

JOHN THOMAS JEFFREYS Fortune Seeker *or* Criminal?

BY JERRY EICHHORST



“A thief, a robber, and a murderer.”

THAT IS HOW HENRY CLYDE ROSS, A PROFESSIONAL GAMBLER AND DANGEROUS GANG MEMBER ALONG THE OREGON TRAIL IN THE EARLY 1850S, DESCRIBED A PARTNER, JOHN THOMAS JEFFREYS.¹ Yet Jeffreys had a significant impact on the history of the Oregon Trail in Idaho by establishing a new emigrant wagon route across the state in 1854. Hundreds of wagons and thousands of emigrants followed his route on their way to Oregon in 1854, the 1860s, and beyond.

Indian attacks on some of the 1854 travelers following the Jeffreys route killed more than twenty people. Very little, if anything, has been written, however, about John Jeffreys himself. The information about Jeffreys presented in this article is the result of my ongoing research into newspaper archives, emigrant accounts, and genealogical investigations. This sketch of Jeffreys's life is part of my forthcoming larger study.

John Thomas Jeffreys was born in Independence, Missouri, on April 7, 1830, and died on February 24, 1867, at the age of thirty-six, in The Dalles, Oregon. In his short life, Jeffreys traveled the Oregon Trail and throughout the West on a number of money-making adventures, married and had a family, and was involved in numerous violent, life-threatening events.

Confusion exists about how John's last name was spelled, which further complicates tracking the historical record of the man. It is generally spelled “Jeffrey” in later documents

about his route across Idaho, such as those held in the Idaho State Historical Society and in writings by other authors. It was spelled “Jefries,” “Jeffrey,” “Jeffreys,” and “Jeffries” by emigrants and newspapers of the day. Genealogical research has confirmed that although his forefathers spelled it “Jeffries,” John's father and his siblings spelled it “Jeffreys.”²

In 1824 John's father, Thomas Mathew Jeffreys of Kentucky, married Mary Polly Dickerson, also of Kentucky. The 1830 census shows them living in Independence, Missouri, with two male children under five years of age, a male slave, and a female slave. Ultimately, they had six children: Woodson, John Thomas, Sarah Jane, Solomon Mathew, Oliver, and James Knox Polk.

Thomas, Mary, and their children joined a wagon train of two hundred people and sixty wagons making the trek to Oregon in 1845. John was fifteen years old at the beginning of the journey west. After many months on the trail, they arrived in October in what would become Oregon Territory three years later. Within two years, Thomas, Mary, and their son Woodson had filed five donation land claims of 640 acres each in the Lafayette area of Yamhill District: two for Woodson, two

¹ John Francis Grant and Gerhard J. Ens, *A Son of the Fur Trade: The Memoirs of Johnny Grant* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2008), 48.

OPPOSITE This drawing of Fort Boise was included in a report from Maj. Osborne Cross to the quartermaster general, August 29, 1849. It was later published as *The March of the Mounted Riflemen* (Arthur H. Clark, 1940). Jeffreys spent time at the fort in 1854 while he was promoting his new route through Idaho. FORT BOISE, CA. 1849. LITHOGRAPH BY E. WEBER & CO., NO. 1254-D. IDAHO STATE ARCHIVES.

² “Descendants of Mathew Jeffries,” genealogical document and history provided by Mathew Jeffreys family genealogy researcher Janice von Schummer, email to author, October 25, 2018. The Mathew Jeffries referred to in the title was John Jeffreys's great-grandfather.

for Thomas, and one for Mary.³ At the time, Lafayette was the principal trading center of the western Willamette Valley.

In 1849 Thomas Mathew Jeffreys and two of his sons, John, then age 19, and Solomon, age 14, went to California in search of gold. After a brief but successful mining effort on the American River, they started to return to Oregon via ship. During the voyage on the three-masted bark *Louisiana*, sailing from San Francisco to Oregon, Thomas died of unknown causes. He was buried at sea about November 1, 1849.⁴ The announcement of the final settlement of his estate was published in February 1853, with his wife, Mary, and son Woodson, named as administrators.⁵

John Jeffreys, the second eldest son, remained in the Lafayette, Oregon, area.⁶ At the age of twenty-one, he married Mary Eleanor Burch in Polk County, Oregon Territory, on November 11, 1851. Mary Eleanor gave birth to two children: Sarah Louisa, born in 1853, and Samuel T., born in 1856. After only five years of marriage, Mary Eleanor, age twenty-three, died on September 24, 1856, leaving her young daughter and infant son. She was buried in the Burch Family Cemetery, Polk County, Oregon.⁷ The children were raised by Mary's parents. Sarah lived until age 85. She died in Portland, Oregon, in 1938. Samuel lived until age 65, passing away in El Paso, Texas, in 1922.⁸

Jeffreys's first known encounter with violence occurred in April 1852 when he was attacked at his house by an axe-wielding Indian. Although Jeffreys's shotgun blast only wounded the Indian, Jeffreys turned himself in to local authorities. Following an investigation, Jeffreys was acquitted on the grounds of self-defense. Jeffreys stated that his action was "both blameless and justifiable." Two men, however, identified only as Garrison and Lansfield, apparently disagreed with the acquittal and sought Jeffreys's arrest.

