

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Nez Perce National Forest



The Lure of Gold



*Old Florence in the 1890's, color enhanced
J.A. Hanson Collection-Idaho State Historical Society*

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The History of Florence, Idaho and the 1861 Discovery of Gold



In August of 1861, gold was discovered in the small creeks and gulches around the Florence Basin. Miners began trickling into the area. What started as a small tent city with 50 residents grew into a bustling, strategically placed (in the center of the new gold diggings at the head of Baboon Gulch) city of 9,000 by the following year. This "boom" ultimately led to the establishment of the Summit Creek Mining District.

By late summer this quick growing town boasted a sawmill, ten butcher shops, seven bakeries, eight lawyers, six gambling saloons, a few "hole-in-the-wall doggeries" (saloons), a dance house, Masonic Hall, and a jail. A few of the log cabins, particularly the saloons, had fancy fronts and glass windows but others let in the light through muslin coverings. In preparation for winter the miners began constructing cabins with logs dragged to the site on hand sleds from over a mile away.

What began as not much more than a meek miner's camp swiftly turned into a thriving town, with two main intersecting town streets named Main and Miner and a third named Pine.

...and her name is Florence

Although how this mining town originally received her name remains shrouded in controversy, in November of 1861, Florence received her name. By December the town was laid out and a city government established.

Incredible amounts of gold dust were produced in Florence and in 1862 alone, six to seven million dollars worth of gold had been extracted. By the summer of 1862 this little miners camp had flourished into a boomtown.

Winter in the wild, wild west

The winter of 1861 & 1862 at Florence became known as the worst on record. It snowed 113 days in a row. Snow depths of 10 feet were reached. Miners were forced to stop mining when their rockers froze. Supplies ran short and miners lived for weeks on a diet of flour and water or "spruce tea" made by melting snow.



John Clark's Hotel, Old Florence.
photo courtesy of Idaho County
Bicentennial Museum

Although the deep snow kept pack trains from reaching Florence, some supplies did make it --packed in on the backs of men referred to as "Boston Jackasses."

After the long winter, the first pack train did not reach the town until May 16, 1862. In addition to having brutal weather, Florence was considered one of the roughest towns in the West during the winter of 1862-1863. Alonzo Brown, a store keeper who once lived in Florence, said: "Men had a habit of getting drunk at the saloons and shooting into stores and tents as they went by. I slept in the store on the floor, and to protect myself from the stray bullets fired by drunken men, I piled up a stack of flour as wide as my bed and about four feet high and made down my bed behind the flour. The town was filled with the worst element of the Pacific Coast, and thieves and gamblers from the East."

"Not infrequently some drunken ruffian draws his revolver and begins to shoot in the midst of the vast crowd, often killing or wounding some one and creating a fearful stampede... There is no law here, or none that sees, abates, retards or punishes crime. Scarcely a day passes that someone is not killed or wounded."

-P.W. Gillette (diary) June 15, 1862



The riches of Florence attracted not only men looking to make a fortune in gold, but also the ruffians who followed in their wake—dishonest gamblers, outlaws and thieves. Men referred to as *highwaymen* held up travelers stealing all their valuables on the main travel route between Lewiston, Oro Fino and Florence.

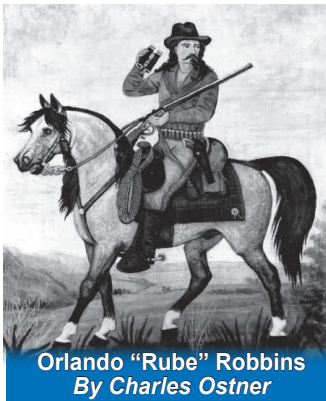
One such highwayman, the legendary Henry Plummer, is rumored to also have been in Florence. In the spring of 1862, two of Plummer's pals, Cherokee Bob Talbotte and Billy Mayfield drifted into Florence. They brought with them a "woman of ill-repute" known as Red-Headed Cynthia. Both of the men were interested in the fiery redhead and a showdown of sorts seemed inevitable. When confronted by the two men regarding her alliance, Cynthia chose Bob, now a business man and owner of the newly acquired Boomerang Saloon. Billy left town the next day, never to return.



