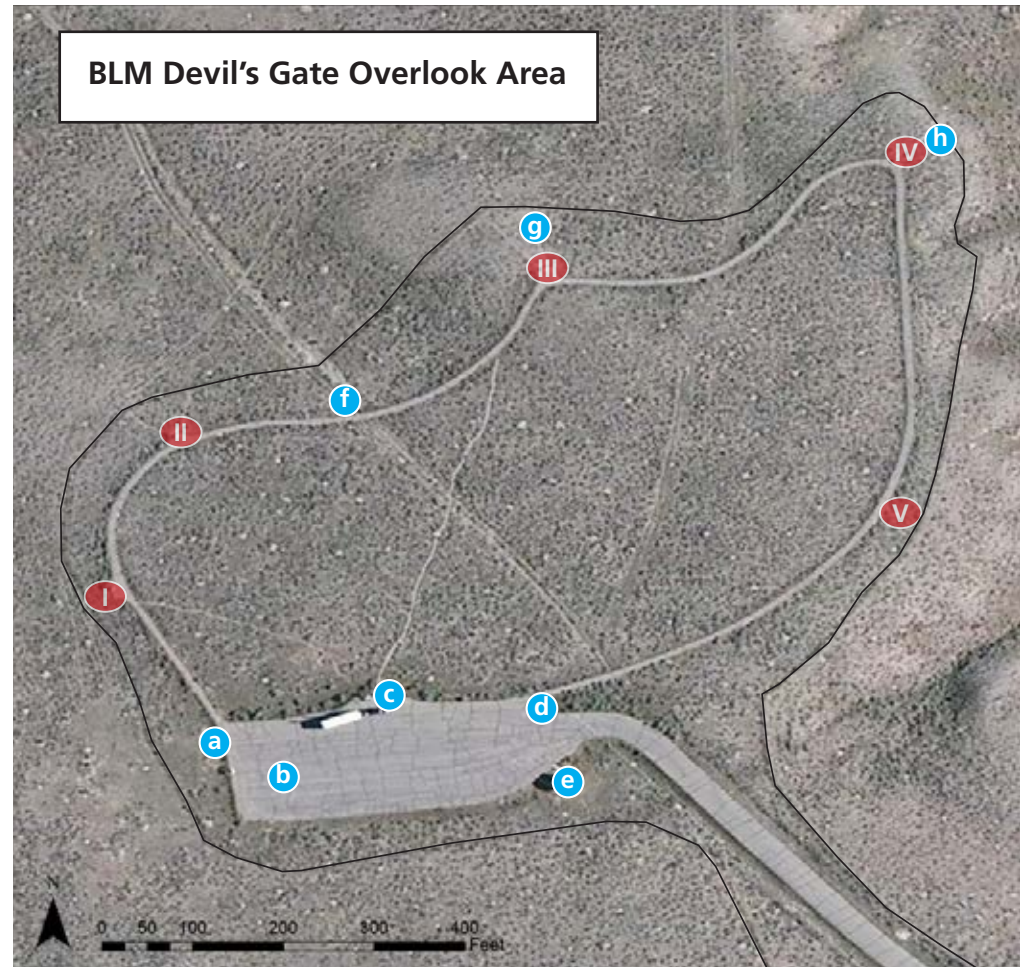
- Focus on the impact the geography had, as well as the challenges and necessity of water. The swamp forced travelers through Rattlesnake Pass; the Sweetwater River provided critical drinking water for trail travelers, and possibly does to the Ranch today and certainly did to Indians. Since the highway is visible here the idea of modern travel being impacted by geography and water could also be highlighted.

## Other Issues and Opportunities Noted at BLM Overlook

- a Current start point, at least based on location of trail register box and information sign. The trail register box is not highly visible and it appears the public may not start from here.
- b Discussion of size of parking lot, and pros/cons of using striping to control circulation. Interest was expressed in reducing the size of the parking overall, possibly using striping to provide organization and structure, and relocating some of the amenities (register box, signage) to one end—probably close to the restroom—to concentrate visitors near there and provide a clear access point to the interpretive trail.
- c Discussion of the location of the two exhibits at this apparent pullout on the side of the parking area. Content provides some overview but no orientation to the trail. When group arrived on second day there was a tour bus stopped in front of these exhibits so they weren't accessible, speculation that the bus stopped there specifically because the pullout was there. Removing these parking lot waysides also helps to move people onto the trail where the real story is visible. Also this location being the apparent start point of the walk seems to be encouraging the social trail cutting from this point through the middle of the loop.
- d Possible new start point for trail, as it is closer to restroom and entrance to parking.
- e BLM is undecided as to whether to keep and continue maintaining this restroom.