After seeking legal advice, Jeffreys fled to California and remained there until the situation in the Lafayette area calmed down. From Sacramento Jeffreys wrote a strongly worded letter to the *Weekly [Salem] Oregon Statesman* stating that he would soon return to Oregon to "meet my enemies, both *white and copper colored*, at the bar of public justice—feeling assured, as I do, that although the laws of the Territory permit the introduction of Indian testimony in such cases, that no honest jury of American citizens will find an innocent man guilty upon such evidence." Nothing further has been uncovered about this incident, but it appears that Jeffreys did return to Oregon.⁹

Back home in the Willamette Valley, in July 1852 John Jeffreys filed a land claim for 640 acres in Yamhill County. In September, he placed an advertisement in the *Statesman* for the return of one of his lost cows.¹⁰

ALTHOUGH JEFFREYS LIVED IN THE WILLAMETTE Valley for a number of years, he regularly left the area on money-making adventures. In January 1853, he went east to purchase cattle to take back to Oregon. He arrived in Arkansas in March. The *Pine Bluff [Arkansas] Republican* newspaper reported his presence there, in an item that was later reprinted in the *Weekly Oregon Statesman*:

Quite a number of young and enterprising gentlemen from this place, are fitting up an expedition to Oregon, under the supervision of J. T. Jeffreys, esq. They design driving some five or six hundred head of cattle to that lucrative market.—Pine Bluff (Ark.) Republican

Mr. Jeffreys, we believe, is a citizen of Yamhill county, who left on a visit to the States last fall.¹¹

After he returned home, Jeffreys encountered serious difficulties again. This time, a man named Atwood accused Jeffreys of killing George Cook and having conspired to kill Henry Ross while in Arkansas. The accusations were published in both Arkansas and Kentucky newspapers. When Jeffreys learned of these accusations later that year in Oregon, he vehemently denied them. As was his habit, he took to the newspaper, where he defended himself:

3 1846 July 13. Land Claim case, Vol. 2, pg. 078, Polk Co., Woodson Jeffreys; 1846 Aug. 13th, Vol. 3, pg. 038, Yamhill Co., Oregon Land claim [for Thomas Jeffreys]; 1846 Oct. 30, Land Claim Yamhill Co., Oregon no. 4822 (Land Claim in wife Mary's Name), Vol. 4, p. 213, Oregon State Archives.

4 Descendants of Mathew Jeffries, provided by Janice von Schummer.

5 "Final Settlement," *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, February 12, 1853, p. 3.

6 Evidence of this is based on a newspaper notice in the summer of 1851 that stated a letter was being held for him at the post office. "List of Letters," *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, July 15, 22, 29, August 5, 12, 1851.

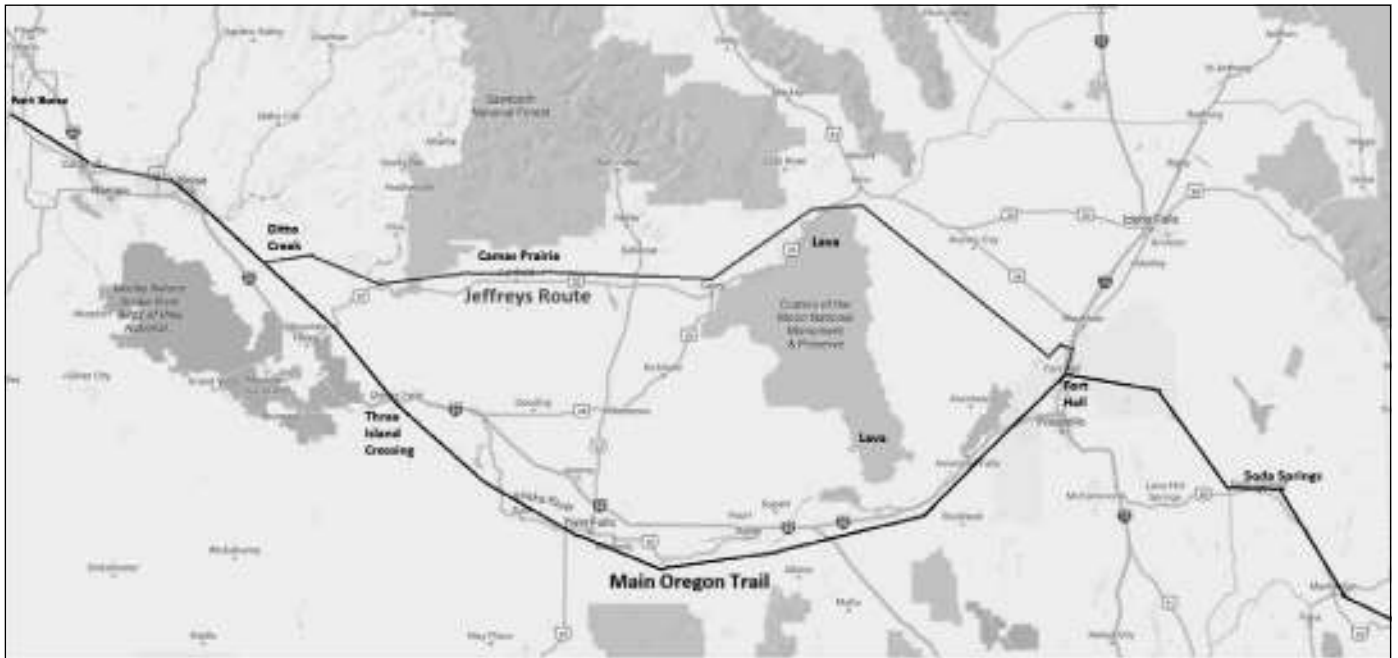
7 Burch Family Cemetery, https://www.polkcountycemetery.org/burch/records/display_record.php?id=255 (accessed November 13, 2018).

8 Find A Grave, online at <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/27849203/sarah-louisa-cauthorn>; also see <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/170194587/samuel-t-jeffreys> (accessed January 10, 2019).

9 John T. Jeffreys, "Letter to Mr. Editor," *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, June 15, 1852, p. 3, col. 3. Italics in original.

10 "\$25 Reward," *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, September 4, 1852, p. 3, col. 3.

11 *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, June 28, 1853, p. 3, col. 1.



MAP 1. Jeffreys's route, showing the wagon road he opened in 1854, and the main Oregon Trail across Idaho. Jeffreys built his ferry crossing on the Snake River, just below the mouth of the Blackfoot River, a few miles upstream from the site of Fort Hall. His route followed ancient Indian trails northwest around the large lava area now called Craters of the Moon National Monument, then curved west across the Camas Prairie until it rejoined the main Oregon Trail southeast of reaching the Boise River. MAP FROM GOOGLE EARTH AND CREATED BY THE AUTHOR.

