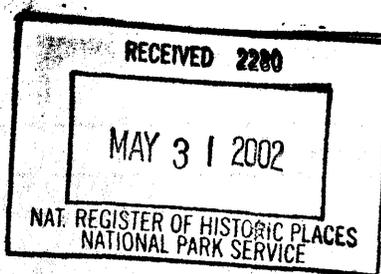


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

1771



National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "X" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable". For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

Historic name Nebraska City to Fort Kearny Cutoff Ruts at Spring Creek Prairie

Other names/site number Spring Creek Prairie Ruts, LC00-128

2. Location

Street & number 11700 SW 100th Street

Not for publication

City or town Denton

Vicinity

State Nebraska Code NE County Lancaster Code 109 Zip code 68339

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Lawrence Sommer
Signature of certifying official

5/24/02
Date

Director, Nebraska State Historical Society
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register.

see continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register.

see continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain): _____

Edson H. Beal 7/24/02

for
Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- Private
- Public-local
- Public-state
- Public-federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		Buildings
		Sites
		Structures
		Objects
1		Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Transportation

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Conservation area

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

N/A

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Foundation N/A

Walls N/A

Roof N/A

Other N/A

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- x A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
B Removed from its original location.
C A birthplace or a grave.
D A cemetery.
E A reconstructed building, object, or structure.
F A commemorative property.
G Less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Transportation, Exploration/Settlement, Commerce

Period of Significance

1860-1864

Significant Dates

1860

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

August F. Harvey

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
Previously listed in the National Register
Previously determined eligible by the National Register
Designated a National Historic Landmark
Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location for additional data:

- X State Historic Preservation Office
Other State agency
Federal agency
Local Government
University
Other
Name of repository:

10. Geographical DataAcreage of property Approximately 53 acres

UTM References (place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet).

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
A.	14	681575	4506680	C.	14	682200	4506010
B.	14	682030	4506520	D.	14	682100	4505930
				E.	14	681505	4506575

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Greg Miller, Preservation Historian
 organization Nebraska State Historical Society date April 2002
 street & number 1500 "R" Street telephone (402) 471-4787
 city or town Lincoln state NE zip code 68501

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets**Maps**A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.**Photographs**Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.**Additional items**

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name/title Audubon Nebraska
 street & number 11700 SW 100th Street telephone (402) 797-2301
 city or town Denton state NE zip code 68339

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determined eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, (15 USC 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff Ruts

Name of Property

Lancaster County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 7 Page 1

A number of remnant ruts of the Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff are preserved in a rare parcel of unplowed prairie located in southern Lancaster County, Nebraska. The wagon ruts, located within a relatively narrow corridor, traverse a section of land running diagonally from the southeast to the northwest. These ruts represent one of the rare preserved segments of the original Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff. The Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff provided an early avenue for government contracted freighting wagons and emigrant travel west across the plains. Few segments of the Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff remain today. Extensive agricultural and urban development has removed almost all traces of the trail and associated properties.

The preserved rut remnants run in a diagonal corridor from the southeast to the northwest of the section. Currently, there are twelve separate identifiable segments that constitute the nominated trail system. The southeast end of the trail ruts consists of two sets of wagon ruts, the longest being 101 meters, running along the top of a ridge above and east of Spring Creek. The remainder of the trail on the ridge is indiscernible primarily because the soils on the ridge top are predominately clay loam and have never been conducive to erosion that would leave long-lasting scars (Riggle 2001).

After leaving the ridge, very visible rut segments descend about 36.5 meters in a west-northwest direction toward the Spring Creek watershed. Although discontinuous, there are three distinct descension routes. The longest, located on the north and east is 336 meters in length. The other segments range from 23 to 151 meters. Eventually, the three routes end at three separate crossing points on Spring Creek. Just as the soil composition impaired rut formations on the ridge, a different soil type enhanced the creation of the ruts on the slope. Here the patchy occurrence of the coarser soil parent material, such as loam and sandy or pebbly materials contributes to the degree of slope erosion. The erosive potential of these patches influences the visibility of the trail ruts (Riggle 2001). The fact there are three distinct descent routes and crossings indicates a pattern known as fanning. This feature has been noted on other wagon trails associated with the California Trail, the Sidney to Black Hills Trail, and the Ox Bow Trail. It appears to represent the fanning out of individual wagons for safety in descent and for breaking while descending steep grades. A total of some 884 meters of trail ruts remain.

