

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

For NPS use only

# National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

## 1. Name

historic City of Rocks

and or common

## 2. Location

street & number Parts of Townships 15 and 16 South,  
Ranges 23 and 24 East  not for publication

city, town  vicinity of Almo

state Idaho code 16 county Cassia code 031

## 3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

## 4. Owner of Property

name See continuation sheet

street & number

city, town  vicinity of state

## 5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Cassia County Courthouse

street & number County Building

city, town Burley state Idaho

## 6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Idaho State Historic Sites Survey has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date 1972  federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records Idaho State Historical Society

city, town Boise state Idaho

## 7. Description

### Condition

excellent

good

fair

deteriorated

ruins

unexposed

### Check one

unaltered

altered

### Check one

original site

moved date \_\_\_\_\_

### Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Extending over an area about six miles long and more than two miles wide in some parts, City of Rocks occupies two adjacent basins that drain into upper Raft River. California Trail emigrants came past a startling series of Graham Creek spires before reaching a still larger Circle Creek assembly within a valley surrounded by mountains, except for a 50-yard wide opening on the northeast end and a 20-yard wide pass at the southwest. In contrast to the sloping range and mountains around it, the valley (approximately three by five miles) is fairly level and studded with many tall conical stones and rock clusters ranging from 60 to 150 feet in height.

City of Rocks is an eroded Tertiary granitic intrusion into Precambrian gneisses, Elba quartzite, and Raft River narrows schists. Located under Cache Peak (Precambrian gneiss rising to 10,340 feet) in a basin at an elevation of about 5,200 feet, outcrops of this twenty-eight-million-year-old granite have been carved into unusual shapes and towers. Geologically interesting fins of soft granite extend over an area of several miles. Harder Precambrian outcrops of towers--located on opposite sides of a contact between Precambrian gneiss (southeast) and Tertiary granite (northwest)--represent an example of each formation. These landmarks, identified on later maps as "Twin Sisters," stand a short distance north of a major California Trail junction of routes from Soda Springs and Salt Lake. With widely varying age (2,500,000,000 years for Precambrian gneiss and 28,000,000 for Almo pluton Tertiary granite) these features have considerable geological interest.

A narrow dirt road is the only path across the valley. The natural scene is undisturbed and evidence of the nineteenth-century emigrants remain in the many tar-filled carvings on the rocks (still readable today), worn rock ledges and old trees scarred by ropes and chains used to help haul wagons down steep slopes. A few rusted and deteriorating artifacts--abandoned items left by the travelers who camped here, and the ruts of the old wagon trails may still be found.

The vegetation in the area is mostly comprised of small trees, clumps of quaking aspen, mountain mahogany, common juniper, and pinyon pine scattered among the rocks. North, Center, and South creeks feed into Circle Creek and Bath Rock which gather snow runoff and flow along the valley floor. Along with springs in the area they provide a reliable and constant water supply. Surrounding mountains are covered with pinyon pine which appears like a dark forest in contrast to the valley and range. A wide variety of animals and birds, including mountain lions, bobcats, and large numbers of deer and cougar as well as golden eagles, doves, and partridge inhabit the area.

South of City of Rocks, the Salt Lake Road passed through Emigrant Canyon on the east, along a valley where it joined with the Fort Hall Road which passed through the City of Rocks valley, at a point southwest of the Twin Sisters peaks. The combined trails then proceed west through Granite Pass. Much of the area from Emigrant Canyon to Granite Pass is virgin prairie and bears many clear traces of the wagon trails.

## 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

Specific dates 1862-1882

Builder/Architect

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

For almost a century and a half, City of Rocks has been recognized as an outstanding California Trail attraction. Thousands of gold hunters, rushing to California in 1849, had seen nothing like that before and City of Rocks quickly gained fame. Few emigrant road landmarks are as notable as City of Rocks. With significance deriving primarily as an emigrant stopping point, complete with register rocks where travelers signed their names, this area also commands geological attention. Aside from scientific investigation, it is important as a natural feature that stimulated a great deal of popular interest in western geology. Named for its strange resemblance to a city skyline scattered across Graham and Circle Creeks and their basins, rising against a backdrop of wooded mountainsides, this complex provided a refreshing contrast to extensive sagebrush plains surrounding it. No other practical route to California was available south of City of Rocks and Granite Pass, so emigrant traffic using earlier Fort Hall or later Hudspeth Cutoff or Salt Lake alternate routes all had to come that way. After 1846, emigrants using Jesse Applegate's Oregon Trail route also came that way. After 1869, with a transcontinental railroad further south, emigrant wagon routes shifted considerably, but Boise-Kelton traffic came that way until 1882.

