

1864 Baker City Township Map

(Before There Was a Baker City)

Part I

Introduction

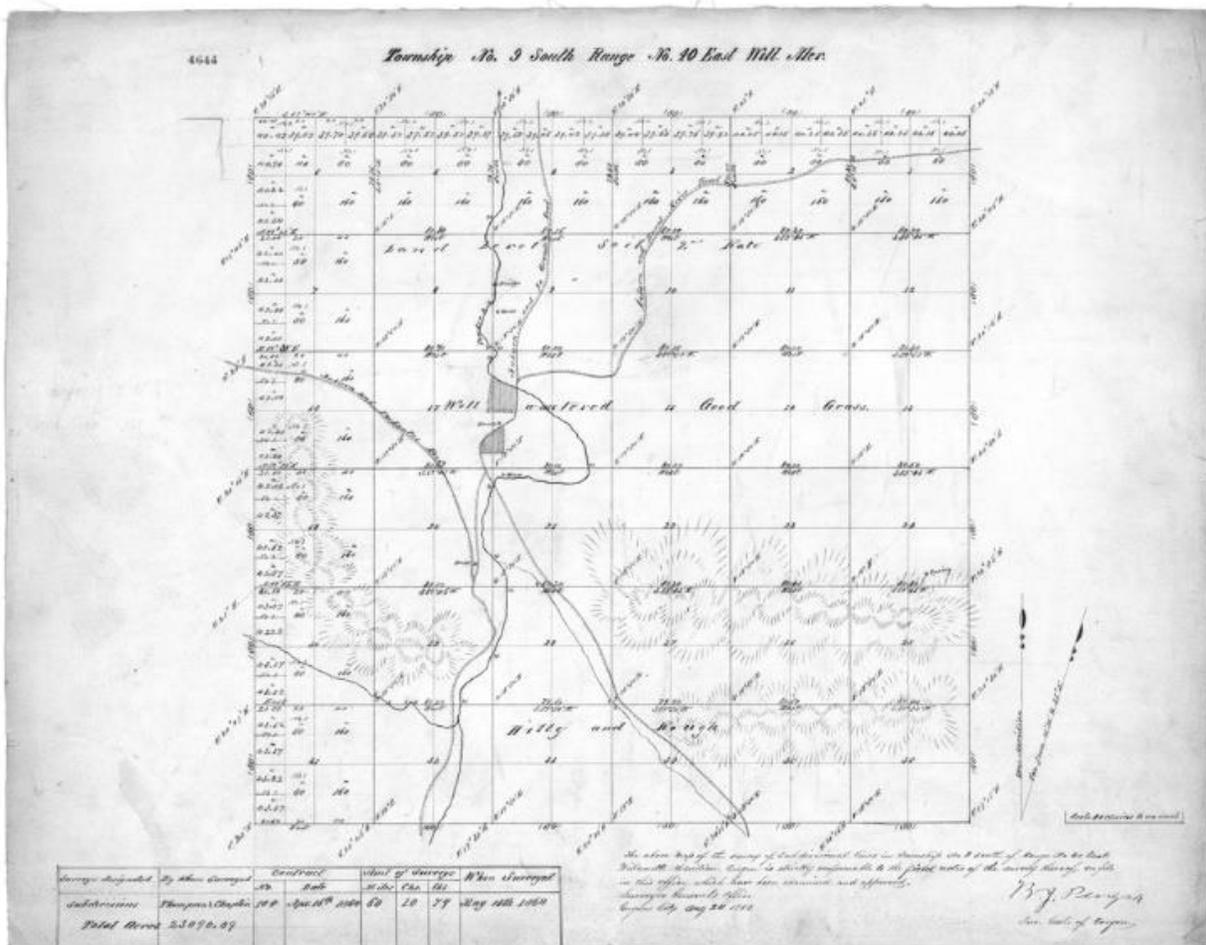
The 1864 Baker City Township Map fascinates me. It's the closest we can get to a "photograph" of what Baker City looked like before the town was platted in 1865. The oldest actual photograph we know of dates from about 1868.

The 1864 Baker City Township Map has several remarkable features considering the fact that in the spring of 1862 the only roads in Baker County were the Oregon Trail and a spur of that trail through Eagle Valley. What caught my attention upon first seeing the 1864 map is the number of wagon roads traversing the mostly sagebrush terrain of the township. Coming from all directions the roads converged on the area where settlement of Baker City would begin just one year later. Also surprising are two farm fields in the heart of the area that would become city. Once settlement began in 1865, the fields disappeared like an inch of snow on a warm spring day, leaving no trace that the fields ever existed.

Another remarkable feature of the 1864 Baker City Township Map is the course Powder River took through town in May of 1864, when the township was being surveyed. At Bridge Street the map shows the river taking a ninety-degree turn to the east for almost a mile, then northwest to Main and D streets, where it again flowed north. In this article I'll explore possible explanations for this surprising swing east.

The final features of the map are by far the tiniest but just as intriguing as any other features: four $\frac{1}{32}$ nd of an inch squares each labeled "House." Plus there is an equally tiny mark labeled "Bridge." All five features are located in the area that became present Baker City. Surveyor field notes tell us who owned three of the four houses.

Below is the full 1864 township map. Further below you'll find maps that zoom in on the area surrounding the two shaded-in farmer's fields that one year later became the part of the center of downtown Baker City.



The vertical township line (future Main St.) runs through the two shaded fields, which become the center of downtown Baker City.

Before going further, here is some history of how surveying got started in the U.S.

Public Land Survey System (PLSS)

In Oregon and Washington, land ownership is described in terms of where a given piece of land is located within a "Township." The township is the basic unit of a system that goes back well over two centuries, when the Continental Congress passed the "Land Ordinance of 1785." The ordinance created the Public Land Survey System (PLSS) for the purpose of describing precisely where land is located. PLSS is still used today, but now it is administered by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM.) An excellent history may be read and/or downloaded at the BLM website below. It may be more than you ever wanted to know, but I think it makes fascinating reading.