On January 2, 1863, Orlando “Rube” Robbins and Jakey Williams shot and mortally wounded Bob during a gunfight on the street in Florence. He died three days later. The men were hastily tried for the act four days later and cleared of the crime. Robbins later became a well-known deputy US Marshall in the Boise area and was often referred to as the “Wyatt Earp of the Boise Basin”.

Little did Bob know that within a few short months he would lie in a grave on “boot hill”, mortally wounded in a gunfight at age 29, defending the reputation of the red-haired beauty. Cherokee Bob had taken over the Boomerang Saloon when he first arrived in Florence by throwing out the owner, and claiming the owner’s deceased partner was in debt to him.

It was here Florence's high-waysmen would gather in order to gain information about the plans of wealthy travelers and shipments of gold dust. It wasn't long before Florence’s most notorious resident and outlaw, Cherokee Bob, met his bloody fate.



Orlando “Rube” Robbins
By Charles Ostner



The tombstone of Cherokee Bob as it appeared in 1935. Photo courtesy R.G. Bailey Collection



Cherokee Bob's grave marker as it appears today.

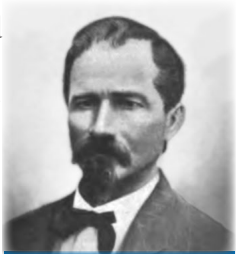
Over time, many of the head stones of souls buried on "Boothill," Florence's cemetery, have degraded and have had to be replaced. Different versions of Cherokee Bob's grave marker can be seen in these photos.

Although the Civil War was being fought thousands of miles away at the same time Florence was booming, the Florence gold rush had an impact on the national economy during the Civil War years. With the South providing the largest export item in the United States, cotton, the North faced a devastating loss of revenue. The North turned westward in search of resources to fund the war and aid the failing economy. Gold became the answer and Idaho gold mines were a key producer. Many historians believe that Idaho gold mines directly contributed to the victory of the war by the North.



The Civil war also had quite an affect on the residents of Florence. In 1862, Main Street in Florence was referred to as the "Mason-Dixon line" by Southern sympathizers and understood to be the dividing line between the factions. As the 4th of July neared, tensions between the two sides intensified. Fearing a fight, residents came up with a plan to avert bloodshed. Two committees were formed—one of southern sympathizers and one of northern—and hired

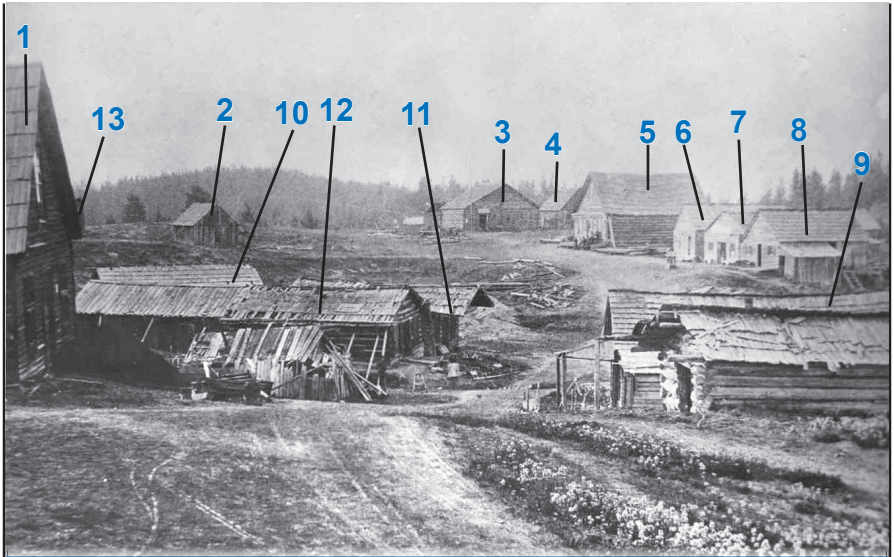
Charles Ostner. A miner and former Heidelberg, Germany art student, Ostner was given the task to prepare a fitting tribute to the country to be unveiled on Independence Day, 1862. Residents brought snow and piled it in the center of Main Street. Every night the growing pile of snow was drenched with water creating a large block of ice. Hidden behind a tarp, Ostner went to work and on the 4th of July hostilities were avoided when his work was unveiled: a sculpture of George Washington on horseback; an American symbol that proved satisfying to both factions.