Yamhill Co. Nov. 20, 1853

Mr. Editor—Sir:—I beg leave to reply to a statement which I see in the Louisville Journal, extracted from an Arkansas paper, made by a Mr. Atwood, which charges me with the murder, or offering a bribe for the killing of a Mr. Cook, and for laying plans with a Mr. Phillips to kill a Mr. Ross. Now, sir, as these reports are calculated to injure my character and that of my relatives, I deem it my duty as well as a privilege to prove to this community and to the world, that these reports are utterly false, which I will prove to the satisfaction of all rational and high minded persons.

I left Oregon in January, 1853, for the east, for the purpose of purchasing stock, and I landed in Arkansas in March, 1853. There are men here now who accompanied me and who are men of standing, whose affidavits I intend getting, and of men who were with me from the time I landed until I reached my residence in Oregon, to prove my course of conduct and the falsity of these reports, and will prove that Mr. Atwood's allegations are false; will also prove that Mr. Atwood is a worthless vagabond; I will prove that he is a man that I discharged at Fort Smith, on the 1st of June, as I considered him a worthless vagabond, a thief and a scoundrel. Mr. Phillips is now in Oregon. I will prove by Mr. Phillips that I never said a word to

him about killing or whipping Mr. Ross or any other person, but he, (Atwood,) was the man who was trying to raise a difficulty between Mr. Ross and Phillips. I will prove by Mr. P., that I tried to allay the difficulty and keep peace between them. I have ten men with my train who came through with me at Salt Lake Valley, who will be here in June, by whom I will prove all these statements to be false. I am very sorry that they are not now here, for I do not want my friends to believe my statement until I substantiate what I say by responsible men. I will start for Salt Lake in a few days, for the purpose of procuring the depositions of those men who came through with me, to prove to the satisfaction of my friends, that Atwood's statements are lies. I am a citizen of Oregon—a man who professes to be of a reputable family. I have brothers and sisters whose characters stand unblemished, and for their sakes, as well as for my own

and my family, is that I am so desirous of showing to this community the absurdity and the falsity of the statements. A great many of my friends seem to meet me rather coolly. I would beg of them to wait and if I fail to prove to their satisfaction that the [unreadable] false, then they will have g[unreadable] should any see fit to discard [unreadable] name from their list as a friend, I [unreadable] it, but leave no apologies to make to [unreadable]; but one thing I would beg of my acquaintances and friends, not to look upon my relations with any degree of contempt upon my account, but ask them not to take my word until I prove and substantiate what I say I have written a letter to the Pine Bluff Republican, purporting in substance what is in this, in order to give Mr. Atwood time and opportunity to prove his charges. All that I ask, God knows, is justice and a fair investigation of this matter. I am in a country where good and rigid laws prevail and I hold myself amenable to the laws of my country.

I will write no more, but ask of my friends to view this matter impartially and I think they will find me to be the same.

JOHN T. JEFFREYS¹²

Two brothers, G. W. and R. W. Phillips, had apparently accompanied Jeffreys on his return trip from Arkansas to Oregon; they may have been two of the men he had hired in Arkansas. Both men wrote letters to the *Statesman* in support of Jeffreys:¹³

Yamhill Co., O. T., Dec. 2, 1853.

Mr. Jeffreys:—As regards the charge made against you by Mr. Atwood, of laying plans for the killing of Mr. Ross, I can state for your benefit, that the charge is a lie—that you never advised me or any other person in my knowledge, to kill or injure Mr. Ross or any other person—that he has basely lied on you, which you can prove by others. As these reports are calculated to injure your character, I deem it my duty, as the charges are false, to let this community know it.

I have the honor to subscribe myself,

With due respect,

G. W. PHILLIPS.

P. S. Enclosed is a note from my Bro. R. W. Phillips. G. W. P.

¹² John T. Jeffreys, "Letter to Mr. Editor," *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, January 3, 1854, p. 1, col. 4–5.

¹³ R. W. Phillips and G. W. Phillips, Letters, *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, January 3, 1854, p. 1, col. 5.

Yamhill Co., O. T., Dec. 1, 1853.

Mr. Jeffreys—Sir:—For the satisfaction of yourself, relations and friends, I can state that the charge made by a Mr. Atwood, who accuses you of laying plans with me to kill Mr. Ross and whip other persons to death, is utterly false. I deny the charge, and here assert that you never advised me, either directly or indirectly, to kill Mr. Ross or any other person, neither do I believe that any of Mr. Atwood's charges are true. You was an entire stranger to me, but as far as I knew of your conduct, it was honorable and upright, and as for your laying plans with me or any other person, I reiterate it to be a lie. I am ready at any convenient time to file my affidavit that Atwood has lied.

Nothing more, but have the honor to

Remain yours, most truly.

R. W. PHILLIPS.

J. T. Jeffreys, Esq

Although the murder was denied by Jeffreys and the Phillips brothers, the governor of Arkansas issued an order placing a reward for the capture of John Jeffreys and three others in January 1854, for the brutal murder of a man in Yell County, Arkansas. The following legal notice, including physical descriptions of the accused, was published in two Arkansas newspapers in early 1854:

\$800 REWARD.

PROCLAMATION BY THE GOVERNOR

WHEREAS, on the 27th day of May, 1853, a most brutal murder was committed in Yell county upon the body of George Cook, by HENRY C. ROSS, CLAY GILASPIE, JOHN T. JEFFRIES, and CHARLES STEVENS, who have fled from justice and are now running at large.

Now, therefore I, Elias N. Conway, Governor of the State of Arkansas, by virtue of the authority in me vested, do hereby offer a reward of \$800 to any person who may apprehend the said Henry C. Ross, Clay Gilaspie, John T. Jeffries and Charles Stevens, (or \$200 for either of them) and deliver them to the Sheriff of the said county of Yell, in order that justice in this behalf may be had and executed.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand, and caused the seal of [L. S.] State to be affixed.

At Little Rock, on the 20th day of January, A. D. 1853 [1854]:

ELIAS N. CONWAY.

By the Governor:

David B. Greer,

Secretary of State.

\$800 REWARD.
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WHEREAS, on the 27th day of May, 1853, a most brutal murder was committed in Yell county upon the body of George Cook, by HENRY C. ROSS, CLAY GILASPIE, JOHN T. JEFFRIES and CHARLES STEVENS, who have fled from justice and are now running at large.