### GEOLOGY

An unusual range of granite monoliths which comprise the City of Rocks was formed after a two-and-a-half-billion-year-old Precambrian crystalline basement complex was buried by 50,000 feet of Paleozoic and Mesozoic rocks, resulting in high temperatures and extreme pressures at great depths. As time passed, this burden was uplifted ten miles vertically. Ancient Precambrian rocks were eventually exposed by erosion, resulting in a low central basin area flanked by ridges and hogbacks. Then a recent intrusion of soft granite (28,000,000-year-old Almo pluton) brought in rock that was eroded into features known as City of Rocks.

A second unusual aspect of the Albion Range generally, and City of Rocks in particular, is their structural character, which geologists describe as "mantled gneiss dome,"--that is a structural uplift, or dome, generally covered by foliated metamorphic rocks called gneisses. City of Rocks is geologically important in the history of the Cordilleran mountain chain, which extended unbroken from southern Nevada to northwestern Alaska. During the past two and a half billion years, these rocks have been disturbed several times by earth movements and there is an impressive record of rock deposition, folding, faulting, and metamorphism in this area as well as through the Albion Range.

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

See continuation sheet

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property 12,480

Quadrangle name Almo and Cache Peak Quadrangles

Quadrangle scale 7.5"

### UTM References

A 

1	1	2	2	7	4	8	0	0	4	6	6	8	7	8	0
Zone	Easting			Northing											

B 

1	2	2	7	8	6	0	0	4	6	6	8	6	0	0
Zone	Easting			Northing										

C 

1	1	2	2	7	1	9	4	2	0	4	6	6	0	4	4	0
Zone	Easting			Northing												

D 

1	2	2	7	6	0	1	0	4	6	5	5	6	6	0
Zone	Easting			Northing										

E 

1	2	2	7	4	4	0	0	4	6	5	5	6	8	0
Zone	Easting			Northing										

F 

1	2	2	7	2	9	0	0	4	6	5	9	7	4	0
Zone	Easting			Northing										

G 

1	1	2	2	7	3	0	8	0	4	6	6	5	6	5	0
Zone	Easting			Northing											

H 

Zone	Easting			Northing												

### Verbal boundary description and justification

See continuation sheet

### List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	code	county	code
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state	code	county	code
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## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Dr. Merle W. Wells, State Historic Preservation Officer

organization Idaho State Historical Society

date March 1986

street & number 610 North Julia Davis Drive

telephone (208) 334-3861

city or town Boise,

state Idaho

## 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

Keeper of the National Register

date 3/6/86

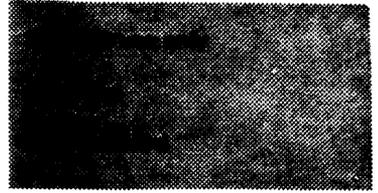
Attest:

Chief of Registration

date \_\_\_\_\_

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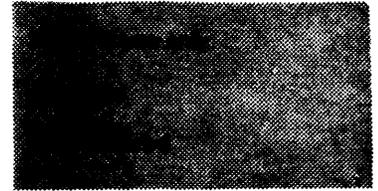
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East of the City of Rocks, the natural landscape lies open to view for more than twenty miles, and the valley west from Emigrant Canyon is also virtually undisturbed terrain. The land surrounding City of Rocks is used primarily for grazing, and some of the land is fenced. Considerable new cultivation through irrigation of the less rocky land in that general area threatens historic traces of the early trails in what was until recently virgin prairie.

Most of the City of Rocks and a sizeable area around it is managed by the Idaho State Parks and Recreation Department, the Bureau of Land Management, the United States Forest Service, and a number of private individuals. Numerous proposals have been made in recent years to establish a large Federal reservation perhaps involving the above agencies and/or the National Park Service, with the City of Rocks as the nucleus. Today a limited section of approximately 640 acres is maintained as a state park, but the area remains completely undeveloped, and presumably--due to its inaccessibility and lack of park facilities--it receives relatively few visitors.