Charles Ostner, Idaho State Historical Society photograph



In 1869, Ostner carved the same likeness in yellow pine and presented it to the Idaho Territory. The statue was refurbished and covered in gold leaf, and today is featured in the Idaho State capitol building.



1 - *Masonic Hall, later Idaho County Courthouse and still later a hotel.*

2 - *Benefield's Cabin*

3 - *Cherokee Bob's Saloon*

4 - *Redheaded Cynthia's House*

5 - *McKenzie's General Store*

6 - *Restaurant*

7 - *Barber Shop, later John Clark's General Store*

8 - *Mulkey's Butcher Shop*

9 - *Where the first court in Idaho County was held*

10 - *Warren's Cabin*

11 - *Romaris' Cabin*

12 - *Stage and Livery Barn*

13 - *Dance Hall*

Old Florence (1896)

Contributed by Martin Bardhof

Idaho Firsts in Florence

Idaho County's 1st County Seat

In December 1861 the territorial legislature created Idaho County and Florence became the first county seat. By 1875, Mount Idaho, built largely as a stop for traffic to the gold fields, was developing into a prosperous town, promising to be a more permanent settlement than Florence, and in 1875 won a special election for county seat. In 1902 Grangeville was designated as the county seat and remains so today.

Jaspar Rand served as the Florence City Justice of the Peace in 1862. Justice Rand handled cases varying from cattle theft and murder to performing wedding ceremonies. Because of the frequency of claim jumping and theft, a vigilance committee for Florence was suggested as early as February 1862. According to Florence court records, thirty-two cases were held in November and December of 1862 and fifty-eight from January to August of 1863.

First Library in Idaho

Sitting wrapped in a blanket by the fire with a good book provided a welcome diversion from the dark, long, and cold wintry evenings in the remote mining camp. In the winter of 1862-1863, one enterprising Florence store owner operated a rental lending library as part of his business, offering about 115 books for loan, including novels, drama and poetry, and non-fiction such as history and politics. Sixty-two men and one woman borrowed books, paying \$3 a month for the privilege. In 1868, \$150.00 was raised to finance a library to serve the continued desire for reading materials by Florence's residents.

Month	Item	Price
	Commenced sold 12 th 1862	no
Dec	13 Corn	3.00
"	13 Corn	3.00
"	Woolfat Wood	3.00
"	38 Torch light	3.00
"	Gabriel Boir	3.00
Jan	14 Furments Expedition	3.00
"	12 Com 5 worth	3.00
Feb	11 Sales of Eng Hist	3.00
"	12 Commenced 3 m	3.00
"	21 Spanish Compt	3.00
"	26 King's Own	3.00
Mar	1 Statesman Manual	3.00
"	3 What I can do	3.00
Apr	4 King & Mining	3.00
"	17 Quo reading	3.00

A page from an 1862 Florence store ledger not only shows the credit sales of groceries to miners, but also has entries for the circulation of books. Courtesy of University of Idaho Library, Special Collections