## Other points of interest along trail

- f Old road, possible trail swales. Prompted discussion of an access trail to Tom Sun Ranch, but there would be sustainability and historic resource issues with building a trail in the road bed itself.
- g Social trailing from exhibit to fence.
- h Social trailing from exhibit to fence. Discussion of whether the view from the fence was better than at the exhibit/on the developed trail (consensus seemed to be that it was) but concerns were raised about encouraging people to go over the fence and down into the wetland area below in an attempt to get to Devil's Gate. BLM likely to eliminate this trail given opportunity/resources in an attempt to avoid this situation.



View of Rattlesnake Pass from location IV at BLM overlook, with social trail (h)

## Signage notes and suggestions: Tom Sun Ranch Headquarters

- a** At location shown or further south before preferred turn into trek parking. Suggested new wording: “Church Handcart Trek Parking [left arrow]. All other visitors [straight arrow].”
- b** Replace existing sign with “Visitor parking and trailhead [left arrow]. Employee and accessible parking [straight arrow]” Possible addition, if determined to be needed: “No vehicular access to Devil’s Gate. Use hiking trail.”
- c** Orientation panel moved inside fence. Discussion of possible need for a shade structure over it. Panel can highlight the various activities one can do on site.

### Take a historic hike

- Devil’s Gate 1 mi RT
- Rattlesnake Pass on 4 historic trails 1.5 mi RT
- Martin’s Cove 5 mi RT
- [For ADA access to these sites by cart, inquire at visitor center]

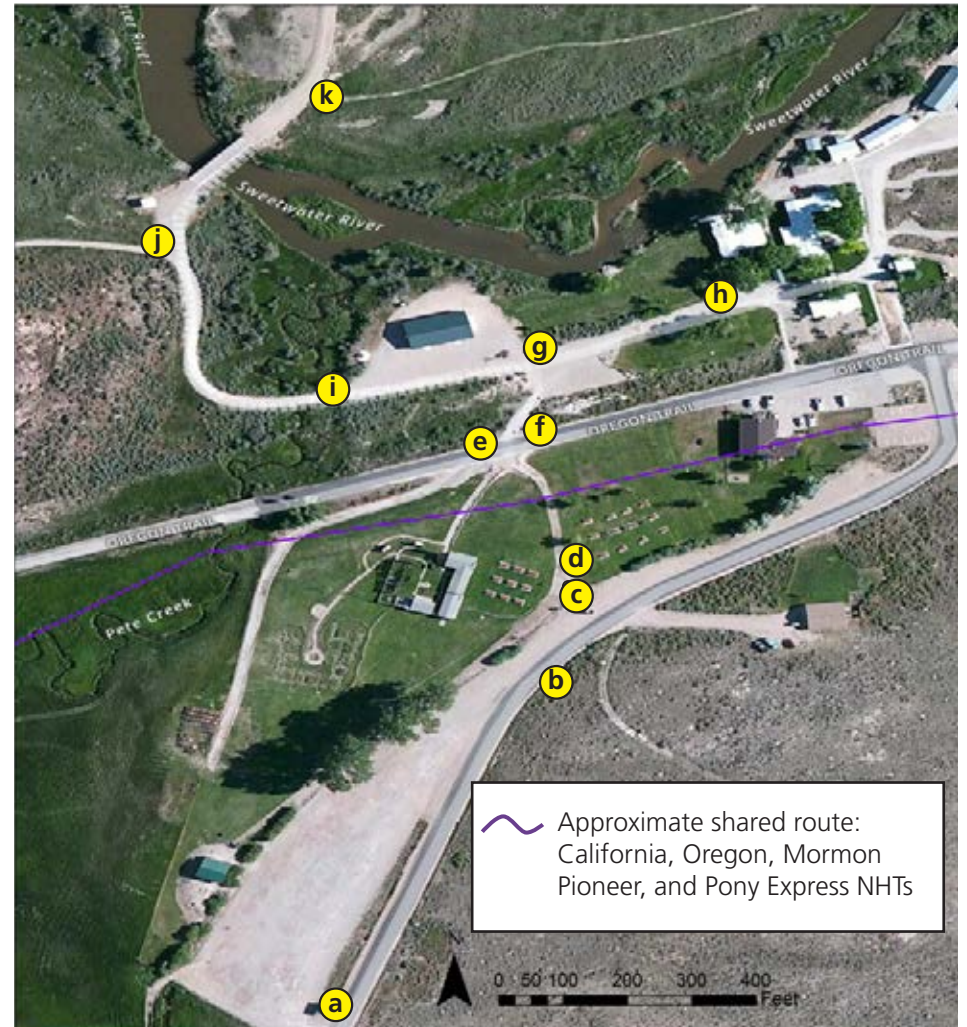
Visit the Church’s Martin’s Cove Handcart Site visitor center (use final site & visitor center name, if different)