<https://www.blm.gov/sites/blm.gov/files/histrect.pdf>

The basic PLSS units are six-mile-square “townships.” Each township is divided into 36 one-mile-square “sections.” The Government Land Office contracted with surveyors to survey every one of the 36 sections of a township. A property’s legal description was, and still is, in relation to where the property is located within a given township. In 1864 the Oregon Surveyor General’s office was in Eugene City, Oregon, with a satellite office in La Grande.



Oregon-Washington starting point of PLSS is in west Portland

In Oregon and Washington, the starting point of the PLSS system is in west Portland, where the Willamette Meridian (WM) and a Baseline were established in 1851. The WM runs north/south from the Canadian border to the California border. The line runs, for example, 13 miles east of Salem and 17 miles east of Eugene. The east-west Baseline ($45^{\circ} 31' 11''$) runs from the Oregon Coast to the Idaho state line. In Portland, Stark Street, for example, runs down the Baseline. In Eastern Oregon the Baseline runs, for example, east and west three miles south of Elgin. All township locations in Oregon and Washington are in reference to how far they are from the Willamette Meridian and the Baseline.

Baker City is located in Township 9 South, Range 40 East, abbreviated T9S R40E WM. In other words, it is the 40th township east of the Willamette Meridian and the 9th township south of the Baseline. Since townships are six-miles square, the Baker City Township is 240 miles east of the WM and 54 miles south of the Baseline.

The Surveying of Baker City Township

In the spring of 1863, aware of settlement taking place in eastern Oregon, the General Land Office in Eugene, Oregon, contracted with surveyor Timothy Davenport to survey the exterior borders of township T9S R40E, which I refer to as "Baker City Township." Then in 1864 surveyors David P. Thompson and Daniel Chaplin were awarded the contract to survey the interior 36 sections of T9S R40E. In a six-day period from May 13 to 18, 1864, surveyors Thompson and Chaplin and their assistants, Z.S. Dotson, James K. Stricklin, and A.J. Stricklin, surveyed all 36 square-mile sections in the six-square-mile Baker City Township. In accomplishing that task the crew logged almost one-hundred miles in less than a week.

To give you a sample of what the survey crew was doing, I've transcribed the survey field notes as the crew surveyed north through the area that became Baker City. I find it the most historically interesting.

But first some technical information. The numbers that begin each field note, for example, 80.00, refer to the number of "chains" the crew has surveyed from the beginning of a section line. Two chainmen stretch out a metal chain that is 66 feet long, which is composed of 100 links. Each link is 7.92 inches long. Here's the math: $100 \text{ links} \times 7.92 \text{ inches} = 792 \text{ inches} / 12 \text{ inches} = 66 \text{ feet}$. When the chainmen have stretched out the chain 80 times, they have surveyed one mile: $80 \text{ chains} \times 66 \text{ feet} = 5,280 \text{ feet} = 1 \text{ mile}$. The abbreviation of "links" in the field notes is "lks" and "chains" is "chs."

In writing about the field notes, I make mention of what we see on the ground today as reference points for the reader. But we should keep in mind that the survey crew is on almost completely undeveloped land, where the only significant signs of civilization are some dusty roads, a couple of farm fields, and a scattering of squatters cabins. After field notes for all 36 sections were written, the surveyors, who have made contact with some of the occupants of the township, learned that the number of settlers in the township was about twenty.

In the following sections all text is quoted from the field notes without the use of quotation marks. I use three periods ... (ellipsis) when text is omitted or is unreadable. All text in () parentheses are my comments. Occasionally I add punctuation for clarity. The first field note begins at the south boundary of the township.

North between Secs 32 & 33 Ascend hill (On May 16, 1864 the crew is at the south boundary of the Baker City Township starting to survey north from the bottom of the township. This section line runs right through the middle of future Baker City. Front Street, now known as Main Street, is on this section line.)
40.00 Set Stone...for $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec corner.

80.00 Set Stone...for corner to secs 28 29 32 & 33 on top of hill. (The crew is on top of the hill east of Highway 7 at the north end of Bowen Valley. +600 in margin of the field note indicates the height of the hill.)

Land Steep and Stony. Good Bunch Grass.

North between Secs 28 & 29

Descend hill

35.00 Foot of hill. Powder River 70 lks wide runs North 10° E. -500. (2,310 feet from beginning of the section line. Powder River is 46.2 feet wide running a little east of due north.)

40.00 (2,640 feet) Set Stone for ¼ Sec corner. (This is at the half-mile mark.)

40.40 (2,666.4 feet) Auburn Road bears NE & SW. (The crew crosses Auburn Road, which is headed southwest toward Auburn, the county seat.)

50.75 (3,349.5 feet) Auburn Road bears NW & SE. (The crew again crosses Auburn Road.)

80.00 (5,280 feet = 1 mile) Set post for corner to secs 20, 21, 28 & 29....

Land hilly on 1st half mile and North ½ Mile Level.

Soil 1st rate (The soil is rated 1st, 2nd, or 3rd rate for agricultural purposes. The crew is now slightly north of the intersection of Colorado Street and Eccles Road in South Baker.)

East on a random line between Sec. 21 & 28 (The crew is surveying from the intersection of Colorado and Eccles streets one mile east, which is a little east of I-84.)

40.00 Set temporary 1/4 Sec corner.

80.20 Intersect N & S Line at corner to secs. 21, 22, 27 & 28 from which corner I run West on a true Line between Secs 21 & 28. Descend hill. (A notation indicated that the elevation drop is 200 feet. The crew is now headed back along the same section line.)

39.90 (2633 feet) Road bears NW & SE. (This is the road from Baker City to Durkee. It is unlabeled on the map.)

41.50 (2739 feet) Brook 6 lks wide runs NW. (Sutton Creek is 3.96 feet wide. From here Sutton Creek is headed to its confluence with Powder River about three-quarters of a mile to the northwest.)