School in New Florence, 1898.
Ace Barton Collection

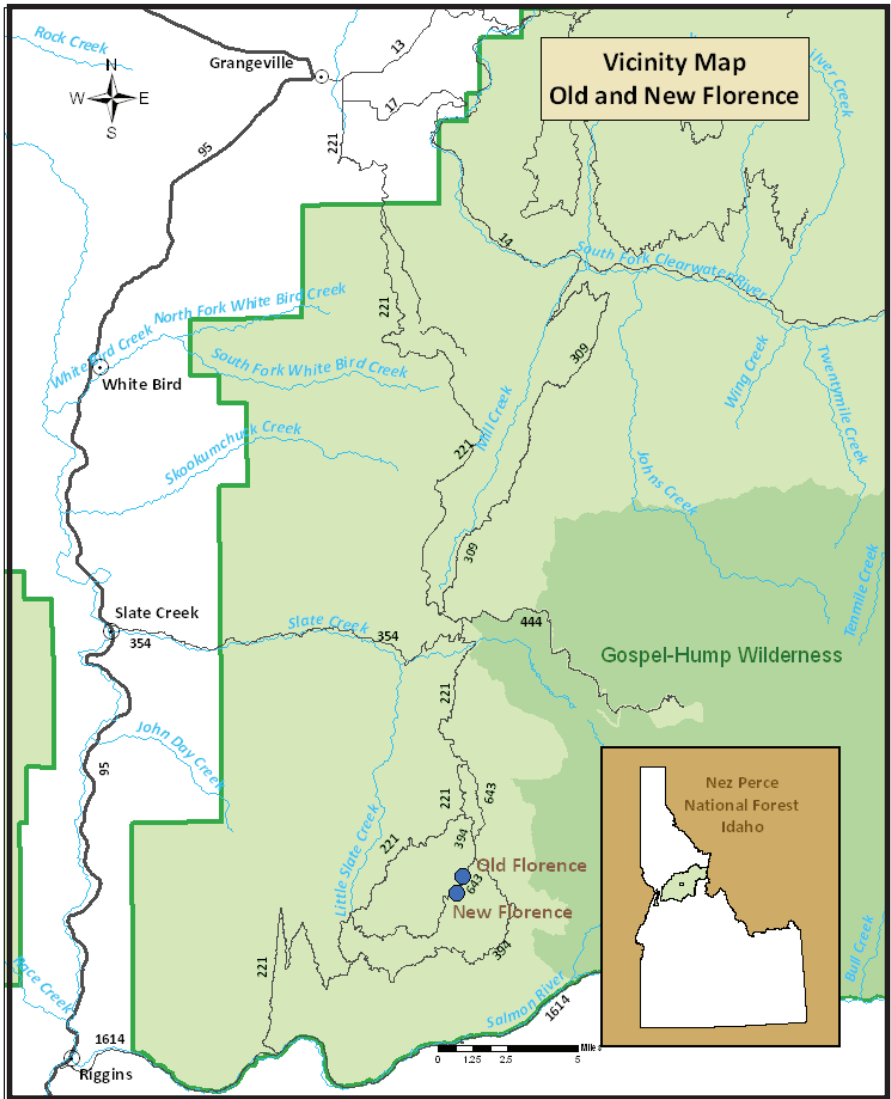
First Public School in Idaho

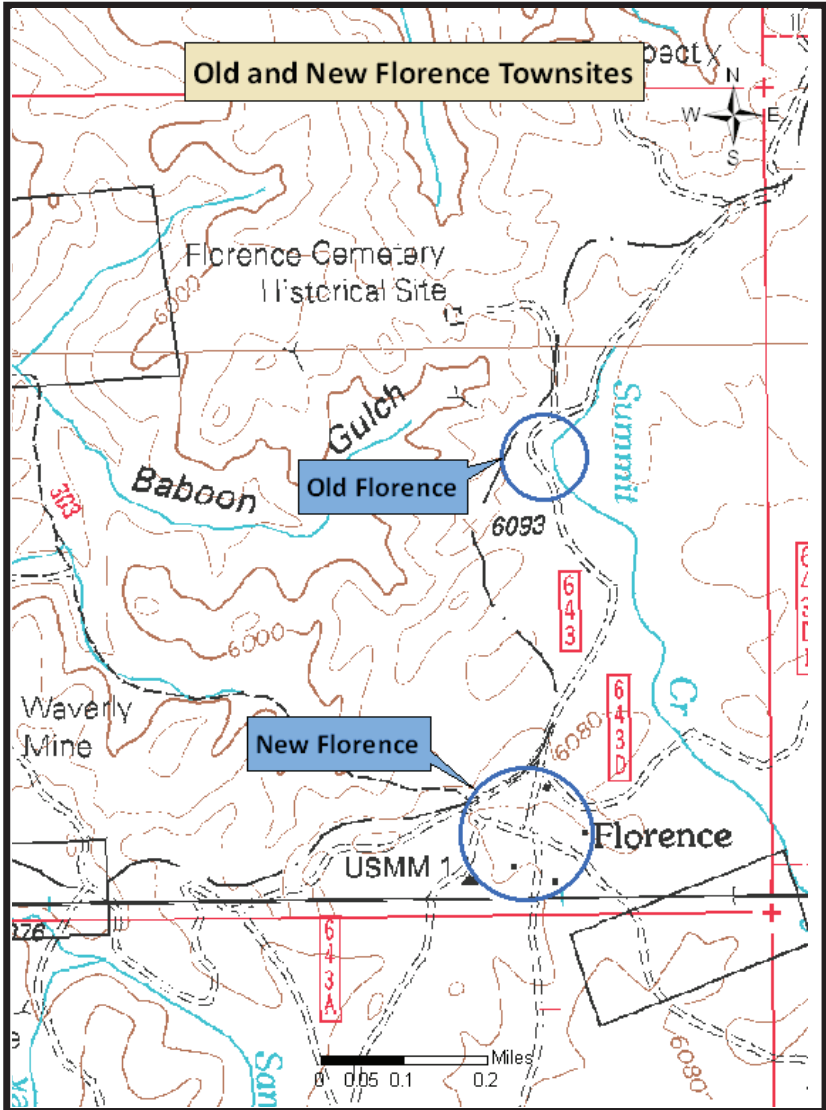
The first public school in Idaho was located at Florence in 1864. At the first session of the territorial legislature the public school law of California was adopted with minor changes to fit conditions in Idaho. Major Frank Fenn's father, who was a member of the assembly, returned to Florence that winter and formed a public school district there. A small, 12' x 14' hewn-log building with a whipsawed board floor and shingled roof was erected as a schoolhouse. Mrs. J.H. Robinson from Ohio was the first school teacher and was paid \$100 per month for teaching six scholars including Major Fenn, two of his siblings, and three other young boys.