Learn about handcart use in 19th century emigration to Salt Lake City

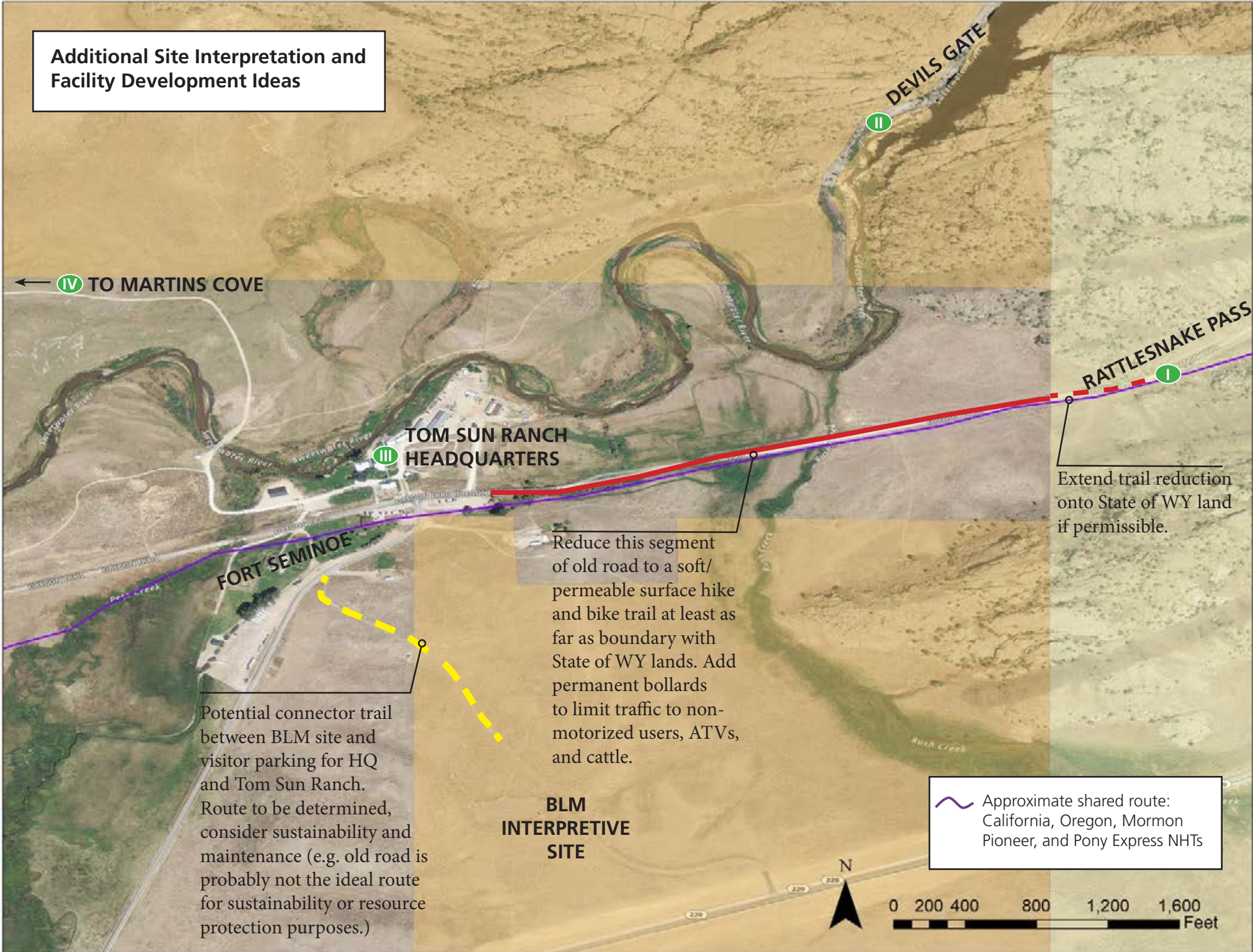
Visit a reconstruction of 1852 Fort Seminoe on the emigrant trails

