

Donation Land Claim Landscapes: American Settlement of Southern Puget Lowland Prairies

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Abstract

Historians and ecologists have observed that Euro-American settlers claimed prairie lands in the Puget Lowland at a high rate, leading to the rapid conversion of prairie habitat to agricultural fields. As we work toward restoring prairies, examining the history of Euro-America impacts to prairies can help us understand the pre-colonial extent and management history of these places. In western Washington only 1.87% of land was claimed through the Donation Land Claim process, but counties with large anthropogenically managed prairies were settled at a higher rate (up to 14.8% of the land) than other parts of western Washington. Does the pattern of Donation Land Claim settlement show a clear preference for prairie landscapes by Euro-Americans settling the area prior to 1855? How does the Donation Land Claim settlement pattern relate to Indigenous use and management of the Puget Lowland prairies? This poster explores the pattern of Donation Land Claims in western Washington to investigate whether Euro-American settlers primarily claimed prairie lands early in the Euro-American colonization of Washington.

The Donation Land Claim Act in Washington Territory

Donation Land Claim (DLC) Act patent data summarizes American settlement patterns in the years leading up to American treaties with Indigenous peoples, as land was claimed between 1846-1855. The Act encouraged American land claimants to immigrate to Oregon Territory to establish American control of the region. In only 5 years, the Act resulted in 302,543 acres (0.7%) of land in Washington Territory being patented by Americans, most prior to treaties with Indigenous peoples (Mathews 2024).

Methods for Defining Prairies and Mapping Donation Land Claims

Descriptions of Donation Land Claim patent boundaries were collected by browsing Donation Land Claim Act (9 Stat. 496) records in the gloreCORDS.blm.gov land patents database (Bureau of Land Management 2025). These descriptions were used to create polygons in ArcGIS Pro. When DLC boundaries deviated from standard Public Land Survey System section lines, the patent boundary was corrected using georeferenced General Land Office plats and parcel data. This analysis relied on the General Land Office (GLO) plat boundaries for prairie mapping. We recognize that the precolonial extent of prairies was likely greater than what was mapped by the GLO, and that the GLO mapped landscape features for the purpose of advertising land to prospective land claimants. ArcGIS Pro selection tools, as well as summary statistics were used to produce the data in Table 2.

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ArcGIS Pro selection tools, as well as summary statistics were used to produce the data in Table 1.

Challenges of Mapping GLO Prairies

This analysis relied on the General Land Office (GLO) plat boundaries for prairie mapping. We recognize that the precolonial extent of prairies was likely greater than what was mapped by the GLO, and that the GLO mapped landscape features for the purpose of managing land claims. We assume these mapped prairie boundaries are imprecise and incomplete. Due to the differences in surveyor field methods and mapping priorities, some of the Townships in our study area have no mapped prairies where

large prairies do exist, such as prairies near Boistfort, Steilacoom, and Puyallup. This means the summary statistics here likely underrepresent American's prairie claims. In several instances, including the large prairies of Pierce County, the boundaries of large prairies were not mapped in some places, resulting in unnatural straight lines along townships.

Table 1. Donation Land Claim Patents by County.

County	Land Acres in County	% of County Patented as DLC	All Donation Land Claims			Donation Land Claims in Prairies			
			DLC Patents	Total Acres	Average Patent Acres	DLC Patents	% of DLCs in Prairie	Total Acres	Average Patent Acres
Grays Harbor	1,217,280	3.3%	14	4,030	288	7	50%	1,910	273
Kitsap	252,800	3.4%	4	854	214	0	0%	0	0
Lewis	1,537,920	2.3%	96	35,005	365	82	85%	30,394	371
Mason	613,760	0.8%	18	4,884	271	5	28%	1,607	321
Pierce	1,068,800	2.0%	108	21,288	290	74	69%	14,938	293
Thurston	462,080	14.9%	239	68,999	289	125	52%	40,554	324
Total	5,152,640	2.8%	479	145,060	303	293	61%	97,889	334

Conclusion

The assumption that American settlers preferred to claim anthropogenic prairies is correct within our study area, but there are several other factors that influenced these claims that need further exploration. For recent immigrants in a nascent state, the comfort of emerging communities, the need for shared labor, and access to commercial hubs and travel routes were also important influences on their decision to claim land.

References Cited

- Bureau of Land Management
2025 General Land Office Records, United States Department of the Interior.
<<https://gloreCORDS.blm.gov/search/default.aspx#>>
- Mathews, Bethany K.
2024 "To Be Held by Her in Her Own Right": Feminism and the Donation Land Claim Act in Washington State, poster presented at the 77th Northwest Anthropological Conference, Portland, OR, March 2024.

Acknowledgements

Antiquity Consulting staff Riley Mallory and Libby Musolino mapped the boundaries of Donation Land Claims for this project and drafted prairie boundaries.