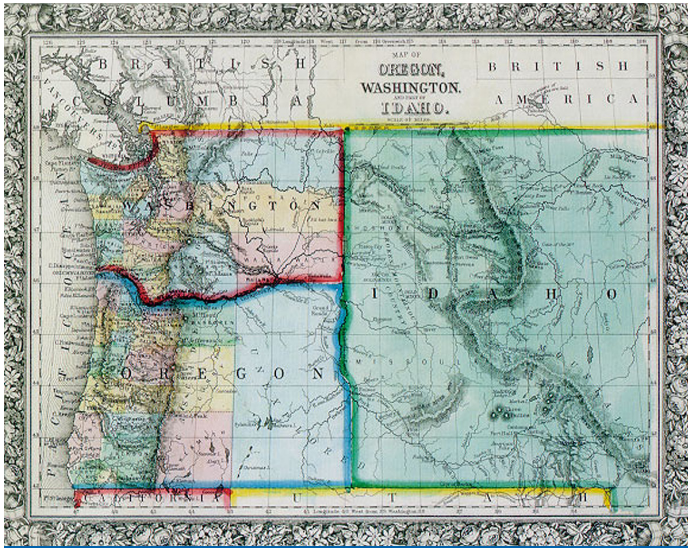
—Idaho Daily Statesmen 1905.
Major Frank Fenn, prominent Idaho legislator, military leader and Forest Service Officer

First Masonic Hall in Idaho

In 1862, at the reputed cost of \$10,000, the first Masonic Hall of Idaho was built in Florence by Masons with help from a few *Odd Fellows*. Although no Masonic Lodge was ever formed, it served as a Masonic "Club," and was shared with the *Odd Fellows*.







Greater Idaho in late 1863 or early 1864. Courtesy of the Special Collections Division, U of W Libraries, n979.5

Idaho's First State Wagon Road: The Milner Trail



Moses E. Milner, 1874.
Courtesy of
Kansas State Historical
Society

In 1890 the Milner Trail, originally built by Moses E. Milner in 1862, was reconstructed becoming part of Idaho's first state wagon road from Mt. Idaho to near Payette Lake.

changes of White Bird Hill and the high ridge above Florence. The Milner Trail between Mount Idaho and Florence was authorized in 1864 by the territorial legislature as a toll trail, with charges of \$3 per wagon and horse or mule, \$1 per horseman and 50 cents per loaded pack animal.