Now, therefore I, Elias N. Conway, Governor of the State of Arkansas, by virtue of the authority in me vested, do hereby offer a reward of \$400 to any person who may apprehend the said Henry C. Ross, Clay Gilaspie, John T. Jeffries and Charles Stevens, (or \$200 for either of them) and deliver them to the Sheriff of the said county of Yell, in order that justice in this behalf may be had and executed.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand, and caused the seal of [L. S.] State to be affixed.

At Little Rock, on the 20th day of January, A. D. 1854:
ELIAS N. CONWAY.
 By the Governor:
 David B. Green,
 Secretary of State.

DESCRIPTION.—Henry C. Ross is about 24 years of age, about 5 feet 6 inches high, spare made, black eyes and hair, rather fair skin, usually dresses well—occasionally very talkative, at times seems to study a good deal and has but little to say. Has a down look and avoids looking a man in the face.

Clay Gilaspie is 24 or 25 years of age, about 5 feet 8 inches high, compactly built, round shouldered, weighs about 150 pounds, sandy hair, red complexion, a great talker, and has a ready and quick reply to any question asked him, has a down look.

John T. Jeffries is about 23 years old, 5 feet 8 or 9 inches high, spare made, weighs about 180 pounds, dark hair—he has the appearance of being a very steady genteel man, usually dresses well.

Charles Stevens is about 23 years old, about 5 feet 8 inches high, spare made, dark hair—his upper front teeth somewhat decayed, weighs about 130 pounds. Jan. 24, 1854. 26-42

The *Arkansas Whig*, January 26, 1854, posted a notice of the \$800 reward for John Jeffreys, Henry Ross, and two others wanted in the killing of George Cook. COURTESY NEWSPAPERS.COM, PUBLIC DOMAIN.

Charles Stevens is about 23 years old, about 5 feet 8 inches high, spare made, dark hair—his upper front teeth somewhat decayed, weight about 130 pounds. Jan. 24, 1854¹⁴

Additional information about this alleged murder is found in the memoirs of Johnny Grant, the son of long-time Fort Hall manager Captain Richard Grant. Johnny was twenty-one years old at the time and had spent the summer of 1853 in the Soda Springs area, a well-known and much-written-about Idaho landmark on the Oregon Trail.¹⁵ Johnny Grant gambled with—and lost heavily to—Henry Ross, who, according to Grant, was a professional gambler. Grant also spent time with other friends of Ross that summer.

Grant described what he heard of the incident for which Ross and Jeffreys were sought by the law in Arkansas:

[Henry] Clyde Ross and one Jeffreys were partners. It appears that they had bought some cattle from a man from the south and they agreed to meet him at a certain place to pay him for the cattle. They took the cattle but instead of paying him they killed him. They drove the cattle to Salt Lake, and Jeffreys went to Oregon while Ross remained in Salt Lake for a time.¹⁶

Grant's memoirs also included a quote, attributed to a man named Tibbets, a friend of Ross's, who said of the incident: "We are all thieves, robbers and murderers, but Ross is the worst. Do not waste words with him; if you have any difficulty with him, he will shoot you; simply do not let him shoot first. I know that he and Jeffreys killed the man from whom they bought those cattle."¹⁷

This author has thus far found nothing further about this incident. Given that there is no record of Jeffreys having

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Clay Gilaspie is 24 or 25 years of age about 5 feet 8 inches high, compactly built, round shouldered, weighs about 150 pounds, sandy hair, red complexion, a great talker, and has a ready and quick reply to any question asked him, has a down look.

John T. Jeffries is about 23 years old, 5 feet 8 or 9 inches high, spare made, weighs about 180 pounds, dark hair—he has the appearance of being a very steady genteel man, usually dresses well.

14 *Arkansas Whig*, January 23, 1854; *Weekly [Little Rock] Arkansas Gazette*, February 24, 1854. The proclamation incorrectly stated the date signed by the governor to be January 20, 1853.

15 See Jerry Eichhorst, "Diaries Across Idaho: Curiosities on the Oregon Trail in Southeast Idaho" *Overland Journal* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 25–36, for more information, including emigrant diary accounts of the Soda Springs area.

16 Johnny Grant, [memoir], p. 44. The memoir was first published as *Very Close to Trouble: The Johnny Grant Memoir*, ed. Lyndel Meikle, n.d., n.p. It contains the portions related to life in Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Oregon. The original is held by the family. A later edition of *Trouble* was published by Washington State University Press, 1996. A complete memoir, written by his wife as dictated by Johnny, was published later as John Francis Grant, *A Son of the Fur Trade: The Memoirs of Johnny Grant* (Alberta: University of Alberta, 2008).

17 Grant, *Very Close to Trouble*, 48.





been arrested or having returned to Arkansas, it appears that the Phillips brothers' letters published in the *Weekly Oregon Statesman* accomplished their goal of clearing Jeffreys; or perhaps Arkansas officials never caught up with him in Oregon. John Jeffreys's relationship with Henry Ross, however, would resume again in 1854.