Several factors contribute to the lack of ruts visible on the north side of Spring Creek. In the 1960s the construction of a dam turned Spring Creek into a pond. Any bank cutting on the north side, associated with the pond construction would have destroyed any trail exit points along the creek. Additionally, the construction of a horse arena (non-extant), ranch buildings, and driveways, all on the north side have destroyed any ruts that may have existed.

Even though discontinuous, the trail ruts associated with the Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff located on the south-southeast side of the pond retain a high degree of integrity. Additionally, associated ruts could be identified in the future. Presently, vegetation likely obscures linear depressions that may be trail ruts. The identification of these possible ruts may be accomplished over a period of time using controlled burns as part of the Audubon-Spring Creek conservation plan.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff Ruts

Name of Property

Lancaster County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 8 Page 1

The nominated trail ruts, located in southwestern Lancaster County, are significant at the state level under Criterion A for their association with transportation, road development, settlement, and commerce. Identified as part of the original Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff, these trail ruts are, according to the most recent survey data, the longest contiguous sequence of ruts still extant along this road. The Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff is significant to Nebraska's history for its association with the Oregon (or California) Trail. The Oregon Trail was, at that time, the most important transportation corridor for the westward movement of people and supplies. Government freighting contractors and emigrants continually looked for shorter and faster routes from the Missouri River to the Oregon Trail. One such route was the Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff. These trail ruts have additional significance because they reveal the manner of descent of a wagon train from a ridge. The several sets of trail ruts along the descent of the ridge demonstrate the need for wagons to leave their line for safety reasons and in preparation for crossing the spring. The period of significance, 1860-1864 begins with the establishment of the Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff and ends when new alignments were introduced leading to decreased traffic on this portion of the trail.

Starting in the early 1840s, the migration of settlers moving west of the Missouri River began in earnest. As they traveled through Nebraska these emigrants followed trails whose names later became synonymous with westward expansion. The Oregon (or California) Trail was the name generally given to the route south of the Platte River, while the northern course later became known as the Mormon Trail.

Although the names Oregon and Mormon imply there were only two routes each trail had various starting points on the Missouri River. One such location was created in 1846 when Col. Stephen Watts Kearny moved to the mouth of Table Creek and established what later became known as "old" Fort Kearny (present-day Nebraska City). At that time this location had the advantage of being the point on the Missouri River closest to the place where the Independence-St. Joseph Road reached the Platte River. As such it seemed like the logical position to station troops to protect emigrants and at the same time be supplied by steamboat.

The rationale for this location was soon challenged primarily because the military recognized most traffic from the Independence and St. Joseph area was not heading straight north to the Platte River. Rather they were taking a more northwesterly voyage crossing the Blue and Little Blue Rivers. As a result the "old" Fort Kearny was too far east to provide adequate protection for the emigrants. A fort was needed where a majority of the wagons were converging with the Platte River.

As a result Lt. Daniel Woodbury was ordered to find a more suitable location for a military outpost. Setting out from "old" Fort Kearny in 1847, Lt. Woodbury apparently traveled two different routes, choosing a different route to return to "old" Fort Kearny. He completed the primary mission of choosing a new site by establishing a "new" Fort Kearny (near present-day Kearney). However, his initial route was direct and not suitable for wagon traffic. As a result he used the return trip to plot a more suitable trail to the new fort. Woodbury's route became a popular route used by emigrants for about the next ten years.

Following Woodbury's expedition, the army officially abandoned Table Creek. However, emigrant journals dating from 1849 indicate Table Creek "continued to be a focal point of military, government contracted freighting as well as emigrant debarkation" (Mattes, p.119). During this same time period other developments began to occur that not only maintained the Table Creek area as a major jumping-off spot, but also brought calls for a shorter route to the newly established Fort Kearny.

In 1854, present-day Nebraska City was platted where the community of Table Creek once stood. In a few short years, Nebraska City prospered because of a sharp rise in Missouri River steamboat traffic and increased demands by

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff Ruts

Name of Property

Lancaster County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 8 Page 2

the military for provisioning by overland freighting contractors. The primary contractor was the firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell who made Nebraska City their center of operations. Fort Kearny was their primary destination and the firm was quite busy. The Mormon War of 1857-58 and the Colorado Gold Rush of 1859 brought even more economic activity to the company and to Nebraska City.