Born in Kentucky, Moses Milner was a colorful character (aka "California Joe"), traveled widely, trapped in Missouri and Wyoming, was a pioneer in Oregon, mined in California, Idaho and Montana. He later served as scout in the U.S. Army. He worked with men like Jim Bridger, Kit Carson, Wild Bill Hickock and Generals George Armstrong Custer, Phil Sheridan, and George Crook.

Today much of the road remains in its original location. In fact, Forest Service Road #643 traveling through the old Florence townsite, was the original Milner Trail and also served as the main street of Florence.

The Milner Trail ascended from Mount Idaho south along the hogback ridge to the Adams Way Station and into Florence, avoiding the great elevation

Chinese Miners

Typical of Idaho mining towns, the original laws of mining districts denied Chinese the right to own or operate mining claims. Chinese miners began coming to Idaho in 1864 as the richest claims were worked out and the Idaho legislature passed an act allowing Chinese to mine in Idaho if they paid a monthly license fee. White miners and the Summit Creek Mining District voted to officially admit Chinese to the mining district in 1869 (when the best deposits had been exhausted). In 1870, Florence had twenty-one male and one female (a prostitute) Chinese residents and by 1874, the Chinese dominated the camp. In 1885, two-hundred Chinese worked in Florence. They remained in the Florence Basin until the late 1890s.



Chinese miners near the mouth of Slate Creek
Idaho State Historical Society photograph

The Nez Perce and the Miners

The 1861 Florence gold strike was one of several gold discoveries made in the Clearwater and Salmon mountains during the 1860s. Thousands of miners rushed into central Idaho, the first major influx of whites into traditionally Nez Perce territory.

The Treaty of 1855 between the Nez Perce and the United States government roughly defined the Nez Perce Reservation as bounded “by the upper part of the south fork of the Palouse River, Alpowa Creek, the Salmon River Mountains, and the spurs of the Bitter Roots”. The Nez Perce were assured that no one would be permitted on the reservation without their consent.



Nez Perce encampment.
*Photo by Dr. Edward H. Latham,
Courtesy of Nez Perce National Historic
Park archives*

The incursion of miners into the territory with the strikes at Oro Fino Creek and Pierce City in 1860 violated the treaty and prompted an informal agreement in the spring of 1861 between the tribe and the U.S. Indian Department opening Nez Perce land north of the Clearwater River to mining while prohibiting agricultural settlement. This new agreement was not ratified nor did it amend the 1855 Treaty. Shortly after the addition of this unofficial proviso to the 1855 treaty, Lewiston was established and gold strikes at Elk City and Florence occurred south of the Clearwater River.

The encroachment of thousands of miners upon the reservation caused hardships for the Nez Perce. Although some Nez Perce initially benefited from assisting and trading with the gold seekers, many eventually became victims of fraud, theft, and the loss of hunting grounds and crucial natural resources. Tensions ran high between the miners and many of the Nez Perce including Eagle from the Light (Tipyele' hne qaa'awpoo) and his band who had inhabited the region along White Bird Creek and adjacent to the Florence mines for generations. Another agreement was negotiated on December 31, 1861 at the council of Slate Creek in which the miners promised to respect Indian rights and the Nez Perce permitted another illegal intrusion onto their reservation.