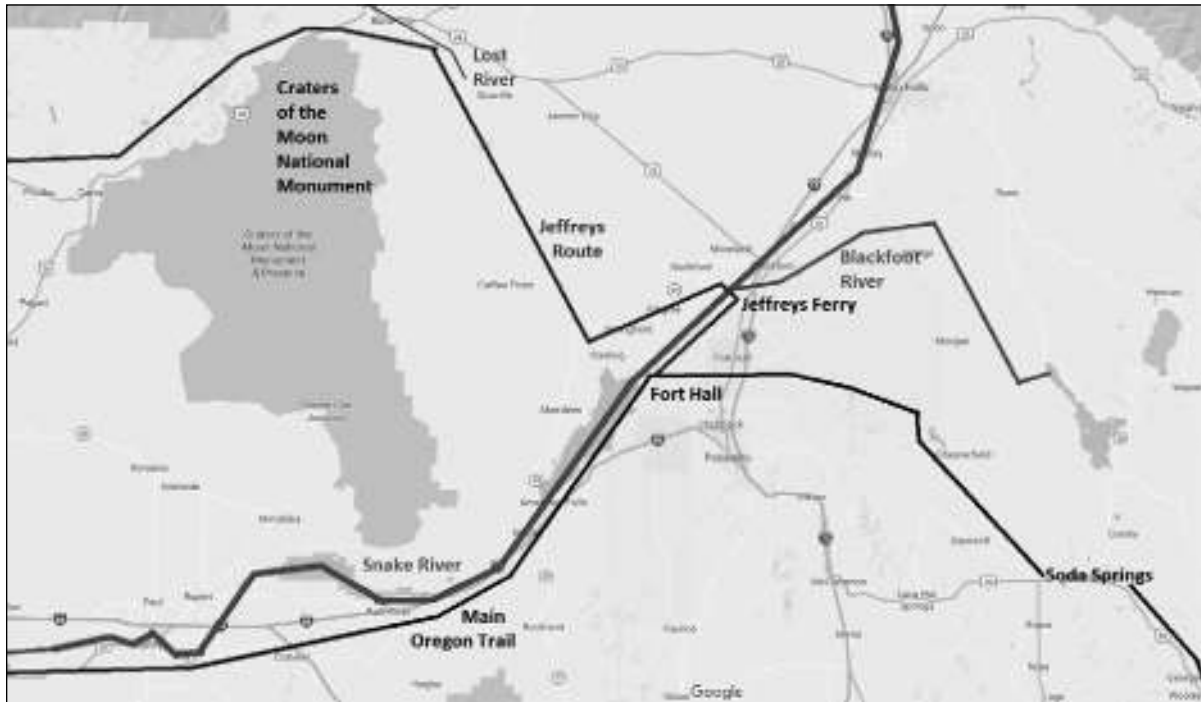
IN THE SUMMER OF 1854, JOHN THOMAS JEFFREYS LEFT Oregon for eastern Idaho, on another money-making adventure. This time he believed he could devise a profitable service to the wagon trains making their way west on the Oregon Trail. He envisioned ferrying emigrants across the Snake River and then following a new route across central Idaho that he had opened that year. Although he would charge no fee for the use of his new route, Jeffreys planned to make money from the emigrants by charging five dollars per wagon and twenty-five cents for each head of stock to ferry them across the Snake River.

He built his ferry crossing on the Snake River, just below the mouth of the Blackfoot River, a few miles upstream from the site of Fort Hall. His route followed ancient Indian trails northwest around the large lava area now called Craters of the Moon National Monument, then curved west across the Camas Prairie until it rejoined the main Oregon Trail southeast of the Boise River. Emigrant diaries indicate there were several men with Jeffreys at the ferry and on the Oregon Trail to the east, soliciting business for the ferry.¹⁸ Some of the men with him were Neil McArthur, John G. Garner, and Don Jose. It is unclear if these men were partners in the venture or worked for Jeffreys.

In July, while visiting Fort Boise, Jeffreys wrote to the *Weekly Oregon Statesman* describing his new route. He claimed his route was four days faster than the traditional main Oregon

¹⁸ Winfield Scott Ebey, *The 1854 Oregon Trail Diary of Winfield Scott Ebey*, eds. Susan Badger Doyle and Fred W. Dykes (Independence, MO: Oregon-California Trails Association, 1997), entries of July 30 and 31, 1854.

Pyramid Spring, one of several natural springs in the Soda Springs, Idaho, area, where Johnny Grant encountered Henry Ross and his friends. JERRY EICHHORST, PHOTOGRAPHER.



MAP 2. Showing eastern portion of Jeffreys's route and main Oregon Trail route in the area. Emigrants had to travel a few miles upstream to the ferry below the mouth of the Blackfoot River. MAP FROM GOOGLE EARTH AND CREATED BY THE AUTHOR.

Trail route along the Snake River.¹⁹ Several diary accounts note meeting Jeffreys on his new route in late July and early August 1854 as he returned from Fort Boise to his new ferry above Fort Hall.²⁰

The same Henry Ross who had been involved in Jeffreys's problems in Arkansas from the previous year arrived at Jeffreys's ferry in August 1854. Trouble between the two men quickly resumed. Neil McArthur, who took over Fort Hall for the Hudson's Bay company when Captain Grant retired, and was one of the men at the ferry that summer, wrote to the editor of the *Weekly Oregon Statesman* reporting his view of their latest encounter and the events leading up to it, which culminated in Jeffreys shooting and killing Ross—in what was determined to be self-defense:

19 John T. Jeffreys, "Letter to Mr. Editor," *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, October 24, 1854, p. 2, col. 5.

20 See Mary Stone Smith, *Travel Account of Journey from Indiana to Washington*, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia, MS 3415, July 30, 1854; Elisha C. Mayhew, *Sketches of a Trip Across the Plains*, August 1, 1854, Merrill J. Mattes Research Library, OCTA, Independence, MO; and Ebey, *The 1854 Oregon Trail Diary of Winfield Scott Ebey*, August 3, 1854.

Oregon City, Oct. 12, 1854

Mr. Bush:—Shortly before my departure from Fort Hall this fall, a man of the name of Henry Clay Ross, a notorious gambler, was shot dead by John T. Jeffrey, of Yamhill County, Oregon; the encounter took place 12 miles above Fort Hall, at a place called the Blackfoot Bute. Ross, it appears was a dangerous and treacherous man, he having shot two men in the States by taking advantage of them when disarmed; \$2,700 reward was offered for him at Salt Lake last winter by the Governor of Arkansas, who sent after him for having killed a man there, he also shot at a man four times last summer at the Soda Springs. On his return from Soda springs [sic] to Cantonment Loring, he lost some horses. On the evening of the 26th August he returned from Fort Hall (where he had been purchasing some goods) in an excited state, after waiting some time, he asked Jeffrey if he would go out with him in search for his horses. Jeffrey pleaded sickness and the lateness of the hour (it was then 6 P.M) as an excuse for not going, Ross insisted upon his going; Jeffrey consented to go as far as the ferry; when starting an immigrant that was with Jeffrey gave him his shot-gun in case he might see some ducks. On their getting up to the ferry, Jeffrey told him that he felt weak and exhausted, and couldn't

go any further than the top of the Bute, where they could see if there were any horses in the bottom or not. On getting to the top Jeffrey got off his horse to tighten the girth of his saddle. When ready to remount, Ross asked if he would go up to the ford of Snake river, 15 miles farther up; Jeffrey told him that he would not; upon which Ross went up to him and asked him where his (Ross') horses were You know where my horses are, and you have been talking about me; I am going to kill you, and then snapped his pistol at him—fortunately the pistol did not go off Jeffrey's horse being frightened by the percussion of the cap, left him on foot, and as Ross was bringing his pistol to bear on Jeffrey the second time, Jeffrey let him have the contents of his shot gun (which was loaded with goose shot.)