70.50 (4653 feet) Powder River 70 lks wide runs N. (Powder River is 46.53 feet wide and running north.)

80.20 The corner to secs 20, 21, 28 & 29. Land hilly. Soil 2nd rate.

In Part II of the this series about the 1864 Baker City Township Map, we'll join the Thompson and Chaplin crew as they survey right up the middle of an area of some sagebrush and dusty roads that became Baker City.

Part II

Last week we left the 1864 survey crew at the intersection of Colorado and Eccles streets ready to continue surveying north. In Part II we'll follow the crew through the heart of Baker City to the north boundary of Baker City Township.

North between Secs 20 & 21

20.00 (1,320 feet) Powder River 70 lks wide runs NW. (The crew crosses Powder River at a point halfway between David Eccles Road and the present Powder River channel, which is 400 feet further east. This area was part of the Oregon Lumber Company operation. I have no explanation for how Powder River channel today is so far east of the old channel. Perhaps it had something to do with the company needing room for the tracks of its narrow-gauge Sumpter Valley Railway, which in about 1890 began bringing logs from Sumpter Valley to the Baker City mill.)

40.00 (2,640 feet) Set...post on East bank of River 9.50 lks (6.27 feet) East of true corner for $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec corner in mound of Earth with charred Stake.... (The crew is avoiding setting the $\frac{1}{4}$ section corner in the middle of the river.)

68.00 (4,488 feet) Leave River, runs NE. (This would be at present Estes Street.)

74.00 (4,884 feet) Road (to Auburn) bears SE & NW.

80.00 Set post for corner to 16, 17, 20 & 21 in Mound of Earth with charred stake....

Land Mostly River bottom, Soil 1st rate

Note: The River bottom is now overflowed to the depth of two feet and it is impracticable to Set $\frac{1}{4}$ post at true corner. I Set it on the nearest dry Land to the true corner.

(The crew is now at the intersection of future Main and Auburn streets. Long-time surveyor Jim Hambleton says the post, which no longer exists, was along the east side of Main Street and on the mid-line of Auburn Street. Standing where the post was you would be a little closer to the present Chevron service station than to Hotel Baker. From here the crew headed east along the section line between sections 16 and 21, in other words they are surveying a mile east along Auburn to just across I-84. Then they head back along the same line.)

15.00 (990 feet) Powder River 70 lks wide runs N. (The crew crosses Powder River, which has turned north near the south end of Pear Street. I use Google Earth to find locations to which the field notes refer. At this location I run into a problem, because Google Earth shows the location at 15 chains to be at an elevation 40 feet above Pear Street. So far I have no explanation for the elevation discrepancy. I just know that the 1864 township map shows Powder River began flowing north in his area.)

34.00 (2,244 feet, at about Cherry Street) Leave willow brush bears N & S.

40.00 Set post for $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec corner in mound of Earth....

80.00 The corner to Secs 16, 17, 20 & 21. (The crew is back at the intersection of Main and Auburn.)

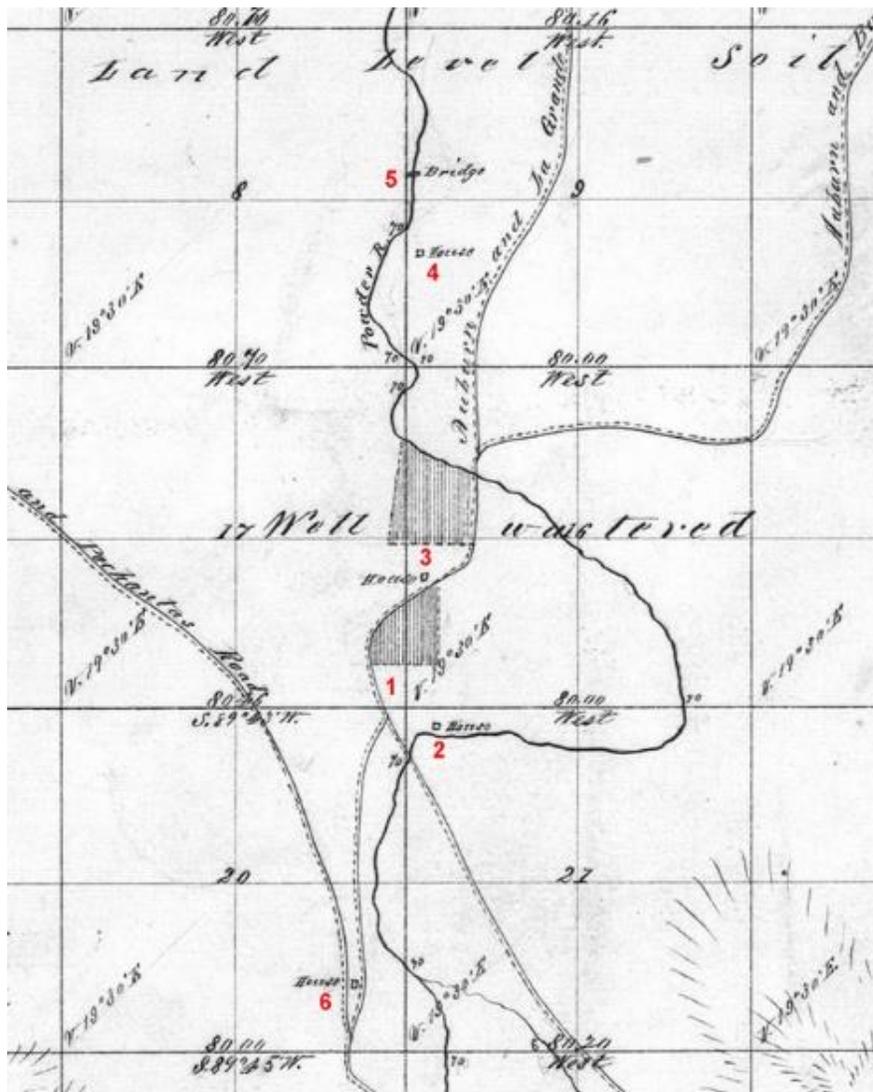
Land rolling. Soil 2nd rate. Good Grass. (I assume that this is a general impression of the land along Auburn Street.)