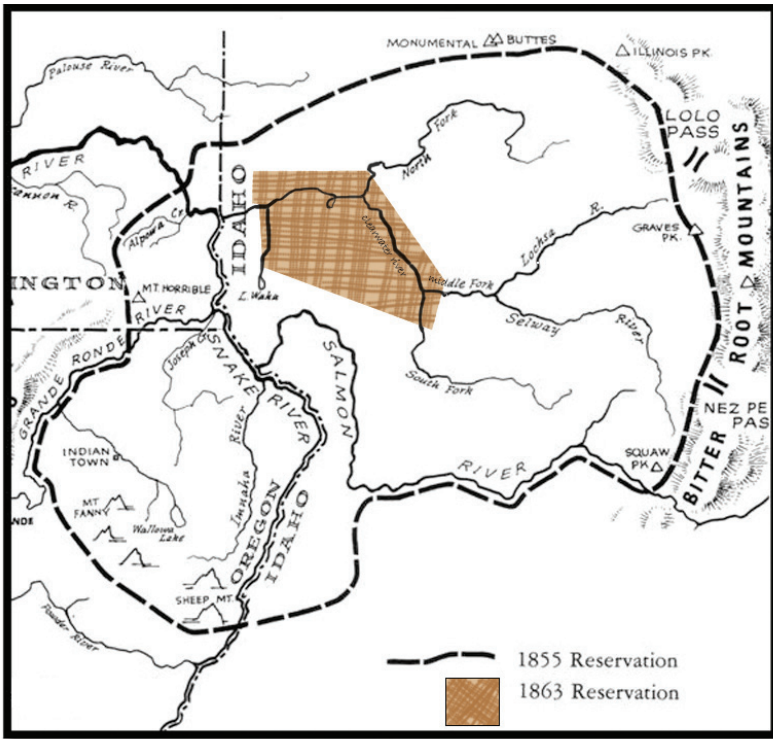
Under extreme pressure from the government, some Nez Perce leaders agreed to a new treaty in 1863 relinquishing all of the gold bearing regions and more. Not only did the treaty reduce the reservation to a fraction of its original size, it led to a split between treaty and non-treaty Nez Perce—those who had refused to sign the treaties.

In the spring of 1877, Chief Joseph led a group of non-treaty Nez Perce who had resisted Euro American settlement on their traditional lands in the Wal-lowa Valley of northeastern Oregon, across the flooding Snake and Salmon Rivers to the 1863 reservation in the territory of Idaho. Ongoing tensions between the Nez Perce and the United States Government tragically culminated in the Nez Perce War of 1877.



Survey of tribal lands; Nez Perce Reservation.
*Photo by Jane Gay, courtesy of Nez Perce
National Historic Park archives*

Map of the Nez Perce Reservation



1918 photo of heroic Nez Perce woman, "To-Lah," also known as Tolo, who trekked 26 miles from Slate Creek to warn Florence of the 1877 Nez Perce uprising. Photo by Allen H. Hilton, courtesy of Nez Perce National Historic Park archives

Old Florence Meets New Florence

Florence's prosperity was brief, and by August of 1862 many left the area in search of richer claims. In the summer of 1865, the remaining residents of Florence were burning unoccupied houses for firewood and much of the ground was placer mined. By that winter only one man was in residence at Florence, a gambler named Billy Courtney who was hired to keep the snow shoveled off the roofs of several buildings in town.

Although the big rush was short-lived, mining activity continued in the Florence Basin. By 1865 Chinese miners had entered the basin, remaining until the late 1890s. In 1896, promises of renewed quartz and placer mining brought hopeful miners back to the basin for a second big boom.

Due to friction between the new wave of miners and the owners of the original townsite, a new town was established about one-half mile south of Florence. *New Florence* was located where roads leading to the major mines of the Summit Creek mining district converged with the Milner Trail, by then a state wagon road.

In 1924, the Submarine Gold Placer & Quartz Mining Company shipped in a large steam shovel to work the placer grounds in 1924, literally obliterating much of what was left of Old Florence. By 1933, of the original buildings, only one remained partially standing--a hurdy-gurdy house.

Today, all that remains of Old Florence are hints of the once thriving boom town--the cemetery, historic photographs, and a treasure trove of tales that read like an old western novel.



Forlorned Old Florence, 1907.
Rodney Glisan photo



Residents standing amidst placer piles in the streets of New Florence, 1896. *Idaho State Historical Society photo*



Resident of New Florence.
1898 Ace Barton Collection



Sheep grazing in New Florence, 1926.
K.D. Swan photo

All prehistoric and historic artifacts and structures, either on the ground surface or buried underground, are protected by various laws and regulations. If you find evidence of past use of the area by prehistoric or historic people, please do not disturb or remove the artifacts, sites or features.

For More Information

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Salmon River Ranger District

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(208) 839-2211

This brochure is a companion publication to "Florence Tells Her Secrets," a Self-Guided Tour of the Florence Basin, also available at Nez Perce Forest offices. Both of these brochures are also located on our website at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/nezperce>

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