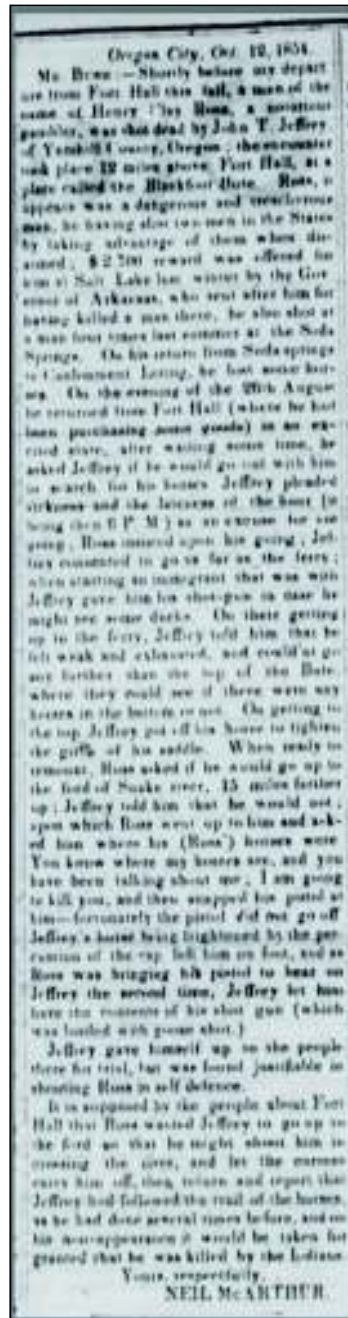
Jeffrey gave himself up to the people there for trial, but was found justifiable in shooting Ross in self defence.

It is supposed by the people about Fort Hall that Ross wanted Jeffrey to go up in the ford so that he might shoot him in crossing the river, and let the current carry him off, then return and report that Jeffrey had followed the trail of the horses as he had done several times before, and on his non-appearance it would be taken for granted that he was killed by the Indians.

Yours, respectfully,
NEIL MCARTHUR.²¹

In his memoirs, however, Johnny Grant provided his own, very different, version of what had transpired:

Sometime after [the summer of 1854] Jeffreys came back, I suppose to settle with Ross concerning the cattle. He had heard that Ross complained he was posing as an honest man, not like the rest of the gang, while he [Jeffreys] was as bad as he was himself—a partner in his deals, a thief, a robber, and a murderer. Jeffreys, knowing how treacherous Ross was, set a trap to get rid of him. He told Ross their horses were lost, and both men went to look for them. Sometime after Jeffreys came back to the Springs alone. He said that out on the plains Ross had accused him of hiding the horses, and they quarreled. Ross fired at him but his revolver had snapped and as he wheeled around, Jeffreys had shot him with his shotgun. This was not the case, for I was told by a reliable man that the horse hunt was only a pretence [sic] to get Ross out. It appears one of Jeffreys'[s] friends had taken the caps off Ross'[s] pistol and



Neil McArthur, one of the men at the ferry with Jeffreys, reported the incident in which Jeffreys shot and killed Henry Ross to the *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, published on October 24, 1854. COURTESY NEWSPAPERS.COM, PUBLIC DOMAIN.

21 Neil McArthur, "Letter to Mr. Bush," *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, October 24, 1854, p. 2, col. 5.

put dough in the tubes. Ross had not even shot at his partner. There was nobody to interfere with the murderer, so Jeffreys then took Ross' [s] horse and went to Oregon, where I suppose he posed as an honest citizen.²²

In 1855 Jeffreys may have left the Willamette Valley once again and returned to his ferry, in what had recently been designated Washington Territory. Wilhelm Keil's letter of October 13, 1855, from Willapa Valley, Washington, to his friends in Bethel, Missouri, talked of a trader, which may have been Jeffreys, coming to encourage them to cross the Snake River and take the new route to avoid Indian problems along the Snake River.²³ Jeffreys most likely abandoned his ferry operation early that summer because there was so little traffic on the Oregon Trail that year.

After returning to the Willamette Valley, Jeffreys wrote to the *Statesman* on August 1, 1855, from Amity, Oregon. His letter provided his opinion of several gold mining areas in the northwest, including Fort Hall:

Amity, August 1st, 1855

Mr. Editor:—As there is quite an excitement, prevailing throughout the country, in regard to the newly discovered mines, and as reports seem to vary somewhat as to the richness and extent of the mines, and being in possession of information which will settle these matters of dispute which I think can be relied upon, having received it from men who have been there, and from my own knowledge of the country, I therefore do not hesitate to give my views with my informants.

... and from other reliable information I am constrained to believe they [gold mines] are very extensive, extending from Fort Hall, or from the Salmon river mountains, north of Fort Hall, to the British possessions. I am well satisfied from my own discoveries that there are good mines in the vicinity of Fort Hall, in fact I believe the Hudson Bay Company have been in possession of this information for the last two years, but have been keeping it concealed for self interest, knowing that it would break up their Indian traffic.²⁴

By late 1855, Jeffreys's activities had taken another turn. Although his military record is not clearly defined, he was now a lieutenant in Company B of the Oregon Mounted Volunteers engaged in the army's fight against Indians near Walla Walla, Washington. Two letters written at Fort Henrietta by "H" and "LUKE" on November 21 discussed the scouting expedition in which Jeffreys discovered that everything at William C. McKay's trading post near Pendleton, Oregon, had been burned, but he saw no Indians.²⁵ B. F. Dowell wrote a letter that speaks of Jeffreys's command being engaged in battle: "Captain Humasson being at the time of the action at Fort Henrietta, his company was commanded by Lieut Jeffries, who was in the thickest of the fight and kept up a deadly fire during the whole action. The officers and men, one and all, are brave and gallant men."²⁶