Donation Land Claim Patents in the Puget Lowland

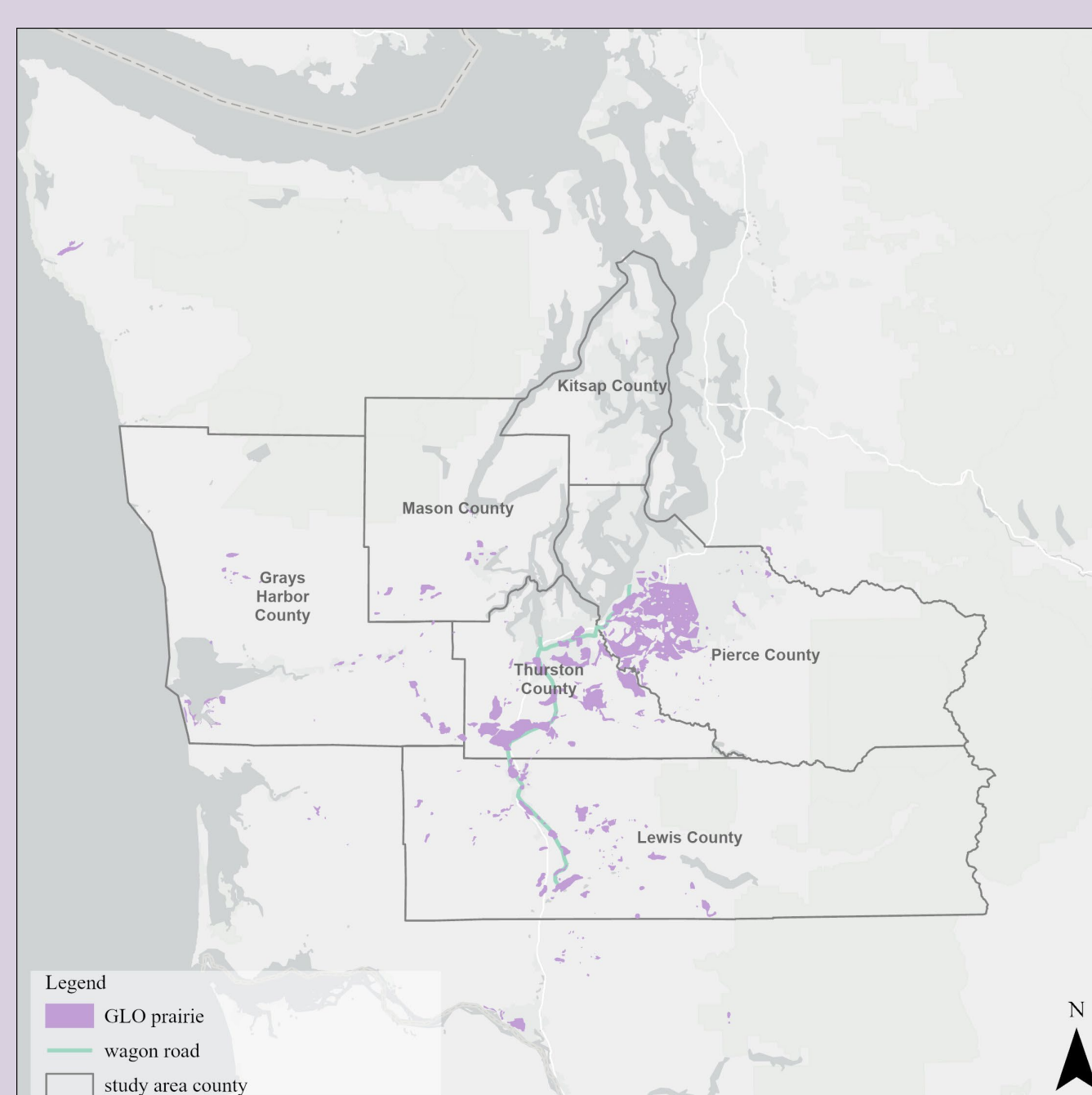


Figure 1. Map of GLO mapped prairies in study area.