Willows on the banks of the River (The Baker City Township Map shows the course of Powder River, which is no doubt visible south of the crew. The river is running east until the hill on the far east side of town causes the river to flow north.)

(Next the crew surveys north along the section line between sections 16 and 17, which runs through the middle of future Baker City. There are more field note entries for this mile than any other one-mile section line in the whole Baker City Township. This is not surprising, since in 1864 several roads converged in this area. A year later lawyer Royal

Pierce platted a new town, which he named Baker, at this convergence of roads at the south end of Powder River Valley. Along the section line between sections 16 and 17 runs today's Main Street.)

2.00 (132 feet) Today this location is in front of the former Record-Courier newspaper office.) C. Place's House bears S 60° E 6 chs dist. (395 feet). (The note refers to Charles E. Place's toll house near the bridge over Powder River, hence today's name Bridge Street. By coincidence Place's cabin stood about ten feet south of the present office of the Baker City Herald newspaper at 1668 Resort. To my delight in researching early Baker City, I discovered that Charles E. Place is the great-great-grandfather of Baker City's Dr. Robert "Bob" McKim.)



Four tiny symbols (1, 2, 3, 4, & 6) indicate "House" and one "Bridge" (5).

10.00 (660 feet) Enter Field bears E & W. (This is the south end of the first of two farm fields located along present Main Street.)

22.90 (1,511.4 feet) Leave Field bears 10 E & S 10 W. (The north and west sides of the field ran at an angle that curved from northeast to southwest).

23.00 (1,518 feet) Auburn Road bears NE & SW. (The map shows that Auburn Road ran along the west side of the field, which probably indicates that the field predated Auburn Road and that the road builders avoided crossing into the farmer's field.)

31.00 (2,046 feet) Fisher's House bears E 4 chs dist. (This field note identifies another of the four little house symbols. Charles B. Fisher's cabin stood 264 feet east in the middle of present-day Dollar Store parking lot, previously occupied by Albertson's grocery store. I don't know if Fisher built his cabin thinking the site might someday become a city.)

39.00 (2,574 feet) Field bears E & W. (At about future Campbell Street, the survey crew enters another farm field, the south border of which runs east-west and is 1,063 feet north of the south field.)

40.00 Set post for $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec corner in mound of Earth....

64.00 (4,224 feet) Powder River 70 lks wide runs NW. (The crew leaves the north end of the field and immediately crosses Powder River, which is running northwest. The river forms the northern border of the field.)

75.00 (4,950 feet) Powder River 70 lks wide runs N 7° E. (In a field south of present Kirkway Drive, the crew again crosses Powder River flowing slightly northeast.)

80.00 (1 mile) Set post for corner to secs 8, 9, 16, 17 in mound made of River Gravel in the Water.

Land 1st rate, Level, Some Willows on Bank of River. (The crew is now at H Street in the north end of future Baker City.)

39

409

409

40 East Willamette Meridian

North between Sec 20 & 21
Variation 1930 East

2000 Powaid River to the wire run N W
4000 Set vertical post on East bank
of River 9.50 M East of true
corner for 1/4 sec corner in ground
of East with charred stake pits
bench & as per instructions

6800 Sec 20 River runs N E

7400 1/4 sec corner S E & N W

8000 Set post for corner to sec

16.17. 20 & 21 in (name of
Earth with charred stake pits
bench & as per instructions

Sec 20 mostly River bottom

Soil 1/4 rate

Note The River bottom is now overflowed
to the depth of two feet and
it is impracticable to set
1/4 post at true corner
I set it on the nearest angle
to the true corner

Surveyor's field note describing area just south of Main and Auburn intersection.
. (Field notes for the 1864 Baker City township survey are available on this BLM
website: [https://www.blm.gov/or/landrecords/survey/.](https://www.blm.gov/or/landrecords/survey/))

(The crew surveys east on H Street between sections 9 & 16, then surveys West along the same section line.)

40.00 Set post for $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec corner in mound of Earth....

63.00 (4,158) Auburn Road bears N & S. (This is the Auburn and La Grande Road.)

78.00 (5,148) Powder River 70 lks wide runs North.

80.00 The corner to secs 8, 9, 16 & 17.

Land Level, Soil 1st rate.

(The crew continues surveying north, but now along the section line between sections 8 and 9, which is a continuation of the Main Street section line.)

2.00 (132 feet) Powder River 70 lks wide runs NW. (Within about a quarter mile Powder River meanders northeast then back toward the northwest.)

27.50 (1,815 feet) Finlays House bears E 2 chs (132 feet) dist . (The house or cabin was in the northwest corner of a present field about 100 feet to the east side of houses on Kirkway Drive. The spelling of the name should be Finlayson.)

33.00 (2,178 feet) Powder River 70 lks wide runs N 7 ° E. (The present location is in Kirkway Drive about 460 feet south of present Hughes Lane bridge.)

40.00 Set witness post on right Bank 6.00 chs (47.52 feet) East of true corner in mound of Earth.... (The true corner must be in Powder River.)

47.00 (3,102 feet) Bridge on Powder River. (Present location is about 415 feet north of present Hughes Lane bridge.)

67.50 (4,455 feet) Powder River 70 lks runs NW.

80.00 chains (1 mile) Set post for corner to secs 4, 5, 8 & 9....

Land level, Soil 1st rate.

Thick Willows on Bank of river. Same Subject to overflow to the depth of 2 or 3 feet.

Water is now 18 inches deep caused by Beaver dams in the river. (The north end of the township is getting pretty swampy.)

(The crew surveys east between sections 4 and 9. Then back west again along the same section line.)