In 1858 Jeffreys's name still appeared on a long list of men who received payment from the Oregon Territorial government for their military services.²⁷

By September 1859 John Jeffreys had relocated to The Dalles, a small community east of Oregon City farther up on the Columbia River. There he advertised as an attorney at law. It is unknown whether he went to law school or was simply practicing law based upon his own experiences. Now entering civic activities, he was one of three people representing Wasco County at the Oregon state Democratic Convention held in Eugene, Oregon, that fall. The purpose of the convention was to elect three delegates who would represent the state at the Charleston, South Carolina, National Democratic Convention later in the year. Jeffreys was one of a group of men from eight Oregon counties that withdrew from the state convention because they did not have the authority to sit longer in the convention; the men thus felt that because not enough Oregon

22 Johnny Grant, *Memoir*, 48–49.

23 William Keil, letter to Brothers and Sisters in Christ, October 13, 1855, cited in Vivian L. McLarty, "From Bethel, Missouri, to Aurora, Oregon, Letters of William Keil, 1855–1870, Part I," *Missouri Historical Review* 48, no. 1 (October 1953): 23–41.

24 John T. Jeffreys, "Letter to Mr. Editor," *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, August 11, 1855, p. 3, col. 1.

25 From Headquarters, Fort Henrietta, letter dated November 21, 1855, from H, *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, December 8, 1855, p. 1, col. 5; From Fort Henrietta, Umatilla Valley, letter dated Nov 21, 1855, from Luke, *Weekly Oregonian*, December 1, 1855, p. 2, col. 3.

Dr. William C. McKay had a trading post located near the mouth of McKay Creek where it flows into the Umatilla River, about forty miles upstream from the Columbia River near present day Pendleton, Oregon. J. W. Reese, "OMV's Fort Henrietta: On Winter Duty, 1855–56," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (June 1965): 132–60.

26 B. F. Dowell, "Walla Walla Correspondence," letter dated Dec. 16, 1855, *Weekly Oregonian*, December 29, 1855, p. 2.

27 "Report of Commission on Indian War Expenses in Oregon and Washington Territories," *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, April 6, 1858, p. 1, col. 2–5.

counties were represented, the convention should not elect representatives for Charleston. Jeffreys was then one of three men selected to draft an address setting forth the reasons for their withdrawal from the state convention.²⁸

The census of 1860 lists Jeffreys's occupation as a lawyer. He was in practice with C. Westmoreland at Dalles City, Oregon. Westmoreland was also a delegate to the 1860 Oregon state Democratic Convention from Wasco County, Oregon.

By 1863 Jeffreys had left Oregon again. In February, newspaper records trace him to Victoria, British Columbia. In what might be called his customary manner, he apparently wrote a letter to the *Victoria Chronicle* claiming that his property in Oregon had been confiscated because he was a secessionist sympathizer. With the Civil War well underway, dividing the country and creating strong opinions, his Southern-supporting views were not popular in the Pacific Northwest, where citizens strongly sided with the Union. The *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, which had published his many letters over the years, did not believe his confiscation claim, and reported:

John T. Jeffreys, of Victoria, formerly of Polk county, and more recently of the Dalles, publishes a letter in a Victoria paper, in which he proclaims that he is a secession sympathizer, and intimates that his property in Oregon has been confiscated. We don't think John has any property in Oregon, and are certain that he "or any other man" never had any confiscated here.²⁹

Jeffreys was apparently in Victoria as part of an attempt by Confederate supporters to purchase a British steamer in an attempt to disrupt federal commerce in the area. Jeffreys wrote to the *Victoria Chronicle* editor admitting to the plot

28 Democratic State Convention, *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, September 22, 1859, p. 2, col. 4-5.

29 *Ibid.*, February 23, 1863, p. 2, col. 2.

"News from the British Possessions and the North-West," published in the *Weekly Oregonian*, Feb. 24, 1863. The article contains letters exchanged between Jeffreys and the editor of the *Victoria Chronicle*, in which Jeffreys admits of the plan to buy the British steamer *Thames* for the Confederate cause, but protests that there was no plan to burn the steamer. The *Chronicle* editor responded by addressing Jeffreys as "Confederate Baron Munchausen," a traitor.

News from the British Possessions and the North-West.

We collect the following items from the *Victoria Chronicle* of late date:

A Plot to seize the "Snooick."—Within the past few days a plot, having for its object the seizure of the U. S. revenue cutter *Snooick*, and her conversion into a privateer, has come to light. The facts, we are told, were fully known to Lieutenant Selden, commanding the cutter, before he left here on Thursday in his vessel for the Sound to bring down the mails. The names of three conspirators, who belonged to his crew, were furnished him, and our informant says that he had made every arrangement to place them in irons on arriving at Port Angeles. The plot was to seize the cutter before she had reached Port Townsend, on her way up the Sound, overpower her officers, and send them ashore. The cutter was then to be headed for this port, and, after taking on board a new crew and supplies in the outer harbor, she was to steer away for the Southern coast to intercept the mail steamer. The friends of the Confederacy expected her yesterday morning, and the new crew was in readiness to embark; but as she had not arrived at a late hour last night, it is believed that the scheme has failed. Lieut. Selden is a Virginian by birth, but is said to be as true as steel in his devotion to the U. S. Government.

THE CONFEDERATE PRIVATEER.—From a communication published in the *Chronicle* of the 7th inst., it appears that the story of an attempt to purchase the British steamer *Thames* by a party of rebels in Victoria was really true. A Mr. John T. Jeffreys comes out and admits the fact, and clearly proves that the *Chronicle* was correct in its report of the affair published a few weeks previous. This man Jeffreys says:

I admit freely that there was a Confederate Commodore here, and that he had a commission in his pocket. I admit that a crew was picked, and that the object was to injure Federal commerce in these waters. In short, I admit everything that you have stated, except that the expedition was a piratical one, and that the design was to burn the mail steamer. That would never have been done, except in case of necessity, which, I think it safe to say, would never have arisen.