Initially, Russell, Majors and Waddell, along with other freighter and emigrants starting out of Nebraska City, primarily used Woodbury's route. Although the trail was somewhat circuitous and slow going because of soft ground, it did have the advantage of following a river that provided water, grass, and wood for fuel. Still, there was a perceived need, especially by the freighters for a more direct route to the Fort Kearny. In 1858, Ward B. Burnett, Surveyor General of the U.S. Land Office in Nebraska City reconnoitered a shorter route from Nebraska City to Fort Kearny. Despite cutting the travel time, many were not receptive to the new road because it did not lie along a prominent stream, and, therefore, it lacked the abundant water, grass, and wood offered by Woodbury's route. More importantly, however, was the question of who would pay for the new road? Bridges and fords were needed on Salt Creek, Big Blue River, and numerous smaller streams. Majors, Russell and Waddell assumed the citizens of Nebraska City would raise the necessary capital since the new road would benefit their community. The town leaders thought the federal government would finance the project, but this was not the case.

As a result of this impasse, a meeting was called in Nebraska City in February 1860 to garner support from the local population for the construction of the new road. Alexander Majors (of Russell, Majors and Waddell) and Nebraska Governor Samuel Black spoke of the need for this more efficient route. Although the speeches were convincing, no money was pledged. Consequently, Russell, Majors and Waddell took upon themselves the responsibility of financing the new trail. They hired August F. Harvey, the city engineer, to survey and mark a direct route from Nebraska City to Fort Kearny. He traveled almost the same route Burnett had in 1858. Not only did it cut about seventy-five miles from Woodbury's road, the new route was built on firmer ground allowing for faster travel.

To mark the trail, Harvey and his assistants went ahead on horseback indicating the location of the route. A man driving a four-mule team hitched to a breaking plow created a furrow more definitively marking the road. Wagons later followed this path ensuring the clarity and firmness of the road. Although not as numerous as on the Woodbury trail, streams and creeks did have to be bridged or forded. Since no federal money was available and the residents of Nebraska City were hesitant to help finance these projects Majors came up with a unique solution. He enlisted the assistance of settlers who lived nearby the new route. Not only did this help the settlers' own transportation needs, but it also allowed them to sell provisions to the travelers.

Heavily used in 1860, the new Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff followed a course through current-day Otoe, Lancaster, Seward, York, Hamilton, Hall, Adams, and Kearney counties. Leaving Otoe County the road entered into southern Lancaster County. From that point the cutoff followed an almost straight east-west route through Lancaster County, where the nominated ruts are located, before entering Seward County. This route continued as the main road from Nebraska City to Fort Kearny until 1864. By that time additional cutoffs, that shortened and improved the route even more, became increasingly popular.

The Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff played an important role in the evolutionary process of finding a more accessible and direct route to Fort Kearny. The Cutoff created a transportation corridor that greatly increased travel efficiency for both freighters and emigrants. It also improved access to land in the South Platte River basin assisting in Euro-American settlement earlier than would otherwise have occurred. This led to ranches positioned for economic and transportation needs along the route. Several of the ranches attracted commerce-oriented settlement. Larger ranches became designated post offices attracting more businesses leading to larger settlements (Riggle, p.21). The use of the

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff Ruts

Name of Property

Lancaster County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 8 Page 3

Cutoff by freighters and emigrants was the mainstay of an evolving economy. Relative to surrounding areas a large amount of wealth was accumulated in the routes termini of Nebraska City and Fort Kearny as well as the areas in between.

The Spring Creek Prairie Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff Trail Ruts are located about three miles south of Denton (or about eight miles southwest of Lincoln). They are eligible at the state level under Criterion A for their association with transportation, commerce, and settlement. This sequence of trail ruts are significant as an excellent and increasingly rare example of remaining elements associated with the historically important Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff. This cutoff is significant for its association with the Oregon Trail that, at the time, was the most important transportation corridor for the westward movement of people and supplies. According to the most recent survey data these are the longest contiguous sequence of trail ruts still extant along this road. They are also significant for being part of the oldest (1860-64) of the major alignments of this trail. Finally, the Spring Creek Prairie Ruts have additional interest because they display the manner of descent from ridge tops. Several sets of descent ruts reveal the need for wagons to leave their line primarily for safety reasons because of the breaking requirements of heavy wagons, and to some extent, individual preferences of the emigrants crossing of Spring Creek.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff Ruts

Name of Property

Lancaster County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 9 Page 1

Bibliography

Brown, E.L. History of Lancaster County, Then and Now. Lincoln: Elinor L. Brown, 1971.

Lass, William E. From the Missouri to the Great Salt Lake. Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1972.

Mapes, Charles Boyd. "The Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cut-Off as a Factor in the Early Development of Nebraska and the West." M.A. Thesis, University of Nebraska, 1931.

Mattes, Merrill J. The Great Platte River Road. Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical City, 1969.

Murphy, David. "Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff." Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 2000.