40.08 Set post for $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec corner in Mound of Earth....

45.25 (2,986.5 feet) Auburn Road bears N & S. (Auburn and La Grande Road)

80.16 The corner to secs 4, 5, 8 & 9. (This corner is 4,253 feet west of the middle of the I-84 and Highway 86 interchange. Today it's on the boundary between a regular farm field on the north and a crop circle on the south.)

Land Level. Soil 1st rate. Good Grass.

(The crew surveys north between sections 4 and 5 until reaching the north boundary of Baker City Township. Then back south along the same line.)

39.75 Set post 8.50 chs (561 feet) East of true $\frac{1}{4}$ sec corner on right bank of River for witness corner in Mound of Earth....

68.00 (4,488 feet) Powder River 70 lks wide runs NE. (Field note refers to width of river channel. But see note below.)

79.75 (5,263.5 feet) The corner to secs 4, 5, 8 & 9.

Land in River bottom. Soil 2nd rate. Thick Willows and Some cotton wood.

Note: The water is higher at this time in the year than any other time and banks of the River is overflowed to the depth of two feet and from 4 to 8 chs wide (264 to 528 feet). (The extensive spring flooding shows how shallow the river channel and how level the land is at this river crossing.)

May 16th 1864. (The date indicates that the surveying from the beginning of this series of sample field notes through future Baker City—from the bottom of the township to the top—was accomplished in just one day.)

Part III

From the first wagon trains in 1843 until 1862, the only road through future Baker County was the Oregon Trail, referred to in those days as the Emigrant Road. It traversed Baker County from Ontario to Farewell Bend, then up Burnt River Canyon, over Virtue Flat into Powder River Valley, and on to North Powder. From there emigrants continued to Grand Ronde Valley, over the Blue Mountains to Columbia River, and on to the emigrants' ultimate goal--Willamette Valley on the west side of the Cascade Mountains. Except for The Dalles at the mouth of the Cascade Gorge, there were no settlements in the two-thirds of Oregon that lay to the east. The slogan "Oregon or Bust" did not include eastern Oregon.

Spurning of eastern Oregon by emigrants changed abruptly as soon as word spread that gold had been discovered in October 1861 a couple miles south of future Baker City. In 1862 the glitter of gold lured thousands of miners, farmers, and merchants to far eastern Oregon. A mining camp named Auburn sprang up like a mushroom in the southern foothills of the Blue Mountains. By the end of the summer of 1862, Auburn could boast several thousand inhabitants. Simultaneously Canyon City and La Grande popped up in similar toadstool fashion.

The Oregon legislature, anxious to encourage settlement in the eastern two-thirds of the state, quickly created a huge, new county along the whole eastern border of Oregon and named it Baker County with Auburn as the county seat. Gold miners from California and southwestern Oregon flocked to Baker County. Gold mining activity attracted farmers and merchants to settle in the new county, where suddenly there was a market for their produce and wares. Anticipating a bright future in eastern Oregon, emigrants began putting down roots.

Not wanting to be considered squatters, emigrants sought legitimate title to land, which in all of eastern Oregon was "public domain," i.e., land owned by the federal government. In order to get title, emigrants turned to the federal General Land Office, which administered sales of public domain land. See sidebar that explains the importance of "townships" to the Public Land Survey System (PLSS).

Aware of settlement taking place in eastern Oregon, the General Land Office in Eugene in the spring of 1863 contracted with surveyor Timothy Davenport to survey the outside borders of township T9S R40E, which I refer to as "Baker City Township." Then in 1864 surveyors David P. Thompson and Daniel Chaplin got the contract to survey the 36

sections within T9S R40E. In a six-day period from May 13 to 18, 1864, surveyors Thompson and Chaplin and their assistants, Z.S. Dotson, James K. Stricklin, and A.J. Stricklin, surveyed all 36 square-mile sections in the six-square-mile Baker City Township

Surveyors Thompson and Chaplin began with section 36 in the southeast corner of the township. (See the schematic township sections map.) The crew surveyed north one mile on the section line between sections 35 and 36 and set a post to mark where the corners of sections 25, 26, 35, and 36 touched each other. Next they surveyed east one mile between 36 and 25 to the east boundary of the township, then turned around and surveyed west a mile between 36 and 25, which functioned to confirm the correctness of their eastward survey.

Since land in the southeastern portion of the township was hilly, the surveyors recorded elevation gain or loss. Going north between 35 and 36 was a gain of 400 feet. Next they followed the same pattern for surveying section 25, and so on until they reached the north boundary of the township at section 1. So, in order to survey one section, the crew had to walk three miles. Having surveyed the six sections along the east boundary, the crew hiked six miles south and began surveying the next column of sections. In the six days it took to survey all 36 sections of the Baker City Township, the crew walked over 90 miles or an average of about 15 miles per day.

After having surveyed all thirty-six sections, the surveyors wrote a General Description of Baker City Township:

The quality of land in this Township is generally 2nd rate. The northern portion is level soil good 2nd rate. The southern portion is hilly. All the Township is well watered by Powder River and by numerous springs through it. There is no timber except some cottonwood and willow on the River. There are about twenty settlers in the Township. This is a very fine Township for grass. Gold has been discovered in small quantities in the southern and eastern portions.

The 1864 Baker City Township Map shows much more than section and quarter-section lines. It reveals a network of wagon roads with almost no evidence of settlement. In the center of what became downtown Baker City, the surveyors shaded in two areas to indicate tilled land. One field was about 5 acres and the other about 3 acres located one above the other about 1100 feet apart. Today's D Street is at the top of the north field and Court Street is at the bottom of the south field. Today's Main Street runs through both fields. The surveyors also put on the map four little squares labeled "House," probably log cabins. (See numbers 2, 3, 4, and 6 on the detail map.) All four cabins were widely separated from each other within the area that became Baker City. At the north end of future Baker City the surveyors placed a tiny bar over Powder River labeled "bridge," located about 490 feet north of the present Hughes Lane bridge. (See number 5 on the detail map.)