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INDIAN HISTORY

Prior to 1860, Pocatello's Northern Shoshoni band ranged through a broad expanse of country from upper Goose Creek and an upper Humboldt-Thousand Springs area to Raft River, with City of Rocks a central feature in their territory. More possessive than many other Northern Shoshoni, they tended to exclude anyone else from utilizing that region. Referred to at times as wild wheat-eaters, Pocatello's people also harvested pine nuts around City of Rocks. That crop, isolated from other pine nut areas farther south, gave Pocatello's band a distinctive culture. Pocatello's Northern Shoshoni also went northwest to fish at Salmon Falls and east to Wind River where they sometimes spent a winter with Washakie's Eastern Shoshoni. After two decades of emigrant wagon traffic, with severe overgrazing and other disturbing features, Pocatello grew concerned enough to have his warriors attack an Oregon Trail emigrant party above Massacre Rocks, September 9-10, 1862, and a California Trail group just before they reached City of Rocks, September 12. These and other incidents led to military retaliation at Bear River, January 29, 1863, where some of Pocatello's people were camped with a substantial band of Cache Valley Shoshoni. By 1868, Pocatello decided that his band would be better off settled on Fort Hall reservation, and he arranged for a Bannock Creek home. After that, City of Rocks no longer had an Indian population.

ARCHEOLOGY

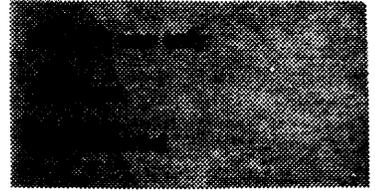
Only one archeological site has been identified in the area--an ancient campsite--but chipping wastes and the many monolithic outcroppings and overhangs suggest that City of Rocks may have potentially important sites. There were at least two known large Shoshoni winter villages nearby on Goose Creek to the west, and a number of groups lived in the vicinity of Yost and Grouse Creek. City of Rocks lies within the northern limit of the pine nut range, a Great Basin staple food. Into the twentieth century, Indians are known to have camped in Circle Valley to collect the pine nuts. But Bonneville salt flats separates City of Rocks from Great Basin pine nut lands, so local use there is culturally detached from Great Basin pine nut culture.

EMIGRANT ROADS

In 1842, Joseph B. Chiles brought a small California party back to Missouri to open a practical emigrant road for later migration. He had come west with an emigrant group that had ascertained that a Bonneville salt flat route west from Salt Lake simply would not do for wagon traffic. Ascending a Humboldt route already utilized farther west, his group had no trouble discovering Granite Pass, which offered them their needed route. Continuing past City of Rocks and descending Raft River, they used an already available Oregon Trail route on to Fort Hall and Soda Springs. Chiles sent his main California Trail emigrant party of 1843 that way under Joseph R. Walker while he searched for a Fort Boise-Pit River route that did not attract much later traffic from City of Rocks.

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After 1842 regular California Trail emigrants came by City of Rocks, and in 1846, Oregon-bound wagons using Jesse Applegate's route began to pass that way too. California gold rush traffic routed through Fort Hall or over Hudspeth's Cutoff came close enough that many emigrants stopped to paint their names on particularly appealing rocks. Salt Lake traffic rejoined Chiles' original California Trail route a short distance beyond. Two conspicuous spires were visible there, so all California emigrants had a chance to observe at least some marvelous granite formations in that area.

Few emigrants ever had seen anything quite like upper Raft River's granite spectacle. Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly, who came by on July 19, 1849, reported:

The road here lies between high & immense rocky mountains, with not a particle of herbage or vegetation upon them, but being white & smooth upon their surface. Just opposite to where we encamped was one with struck us as particularly curious. It was a perfect face upon the highest cliff around . . . The road continued between these & around these rocky piles, church domes, spires, pyramids, &cs., & in fact, with a little fancying you can see [anything] from the capitol at Washington to a lowly thatched cottage.

Then on August 4, August Burbank saw a religious significance there:

Passed on through what I called pyramid pass. The Grey Granite Rocks stand in pyramid, mountain & dome forms, here & there towering aloft. The road winds along between them. Emigrants names are written with tar-keel & on these curious structures.

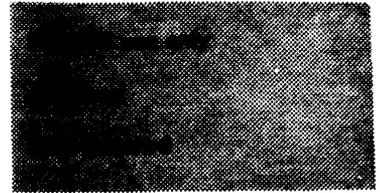
Here was truly manifested in a temporial point, the figures used in the Scriptures like unto the Shadow of a great rock in a weary land. The Shadow was cool-inviting and brought to mind the Spiritus 1 illustration--of the figure--the Scenery was grand & the concave rocks at the narrow pass was quite a curiosity.