- d** “All trails and sites [straight arrow]” confirmation sign just past orientation panel.
- e** Trail end distance sign(s) for all four NHTs, parallel to old road. This sign type lists distances to beginning and end of each emigrant trail, e.g. “Independence, Missouri [#] miles [right arrow] Salt Lake City, Utah [#] miles [left arrow.] Possible use of NHT logo stencils on existing paving. Also add a crosswalk to make connection across road visible from the orientation panel.
- f** Directional sign: “Rattlesnake Pass and Fulkerson Grave, with views of Devil’s Gate, 0.75 miles [right arrow]. All other trails and sites [straight arrow].” Straight arrow text may not be necessary if next directional sign is clearly visible.
- g** Directional sign: “Visitor center and restrooms [right arrow]. Martins Cove and Devil’s Gate hiking trail [left arrow.]”

- h** Directional sign when leaving restroom/visitor area: “Hiking trail to Devil’s Gate and Martin’s Cove, Fort Seminoe [straight arrow].”
- i** Optional directional sign with distances: “Martins Cove 2.5 miles, Devil’s Gate 0.5 miles.”
- j** Optional directional sign: Sweetwater Crossing (or other relevant handcart destination) [left arrow], Martin’s Cove and Devil’s Gate [right arrow].”
- k** Directional sign: “Martin’s Cove [left arrow], Devil’s Gate [right arrow].”



# Additional Site Interpretation and Facility Development Ideas



## Additional Site Interpretation

### I *Rattlesnake Pass*

- Primary topic: geography, numbers of people and animals that passed through this tiny gap in the rocks.
- Additional discussion topics: grave site, inscriptions.

#### Recommendation:

- Monitor inscriptions for vandalism; if this becomes an issue consider fencing to keep people removed from the rock faces. If fenced, remember that the Pony Express riders and Sun Ranch both move through this corridor with horses and livestock.
- Install one wayside just east of the grave site that faces the narrow corridor, and focus topic on the mass of humanity and livestock that passed through this narrow gap.

### II *Devil's Gate*

- Primary topic: geography, geology, water.
- Additional discussion topics: indigenous stories, naming of the site from multiple perspectives.

#### Recommendation:

- Find out who installed and owns existing wayside at entrance to canyon.
- Conduct research to determine if there are legitimate indigenous uses or stories for this site.
- Limit to one wayside (it's an unpleasant place to stand due to insects) facing the gate that focuses on narrow constriction that allows water to pass but not loaded wagons.

### III *Sun Ranch*

- Primary topic: historic ranching; handcart reenactment.

#### Recommendation:

- Interpret the handcart reenactment close to the parking area to allow people not engaged in this event to understand it.
- Interpret the historic ranch and buildings on the ranch property; avoid duplicating what is told at the BLM overlook.

### IV *Martin's Cove*

- Primary topic: Martin Company disaster, today's reenactment.

#### Recommendation:

- The Church and BLM to determine more detailed subjects and numbers of waysides here. These were not addressed beyond the basic primary topic noted above.
- Consider both the Church audience and the non-Church audience visiting this site and consider designing waysides that address this story from a more general sense for the non-Church audience, and provide more details at specific sites for the Church audience.



Devil's Gate

## Trail-wide Themes - California, Mormon Pioneer, Oregon, and Pony Express Trails

A 2010 National Park Service Interpretive Plan identified these themes pertinent to all four trails.