Today we're able to follow many of the activities of the surveyors by reading their handwritten "field notes." The survey contract required surveyors to write field notes describing locations of posts set at all four corners of each of the 36 sections and at all halfway points marking the $\frac{1}{4}$ section lines between corner posts. Also recorded in the field notes are, for example, the distance from a given corner to significant land features, such as river crossings, including river width, depth, and whether prone to flooding, road crossings, farm fields, nearby trees, and nearby houses. Also recorded were ascent and descent of hills, including elevation gain or loss. The field notes included comments about the terrain like "steep," "hilly," and "stony," plus agricultural qualities about soil type, available grass for animal grazing, and the presence of sagebrush.

The field notes gave exact locations of roads and streams only when the survey lines crossed them. The sketched-in routes of those roads and streams between the surveyed locations described in the field notes are not necessarily exact but rather estimations based on visual but not surveyed observations.

Where were the four cabins? (See map in Part 2.) One cabin (6), owner unknown, was located in South Baker about 240 feet northeast of the intersection of Colorado and 4th streets. A second cabin (2) a mile north was owned by Charles E. Place, who, beginning in 1862, operated a toll road from Auburn to Burnt River. His log cabin was on the north side of Bridge Street and north of the old channel of Powder River. The bridge was a convenient place to collect the toll. Present-day Place Street was named for Charles Place.

(I should note here that I used Google Earth to translate field note locations into locations in present Baker City. Those locations may or may not be exactly correct. Probably the only way to be more exact, would be to do an on-the-ground survey, but I'm not a surveyor. So treat my location descriptions as estimates.)

A half mile north of Place's cabin was Charles B. Fisher's cabin (3) located on the west side of Powder River a little south of a stand of mostly cottonwood trees, which locals called Fisher's Grove, present site of Geiser-Pollman Park. Those surveyor field notes are corroborated by a couple of newspaper reports. The July 7, 1873, edition of the *Bedrock Democrat*, gave this location for the 4th of July festivities: "The grounds at Fisher's Grove (are) about one quarter mile from our city....The grove was thoroughly cleaned of all underbrush." A 1909 *Morning Democrat* article mentioned, "His (Fisher's) cabin was located where Mr. P. Crabill's residence now is." The 1903 *Baker City Directory* gives the address of Philander Crabill's two-story house as 2300 Resort, present parking lot of the Dollar Store (earlier occupied by Albertsons).

Fisher successfully filed a claim on land from the east side of Main Street to Powder River, which is known today as Fisher's Addition to Baker City. Later Fisher acquired farm land on the east side of town, part of which became Mt. Hope Cemetery.

The 1864 surveyors indicated there was a fourth cabin (4) about 800 feet south of Hughes Lane. Field notes say the cabin belonged to Thomas Finlay, probably a misspelling of Finlayson. The 1870 Federal Census for Baker City did not list Thomas Finlay, but did list Thomas Finlayson, a forty-five-year-old Scottish farmer with personal and real estate worth \$10,000, making him one of the richest men in the county. Living with him were his wife, Margaret, 46, also from Scotland, and their four daughters ages seven to fifteen. The family came to Baker County in 1862. It was probably Finlayson's cabin that the 1864 surveyors discovered on the east side of Powder River, south of Hughes Lane and east of present Kirkway Drive. The cabin was south of where the surveyors showed a bridge over Powder River about 400 feet north of the present Hughes Lane bridge. Finlayson probably built the bridge to access farm land on the west side of Powder River. At that time the surveyors showed no road in that immediate vicinity.

Part IV

The 1864 Baker City Township Map shows a total of approximately 16 miles of roads converging on the southern end of Powder River Valley. It's not surprising that the site seemed to be a much better location for a city than Auburn. In 1864 Auburn was the seat of county government and the only sizeable settlement in Baker County. Auburn was located in a narrow gulch with no prospect of becoming a major city. In fact, in 1864 it was rapidly losing inhabitants, as nearby placer mines started playing out and many miners headed to new gold strikes in western Idaho.

The 1864 map shows the general route of Powder River flowing from south to north through the township, but with a surprising detour through the east side of future Baker City. The township map also shows two creeks flowing into Powder River on the south half of the map: Sutton Creek from the east and Griffin Creek from the west. Additionally the surveyors roughly sketched in low hills in the eastern and southwestern portions of the township, and noted on the map several general comments about the terrain: "Hilly and Rough" in the south and east; "Well watered" and "Good Grass" in the middle; and "Land level" and "Soil 2nd Rate" in the north.

The surveyors sketched four roads on the township map and labeled three of them. Below is a list of the four roads and their general location. Further below I describe in detail each road's route in reference to its location in present Baker City.

"Auburn and Burnt River Road" (5 miles): From the northeast corner of the township to the future site of Baker City and on to Auburn. This road connected to the Emigrant Road about a half mile off the northeast corner of the township.

"Auburn and La Grande Road" (6 miles): From the northern border of the township, to future Baker City, and on out the southern boundary of the township.

“Auburn and Pocahontas Road” (4½ miles): From the west boundary of the township to the southern part of future Baker City, where it merged with the Auburn and La Grande Road.

Unlabeled road, which I call “Baker City to Burnt River Road” (6 miles): From just east of the present site of Baker City Hall, the road went straight southeast out of town. This road is not to be confused with the Auburn and Burnt River Road, although they both end up at Burnt River in Durkee Valley).

Auburn and Burnt River Road

“Burnt River Road” refers to the Emigrant Road, later known as the Oregon Trail, which I-84 generally follows today. Before gold was discovered in 1861, the Emigrant Road was the only road through Baker County, with the exception of a little-used route from the Brownlee Dam area up Powder River, through Eagle Valley, and down into Powder River Valley. The Auburn and Burnt River Road departed from the Emigrant Road about one half mile off the northeast corner of the 1864 Baker City Township Map. The road entered Baker City Township about where Highway 86 comes off the hill into Powder River Valley. Unlike Highway 86, the road continued west about a half mile north of Highway 86, then angled slightly southwest for about a mile, where it turned sharply south and crossed Highway 86 about 560 feet west of Lindley Lane. The road continued south slightly east of the three big ponds on Best Frontage Road and crossed H Street about 660 feet east of Best Frontage Road. The road continued south through the field north of Motel Eight, where it turned West, crossed both I-84 and Birch Street, continued slightly southwest through the residences between D and E streets, eventually going down D Street north of Leo Adler Field. Near the intersection of D and East streets, the road intersected the Auburn and La Grande Road (see below) coming from the north.