Still later, J. Goldsborough Bruff described castles and all sorts of formations, August 29:

An entire range on our left, of volcanic hills, for about 15 miles: and on our right, similar formations for about 10 ms. when we entered a very extraordinary valley, called the "City of Castles." A couple of miles long, and probably 1/2 mile broad, A light grey decipitating granite, (probably altered by fire) in blocks of every size, from that of a barrel to the dimensions of a large dwelling house; groups, Masses on Masses, and Cliffs; and worn, by the action of ages of elementary affluences, into strange and romantic forms.-- The travellers had marked several large blocks, as their fancy

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dictated the resemblance to houses, castles, &c.--On one was marked (with tar) "NAPOLEON'S CASTLE," another "CITY HOTEL," &c. We nooned among these curious monuments of nature. I dined hastily, on bread & water, and while others rested, I explored and sketched some of these queer rocks. A group, on left of the trail, resembled gigantic fungi, petrified, other clusters were worn in cells and caverns; and one, which contrasted with the size and height of the adjacent rocks, seemed no larger than a big chest, was to my astonishment, when close to it, quite large, hollow, with an arch'd entrance, and capable of containing a dozen persons. This, from its peculiar shape, I named the "Sarcophagus Rock."

By August 12, 1849, James F. Wilkins identified that granite assemblage as "The City of Rocks," a name that soon gained general acceptance. Some travelers continued to supply their own names to features there, as did Cyrus C. Loveland, August 7, 1850:

Then went through a Novelty Pass, distance of three miles, to Echo Gap. This pass through the mountains is called Novelty Pass from the great mountains of singularly shaped rock on either side of the road. There is a very large rock on the left, close to the road, that I named Temple or Recorder's Rock. Here, upon its base, is recorded many an emigrant's name. This rock may be one hundred and twenty feet high and runs up nearly perpendicularly. A little farther and on the right is another with a small prong sticking up on its top that appears a little like a cupola. I might give names to many of these monuments of Nature but they are too numerous.

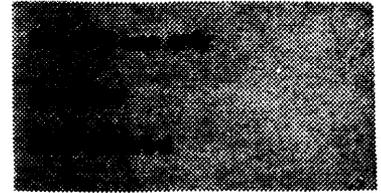
Echo Gap is fifteen or twenty feet wide, with perpendicular rocks on each side from fifty to one hundred and fifty feet high, and receives its name from having the loudest echo that I have ever heard. One mile after leaving Echo Gap brings us to where the Salt Lake Road comes in.

Franklin Langworthy, a journalist who came by way of Salt Lake in 1850, published an early description (Scenery of the Plains, Ogdensburg, New York: J. C. Sprague, 1855) of what he saw from that route:

A short distance from the junction are the noted Steeple Rocks between two of which runs the Fort Hall road, the pass being barely sufficient to crown a wagon through. In sight of, and near our road, are two tall and sharp pointed columns two or three hundred feet in apparent height, their forms being regular and beautifully elongated cones. Here are monuments erected by the hand of Nature, rivalling in grandeur Trajan's Pillar, or Cleopatra's Needle. Further back on the Fort Hall road, I am told is a succession of these steeples, filling a narrow valley for two or three miles . . .

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Thousands of emigrants signed their names there, according to Richard August Keen, who came by on June 22, 1852, but unlike basalt registers that also were common in that region, that of Keen's "Castle Rock hotel" has not survived so well.

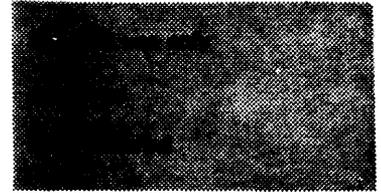
Although Granite Pass provided a satisfactory route for Idaho's heaviest traveled early emigrant wagon road, later traffic was not bound by such strict route constraints. Boise-to-Kelton stage and freight traffic continued to come that way until after 1880, but Granite Pass fell into disuse. Even after railroads altered freight and stage routes, emigrant wagons continued to roll west--and in all other directions--until well after 1900. But automobile highways avoided Granite Pass, City of Rocks, and other tourist attractions of that area. Important Utah mines adjacent to Granite Pass kept a road open there, but Idaho's California Trail descent to Goose Creek has attracted no vehicles for many years. Current roads are on new grades from City of Rocks west to Granite Pass, but old California Trail ruts remain visible through much of that area.

Settlement in the upper Raft River Valley began slowly about 1874, primarily with cattle grazing in the Almo area. About 1877, a Mormon settler opened a log-cabin store on the north side of Almo Creek, and by 1882 a school and church were also built there, although the town apparently never grew beyond a small population.

This quite desolate land continued as open range for cattle grazing until the high prices of wheat after 1914 brought dry land farmers into Circle Creek Basin. They cleared the sagebrush, added fencing and planted crops. At this time a road crossing the area was built from Almo to Moulton. Most of the farmers on Circle Creek gave up during years of drought and depression after 1920, when their crops dried up in the prairie dustbowl. People moved away, the houses and barns deteriorated, and unplowed fields once again became grazing lands.