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### *Impact on American Indians*

The influx of close to 500,000 emigrants and communications corridors across and into the traditional homelands of the American Indians undermined the latter groups' political and economic independence in the trans-Mississippi West, resulting in resource losses, disease, violence, increased intertribal conflicts, and loss of lifestyle.

### *National Heritage*

All 19th century overland travelers shared similar experiences while traveling west: the drudgery of walking or riding hundreds of miles, suffocating dust, violent thunderstorms, mud, temperature extremes, bad weather, poor forage, fear of Indians, accidents, sickness, and death. These experiences — frequently recorded in journals, diaries, and letters — became a part of our national heritage and inspired a romantic movement in art, literature, and cinema that has had an enormous effect on American popular culture.

### *Strength and Survival*

The impact to the indigenous tribes was devastating. After suffering through the introduction of alien diseases and loss of homeland, the tribes were placed on reservations. The story of survival of the American Indian is a story that covers all aspects of human strengths. The dreams of the emigrant may have been attained, but the dreams of American Indians were altered as well.

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### *Past, Present and Future Corridors*

Though overland traffic declined dramatically after the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, the trail corridors laid the basis for communication and transportation systems that are still in use today. Railroads, modern highways, pipelines, and powerlines still follow the general routes of the old emigrant trails.

### *Intercultural Contact*

There was a broad range of intercultural contact ranging from mutually beneficial to violent conflict that led to open warfare.

### *Nature's Influence*

Landforms, landmarks, forage, wood, and water dictated the paths of migration. Numerous factors, such as weather, flooding rivers, adequate pasture for draft animals, and water for animals and humans affected the organization and outfitting of wagon trains and the Pony Express.

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### *Suffering and Hardship*

After surviving the journey, and reaching their destinations, emigrants still faced hardship, hard work, and deprivation to realize their dreams.

### *Superhighways*

These corridors were the “superhighways” of westward expansion during the mid-19th century, a period of “manifest destiny” when the nation realized its dream of stretching from ocean to ocean.

## Project Topic Connection to Trail-Wide Themes

By connecting proposed interpretive topics to existing trail-wide themes the overarching stories of these trails remain connected at all sites along the trails. Not all project topics relate directly to the National Historic Trails, though some may still find a connection to the themes. Some topics may relate to multiple themes.

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Theme</i>
LANDMARKS	Nature's Influence		
MARTIN'S COVE	Suffering and Hardship		
RATTLESNAKE PASS	Superhighways	Past, Present, and Future Corridors	
GEOGRAPHY	Past, Present, and Future Corridors	Superhighways	Intercultural Contact
SUN RANCH	National Heritage		
SEMINOE FORT	Intercultural Contact	Impact on American Indians	
WATER	Nature's Influence	Past, Present, and Future Corridors	



View of historic trails route exiting Rattlesnake Pass from southwest end of Devil's Gate

## Audiences and Media

*Different audiences desire and use different types of media. Identifying audiences and designing interpretive media targeted for those audiences is critical to successful interpretation.*

### Existing Audiences

- Students – 4th Graders visiting Sun Ranch and Trails
- Students – 3rd Graders interaction with Pony Express
- Trail enthusiasts
- Families with Church heritage
- Families with trail traveler heritage
- Tour bus groups
- International travelers

### Desired Audiences

- Indian Nations
- Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Park destination tourists
- Drop-in highway traffic (beyond using the restroom at the BLM overlook)
- 20 – 40 year olds
- More trail enthusiasts

### Existing Media

- Oregon Mobile App (NPS)
- Auto Tour Route guide books (NPS)
- National Historic Trail map and guides (NPS)
- Websites
  - NPS (California, Mormon Pioneer, Oregon, and Pony Express)
  - Church
  - WY State Historical Society - WYHistory.org
  - State of Wyoming - Monuments and Markers

- TravelStories app (status uncertain)
- BLM state web pages
- Social Media (NPS, BLM, Church, other)

### Future Media Ideas

- Don't duplicate efforts
- Develop media for the audience you want to attract
- Link to each other's sites
- Share content
- Establish calendar for posting on social media
- Use QR codes (determine where these should link to)
- Videos are the "in" thing with younger generations



Planning group visiting Rattlesnake Pass