Auburn and La Grande Road

The “Auburn and La Grande Road” coming from Union County via Pyles Canyon entered the north boundary of Baker City Township and continued south following fairly closely the west frontage road of I-84 through the western third of the township. I’ll reference present locations as we travel down the former Auburn and La Grande Road starting at the north boundary of section 4 of the 1864 Baker City Township Map.

We reach the bottom of section 4 about 280 feet from the northwest corner of the RV park on the west side of the Hwy 86 and I-84 interchange. Angling slightly southwest for a mile, the Auburn and La Grande Road crossed H Street at about its intersection with Elm Street. Continuing a quarter mile straight down Elm Street, the Auburn and La Grande Road meets the Auburn and Burnt River Road coming from the east. That junction is near the intersection of D and Elm streets north of Leo Adler Field. The two roads are merged going south.

Within a few yards the merged roads cross the old channel of Powder River, which defined the north end of the north farm field shaded in by the surveyors. We're now at about C Street in the middle of downtown Baker City. The merged roads head due south along the east edge of the field. Within a quarter mile the merged roads cross Campbell Street at the southeast corner of the farm field and head through the middle of Geiser-Pollman Park. At Madison Street the merged roads went southwest and cross present Powder River at Baker Street. Then at about Church and Resort the merged roads come to the northeast corner of the south farm field that is almost the shape of a right triangle with the vertical east side along Resort Street. Here the roads skirt southwest along the hypotenuse (west side) of the south field to the southern edge of the field running along Court Street. At the southwest corner of the south field, the merged roads go southeast less than a quarter of a mile and cross Auburn Street a little east of Baker City Hall, where there is a Y intersection. From there one could go southeast on an unlabeled road, which I call Baker City to Burnt River Road, or one could continue south to Auburn.

If one continues south from the Y junction in front of present Baker City Hall, the road crosses Dewey Street at Grace Street and straight south across Myrtle Street west of the Myrtle Street bridge. South of that point the road crossed a bend in present Powder River and immediately crosses the present railroad tracks. From there the road continues south through the residential area of South Baker between 2nd and 3rd streets. At Miller Street the road hits the junction of the Auburn and Pocahontas Road, where one could continue south to Auburn or turn northwest onto the Auburn and Pocahontas Road.

Auburn and Pocahontas Road

Pocahontas, a village at the foot of the Elkhorn Mountains about eight miles west of Baker City, was founded in 1862 by miners and farmers. From the junction at Miller Street, the Pocahontas Road headed north along 3rd Street, then northwest crossing Dewey Street just south of the present railroad underpass, crossed the present U.P. tracks west of South Baker School, paralleled the tracks on their north side, crossed Auburn Street at about 7th Street. At about Court Street the road crossed over to the west side of the railroad tracks, crossed Campbell Street at 16th Street, and continued northwest out of present Baker City. Once the traveler reached Pocahontas, which was outside of the west boundary of the 1864 Baker City Township Map, there was a road up Washington Gulch to Auburn. Back at the Y junction in South Baker, the traveler could go south through the former Oregon Lumber Company property, skirt around the hill south of town following along the west bank of Powder River, cross Griffin Creek about a mile south of Baker City, enter the north end Bowen Valley, and on south and west to Auburn.

Baker City to Durkee Road

On the 1864 Baker City Township Map, the surveyors did not label the road that branched off from Y junction just east of present Baker City Hall. I refer to it as the

Baker City to Durkee Road. From City Hall it followed a southeast course across Dewey Street at Place Street and through the present site of the Federal Building, behind which within a few yards it crossed the Old Channel of Powder River. At the present bridge over Estes Street, the road continued southeast through South Baker to Indiana Street east of Elm Street. Another half mile southeast the road headed out of present Baker City approximately along today's Highway 30 to Durkee.

Part V

Old Channel of Powder River



For me the most striking feature of the 1864 Baker City Township Map is the route of Powder River. The surveyors drew the route pretty much on a straight south-to-north route through the township, except for a surprising nearly one-mile swoop through the area that today is the east side of Baker City. South of Colorado Street and north of Hughes Lane are the only areas in Baker City where the old and present Powder River channels share about the same channel. In between those two locations the old channel crossed the present course of Powder River six times.

A discussion about the old channel of Powder River drawn on the 1864 Baker City Township Map is an approximation of where the river flowed, except for the thirteen points, where Powder River crossed section lines. The surveyors noted in their field notes exactly where those crossings occurred.

How accurate is that old channel of Powder River the surveyors drew between those thirteen points? We will never know. The course should only be considered an approximation. At the junction of Auburn and Oak streets, for example, the course

drawn by the surveyors shows Powder River about 135 feet further south than the base of Spring Garden hill would have allowed. The surveyors did not survey the course of Powder River, nor did their contract require that they do so.

Following are some comparisons between the old and present channels of Powder River. (Please keep in mind that these comments should only be considered approximations.) Starting at the east end of Colorado Street, the old channel veers northwest from the present channel. Sutton Creek flows into the old channel between Failing and Virginia streets about a block west of present Powder River. From there the old channel continues slightly northwest until it crosses the present railroad track and present Powder River just south of Cliff Street. Then the old channel flows north through the middle of the Elks youth baseball field south of Myrtle Street. North of Myrtle at the west end of Edgewater Street the old channel again crossed present Powder River and headed almost due north, where it passed within a few yards of the east side of the present Federal Building. Where did it go from there?