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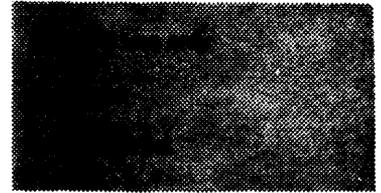
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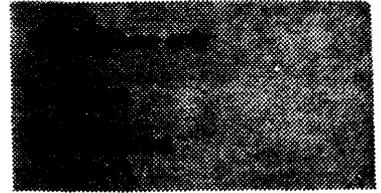
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Verbal Boundary Description

Commencing at a 1/4 corner, Section 19, T16S, R24E, and Section 24, T16S, R23E; continuing due west 1/2 mile and north about 1/2 mile to a 1/4 corner, Sections 13 and 24, T16S, R 23E; continuing east about 1/2 mile to section corner, 18 and 19, T16S, R24E and 13, 24, T16S, R23E; continuing due north 3/4 mile, due east 1/4 mile, and due north about 1-1/4 miles to a line between Section 6-7, T16S, R24E; continuing due east 1/2 mile, due south 1/4 mile, due east 1/2 mile, and due north almost 1/2 mile to a township line between Section 32, T15S, R24E and 5, T16S, R24E; continuing about 3/4 mile east to a section corner, 5-4, T16S, R24E, and 32-33, T15S, R24E; continuing north 2-1/4 miles along a section line, due east 3/4 mile, due north 1/4 mile, and west about 1/4 mile to a 1/4 corner, Sections 19-20, T15S, R24E; continuing north 1/4 mile along a section line, due west 1/2 mile, and north about 1/4 mile to a 1/4 corner, Sections 18-19, T15S, R24E; continuing west about 1/2 mile to a section corner, 18-19, T15S, R24E, and 13, 24, T15S, R23E; continuing north about 1 mile to a section corner, 7, 18, T15S, R24E and 12-13, T15S, R23E; continuing east about 1 mile to a section corner, 7-8 and 17-18, T15S, R24E; continuing north about 1/2 mile to a 1/4 corner, Sections 7-8, T15S, R24E; continuing due east 1/2 mile, due south 3/4 mile, due east about 1/2 mile to a section line, and north about 1-1/4 miles to a section corner, 4-5 and 8-9, T15S, R24E; continuing west about 3 miles to a section corner, 1-2 and 11-12, T15S, R23E; continuing south 1-1/2 miles to a 1/4 corner, Sections 13-14, T15S, R23E; continuing due west 1/2 mile and due south 1/2 mile to a 1/4 corner, Sections 14, 23, T15S, R23E; continuing west about 1/2 mile to a section corner, 14-15 and 22-23, T15S, R23E; continuing south 3-1/2 miles along a section line, due east 1/4 mile and due south about 3/4 mile to a section line, 11, 14, T16S, R23E; continuing about 3/4 mile east to a section corner, 11, 12, 13, 14, T16S, R23E; continuing 1-3/4 miles south along a section line, about 1 mile due east to a township line, and north about 1/4 mile to a 1/4 corner Section 19, T16S, R24E and 24, T16S, R23E.

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Boundary Justification

As a California Trail attraction of exceptional interest, City of Rocks National Historic Landmark includes spectacular Almo pluton granite formations and adjacent emigrant road segments. These boundaries are defined to include appropriate Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, and State Park holdings that incorporate a minimum of non-public lands. Adjacent road segments and other cultural resource inventory eligible for National Register recognition will be identified in a separate nomination.

Major granite features visible from California Trail and Salt Lake Alternate road grades constitute most of this area. Their significance derives primarily from their vast expanse as a scenic attraction that impressed tens of thousands of emigrants who had seen nothing like that before. Their large scale was particularly important, so that any attempt to identify their extent must account for that attribute. These boundaries of necessity include Graham Peak (from which downtown Salt Lake City was visible) and appropriate rock formations projecting from it, along with granite features extending toward Salt Lake Alternate tracks. Nearby Cache Peak, with sculptured granite exposures similar to those of Graham Peak, is a couple of miles farther away--remote enough to be excluded from this nomination. Cadastral survey boundaries are utilized exclusively in order to gain precision and economy in definition. These boundaries have been checked and revised repeatedly in a several-year Preservation Office investigation that coordinates information and suggestions from local ranchers as well as State Park, National Park Service, Forest Service, and BLM specialists. No other Idaho National Historic Landmark has been subject to a more extensive boundary review.