Riggle, Stan. "Cultural Resources associated with Audubon-Spring Creek Prairie Wildlife Habitat Development Plan, Lancaster County, Nebraska." Lincoln: Natural Resources Conservation Service, 2001.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Cutoff Ruts

Name of Property

Lancaster County, Nebraska

County and State

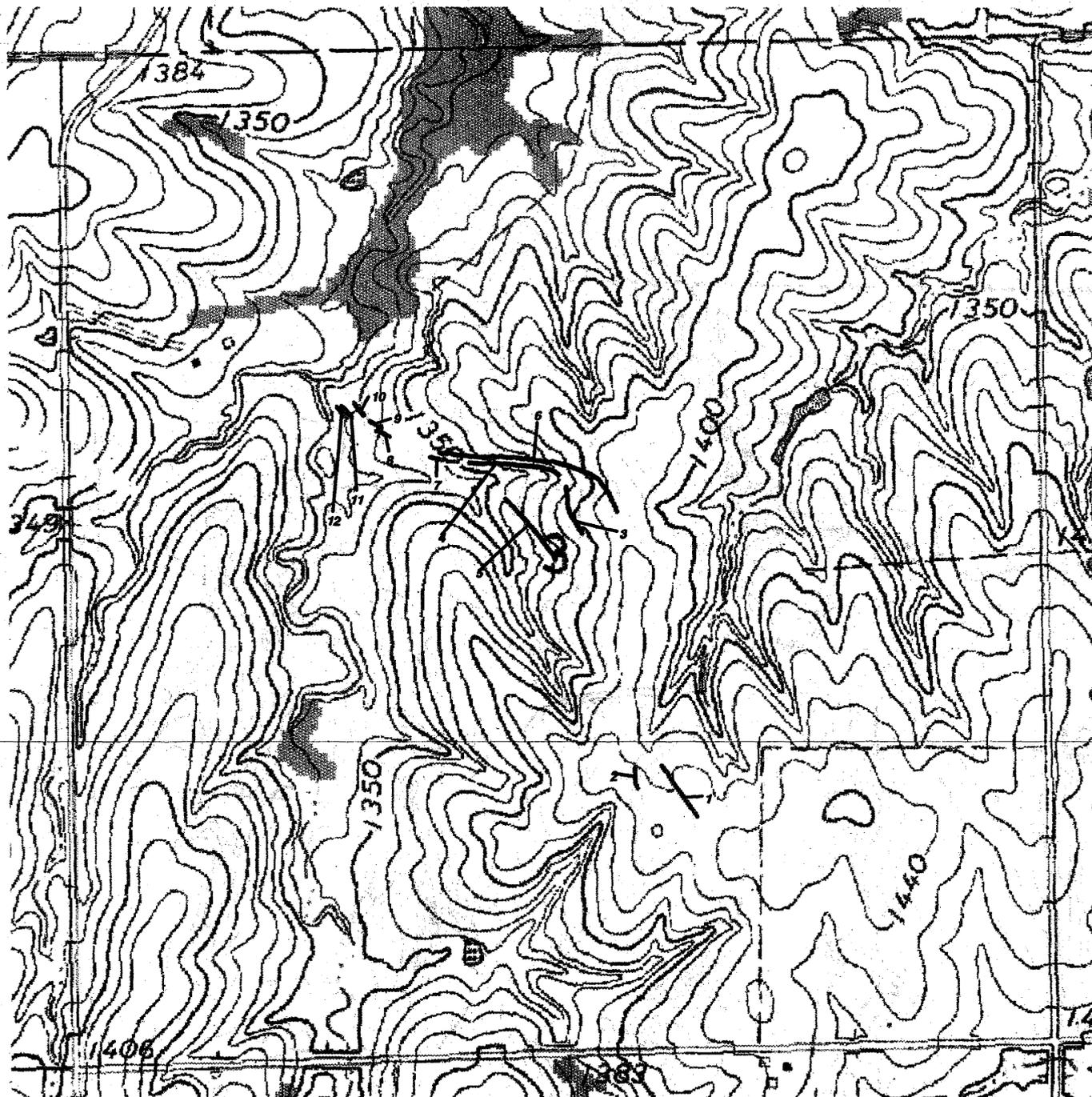
Section 10 Page 1

Verbal Boundary Description

An area as delineated by the UTM points "A" through "E" as indicated on the accompanying USGS Quad: Denton.

Boundary Justification

This area includes all contiguous ruts and remnants of the contiguous ruts included in the nomination.



(Fig.1)

number	Depth (meters)
1	101
2	34
3	82
4	151
5	129
6	336
7	23
8	24
9	22
10	26
11	27
12	23