The Mysterious Bend in the Old Channel of Powder River

Here's the mystery. Why did two groups of people—the 1862 emigrants and the 1864 Baker City Township surveyors—have two different recollections about the course of Powder River through the township?

The diaries and memoirs of the 1862 emigrants, who arrived in late summer, mention camping near a cabin, probably Fisher's, on Powder River in the center of what became Baker City. Yet they mention nothing about Powder River flowing through the east side of town. Plus, Charles B. Fisher obtained title to land between the Main Street and Powder River.

The surveyors, who in May 1864 surveyed north along a section line through the middle of future Baker City, mention nothing about seeing Powder River in the middle of town. Instead, the surveyors drew very prominently on their township map the course of Powder River flowing ninety-degrees east for three-quarters of a mile into what became the east side of Baker City.

Perhaps the explanation partly lies in the time of year. Emigrants arrived in late summer, a dry time of year. Whereas, in May of 1864 Powder River was in flood stage.

The 1864 map shows Powder River flowing from south of town pretty much straight north, as it does today. But at about Main and Bridge streets the 1864 surveyors drew Powder River abruptly turning east and flowing three-quarters of a mile in an easterly direction, until it nudged up against the I-84 hill. From that point the surveyors show the river flowing north and northwest through the east side of Baker City to about Main and D streets, where it then resumed a northerly course out of Baker City.

As far as I know, none of the diaries and memoirs of the first emigrants arriving in Powder River Valley in late summer of 1862 mention the Powder River's big swoop

east. Instead, those 1862 migrants tell about camping on Powder River near a lone cabin just south of present Geiser-Pollman Park. The 1864 surveyors, as they were surveying north through the area that became Baker City's Main Street, mentioned Fisher's cabin in their field notes, but not a word about Powder River flowing north in that area.

I have a theory that partially explains the discrepancy between the Powder River route the surveyors described and the Powder River route that early emigrants remember. Most of the emigrants were arriving in late summer or early autumn. The 1864 survey was accomplished in May. At that time of year Powder River would have been experiencing high spring runoff due to a melting snowpack in the Elkhorn Mountains. I assume that Powder River jumped its bank into an ancient channel that flowed northeast out of Baker City. In 1864 and today the east side of Baker City is several feet lower than downtown. When the spring runoff was over, the river would have then resumed its northerly course. Baldock Slough may be the remnant of that ancient channel. But my theory does not explain why the 1864 surveyors did not mention the Powder River the emigrants observed flowing through what became the center of Baker City.

My theory that Powder River flowed through future Baker City in 1864 is supported by the fact that cottonwood trees (Fisher's Grove) and willow trees (present grove north of D Street, which was called Boys Jungle, when I was a kid) are known to grow along water courses. Both groves no doubt predate settlement of Baker City.

Also supporting my theory that Powder River jumped its bank in the spring of 1864 is the fact that, at the height of the depression of the 1930's, the Civilian Conservation Corps did riprapping along both banks of Powder River to prevent the river from flooding the middle of Baker City. The riprapping material was the same tuff stone from the Pleasant Valley quarry used in construction of several of Baker City's most prominent structures (e.g., Baker City Hall, Baker County Courthouse, St. Francis Cathedral, several downtown businesses, and several private homes). The best examples of riprapping may still be seen along Powder River between Baker County Library and Geiser-Pollman Park.

In spite of the riprapping of the Powder River channel, Baker City still experienced occasional floods. Perhaps the worst flood was in February 1957. At that time I was a senior at Baker High School and a member of Company F of the Oregon National Guard. Governor Mark Hatfield declared an emergency and activated Company F for the weekend to fight chunks of ice as much as fourteen inches thick heaved up south of Baker City and rafted north through town. The riprapped channel was full almost to overflowing. Large pieces of floating ice piled up against Baker City's bridges. City employees, National Guardsmen, and volunteers used long poles to push those huge blocks of ice under the bridges in an attempt to prevent them from damming up the channel. In spite of their efforts, water flowed into town east of Resort Street. Geiser-Pollman Park became a lake and a large area from east of 10th Street and as far as Hughes Lane was inundated.

I continue describing the approximate route through future Baker City according to the 1864 Baker City Township Map. Within a stone's throw of Hotel Baker, the old channel made a 90 degree turn to the east, crossed present Powder River just west of the Les Schwab tire store on Bridge Street, and proceeded east about three-fourths of a mile along the foot of Spring Garden Hill to about the intersection of Birch and Pear streets. At that point an abrupt rise in elevation diverted Powder River north to about Washington Birch streets, where the river crossed Campbell at about Oak Street, and continued on an azimuth to the present Powder River channel at Main and D streets. From that intersection the old channel flowed due north through the backyards of residences on the east side of Grandview Drive.

At about 75 yards north of D Street, the old channel again crossed present Powder River, turned northeast about 75 yards then back northwest another 75 yards, where it crossed present Powder River at H Street. From there the old and present river channels paralleled each other at about a 100-foot separation, until the old channel angled east. The old and present channels coalesced at Hughes Lane west of Kirkway Drive. From there the combined old and present channels continued north and off the top of the 1864 Baker City Township Map.

The government surveyors did not record the route of Baldock Slough on their 1864 Baker City Township Map. The slough is named for pioneer William Baldock (1828-1907), who settled on the east side of Powder River Valley near Flagstaff Hill in 1862. Today the slough has its origins in springs on the east side of Baker City, which feed the slough with running water. Pioneer diaries of travelers of the Oregon Trail called it the "first crossing" of Powder River. The famous Lone Pine of the Oregon Trail stood tall at that crossing, until it was cut down in September 1843 by members of the first wagon train to traverse Baker County. Since water still flows in Baldock Slough, it can be considered a short branch of main Powder River, into which the "slough" finds its confluence with Powder River about two-and-one-half miles southeast of Haines, Oregon.

For readers interested in seeing remnants of many ancient channels of Powder River, take an airplane flight over the valley north of the airport or go online and view the area using Google Earth.