I make this statements boldly, not because I wish to render myself notorious, but because you have meanly—with a meanness which your friends never supposed you capable of—violated a confidence reposed in you, and made an affair public which you should have kept locked within your own breast. True, the thing had fallen through. True, the Commodore had left and the scheme had been abandoned; but, sir, by what right, or by whose permission, did you feel warranted in exposing the enterprise, without first consulting its leaders, or the parties who furnished you the information? I do not care who your informant was, and I do not care to know now, (time was when I might have cared, though) but this I will say, that he has betrayed a sacred confidence reposed in him, which he should have rather lost his life than to have done.

Whew! Mr. Jeffreys seems to be highly indignant at the editor of the *Chronicle*, because he exposed the hellish plot and thus in a great measure defeated the scheme. The *Chronicle* very properly informs this Confederate Baron Munchausen, that he regards him as a traitor, unworthy of sufficient notice to call for any further controversy, and dismisses him with just contempt.

At latest dates the steamer *Thames* had gone to Barclay Sound, and was still the property of Anderson & Co. of Victoria.

and chastising the newspaper for publishing details of it. The *Chronicle's* report had said:

THE CONFEDERATE PRIVATEER—From a communication published in the [Victoria] *Chronicle* of the 7th inst, it appears that the story of an attempt to purchase the British steamer *Thames* by a party of rebels in Victoria was really true. A Mr John T Jeffreys come out and admits the fact and clearly proves that the *Chronicle* was correct in its report of the affair published a few weeks previous. This man Jeffreys says

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Solomon M. Jeffreys, younger brother of John Thomas Jeffreys. COURTESY OF JANICE VON SCHUMMER, GENEALOGIST AND GREAT-GRANDDAUGHTER OF SOLOMON JEFFREYS.

In November 1865 Jeffreys was a member of a group calling itself Democracy of Wasco and Grant Counties, which met in Dalles City. He was appointed to the committee charged with drafting resolutions that had been determined during their small convention. Some of the more interesting of these were:

Resolved, That the Federal Government was formed by the States, and all its powers are conferred by the Constitution, and the residue of the powers were reserved to the States and the people; and we insist upon an entire uninterference by Congress in the domestic relations of the several States.

Resolved, That we are unalterably opposed to the extravagant expenditures of our State Government, and call upon our Democratic friends throughout our State for a strenuous effort to return to the policy departed from within the last three years.

Resolved, That the militia poll tax is oppressive and unnecessary, and should be repealed at once.

Resolved, That we explicitly condemn the policy of the party in power in our State, and the Legislature thereof, in prescribing test oaths to our citizens.

Resolved, That our State Constitutions was made by white men, and for them, and that we are unalterably opposed to any change thereof, with a view of enfranchising the negroes and inferior races.

Resolved, That the present Sunday law is oppressive, and should, with others of a like character, be modified or repealed.

Resolved, That we disapprove of the called session of the Legislative Assembly, and believe the same to be a needless expense to our already overburdened tax-payers.³¹

One month later, one-half of Jeffreys's property in Yamhill County was petitioned to be sold to pay for the debts and administration expenses as part of the settlement of the

30 "The Confederate Privateer," *Morning [Portland] Oregonian*, February 24, 1863, p. 2, col. 2.

31 "Democratic Convention," *Albany Democrat*, November 25, 1865, p. 4, col. 6.

estate of William A. Culbertson, an early Oregon legislator.³² Culbertson appears to have been a neighbor of Jeffreys in Yamhill County, but nothing else has yet been learned of his relationship with Jeffreys.


IN THE MID-1860S, WHILE JOHN THOMAS JEFFREYS remained in Dalles City, many of his siblings, who had also settled in Oregon, moved from the Willamette Valley to the Weiser, Idaho, area, and settled on Mann Creek near its mouth with the Weiser River. John's mother, Mary, who outlived at least two of her children, passed away in 1879 while she was visiting her children in the Weiser area.

The small Galloway cemetery east of Weiser is the final resting spot of John's mother, his sister Sarah, and his brother Woodson. Brothers Solomon and James are buried in the Hillcrest Cemetery in the town of Weiser. His brother Oliver died in The Dalles in 1864.

John Thomas Jeffreys died on February 24, 1867, of consumption, more commonly known today as tuberculosis, at Dalles City, Oregon. He was thirty-six years of age. His daughter Sarah, then about age 13, was at his bedside when he died. He is buried in the Saint Peter's Parish Center Cemetery at The Dalles.³³

Jeffreys's obituary described him as a widely known butcher and drover, and as a Southern supporter. The announcement of his passing did not note his career as a lawyer.³⁴ Bancroft's *History of Oregon* includes a short biography:

John T. Jeffries [Jeffreys], born in Missouri, in 1830, emigrated to Oregon in 1845, and settled in Yamhill County. When eastern Oregon began to attract attention he removed to the Dalles, where he practised law, but finding cattle buying and selling more profitable, he engaged successfully in that business. He died Feb. 24, 1867, at the Dalles, leaving two children, a son and a daughter. *Dalles Mountaineer*, March 2, 1867.³⁵

John Thomas Jeffreys led an adventurous life, traveling over much of the West in relatively few years. He seemed regularly to be involved with trouble, and often on the fringes of the law. As a Southern sympathizer, he supported unpopular ideals for his time and location. Jeffreys established a new emigrant route across Idaho in 1854, which later became a major travel route across the state for emigrants on their way to Oregon and Idaho. Because it became commonly known as "Goodale's Cutoff," John Jeffreys never received the appropriate credit for establishing the route. 

32 "Administrator's Notice," *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, December 11, 1865, p. 2, col. 7.

33 Information on Jeffreys's cemetery monument photograph, found on Find A Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/54394797/john-thomas-jeffreys>, accessed November 13, 2018.

34 "Descendants of Mathew Jeffries," Genealogical document and history provided by Janice von Schummer, email to author, October 25, 2018.

35 H. H. Bancroft, *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft, History of Oregon I, 1834-1848*, 529.