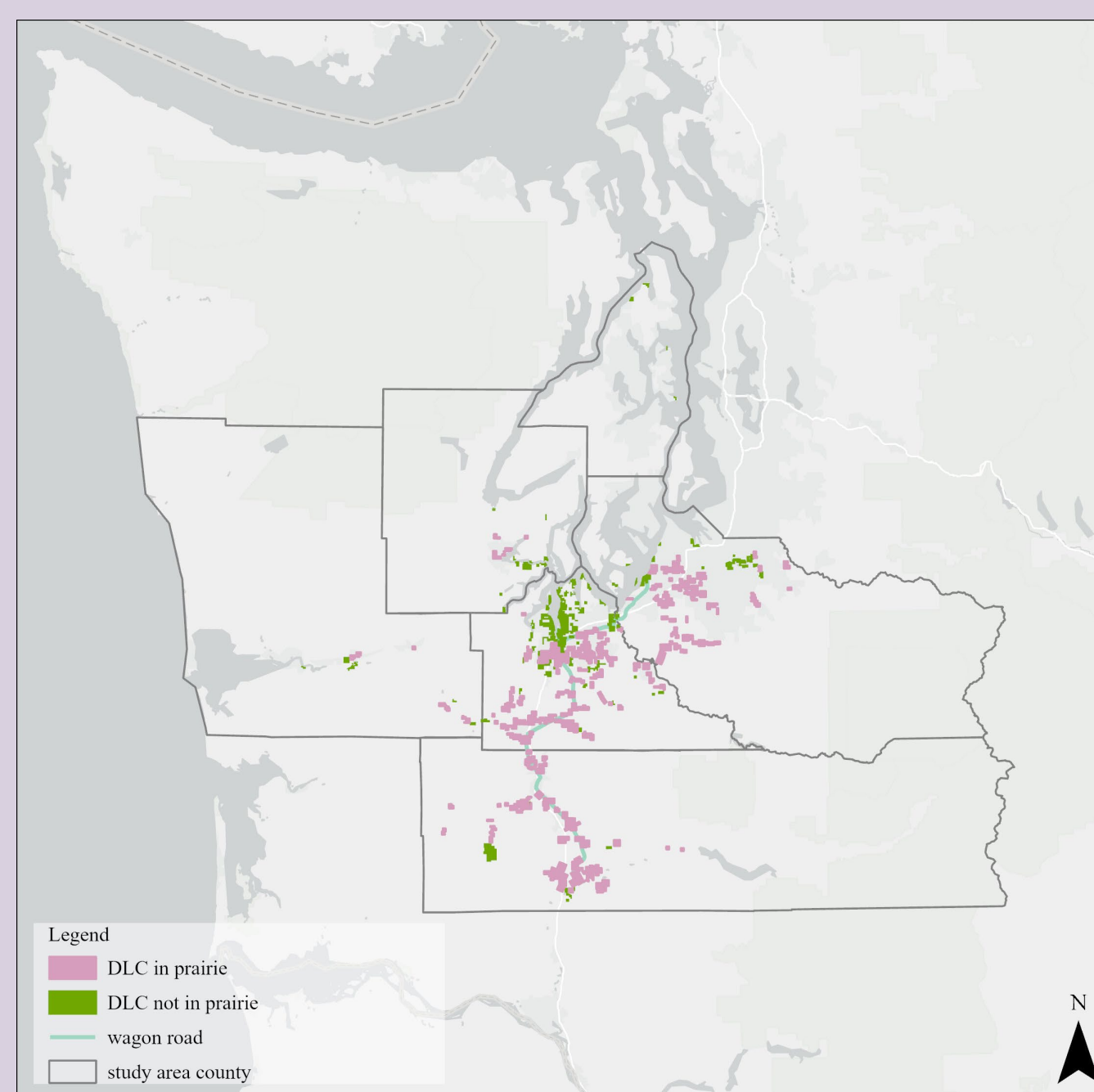


Figure 2. Map of Washington Donation Land Claim patents mapped in prairie and not in prairie.

To study the distribution of DLC patents in relation to prairies, the study area was limited to Grays Harbor, Kitsap, Lewis, Mason, Pierce, and Thurston Counties because of the high number of DLC patents and variety of ecosystems in this area (Figure 1). A total of 479 DLC claims were patented in this area, encompassing 145,060 acres (2.8% of land in the study area).

Many (61%) of these patents were situated on prairies that had been managed by Indigenous peoples prior to American colonization (Figure 2). In Lewis County, where patents were the largest -- typically the largest were the earliest -- American settlement was clearly focused on prairies; 85% of patents here intersected with prairies. Thurston (52%), Pierce (69%), and Grays Harbor (50%) county prairies were also clearly a significant draw for settlement (Figures 3-6).

Although historians have stated that prairie lands were exclusively settled first, several other patterns are visible in the DLC patent distribution. In Thurston County, settlement was also focused along the shoreline of Budd Inlet, where the new settlement of Olympia was growing with opportunities for timber extraction and access to commerce. In southeastern Thurston County, there appears to be a pattern of settlers preferring to claim the boundaries of prairies, perhaps because of access to a diversity of natural resources on those ecotones. There is also clearly a connection between DLC patents in Thurston and Lewis counties and the alignment of the Cowlitz trail, which was later developed as a wagon road. The regional importance of this trail, and the Indigenous and Hudson Bay Company settlements along this trail, influenced American settlement.

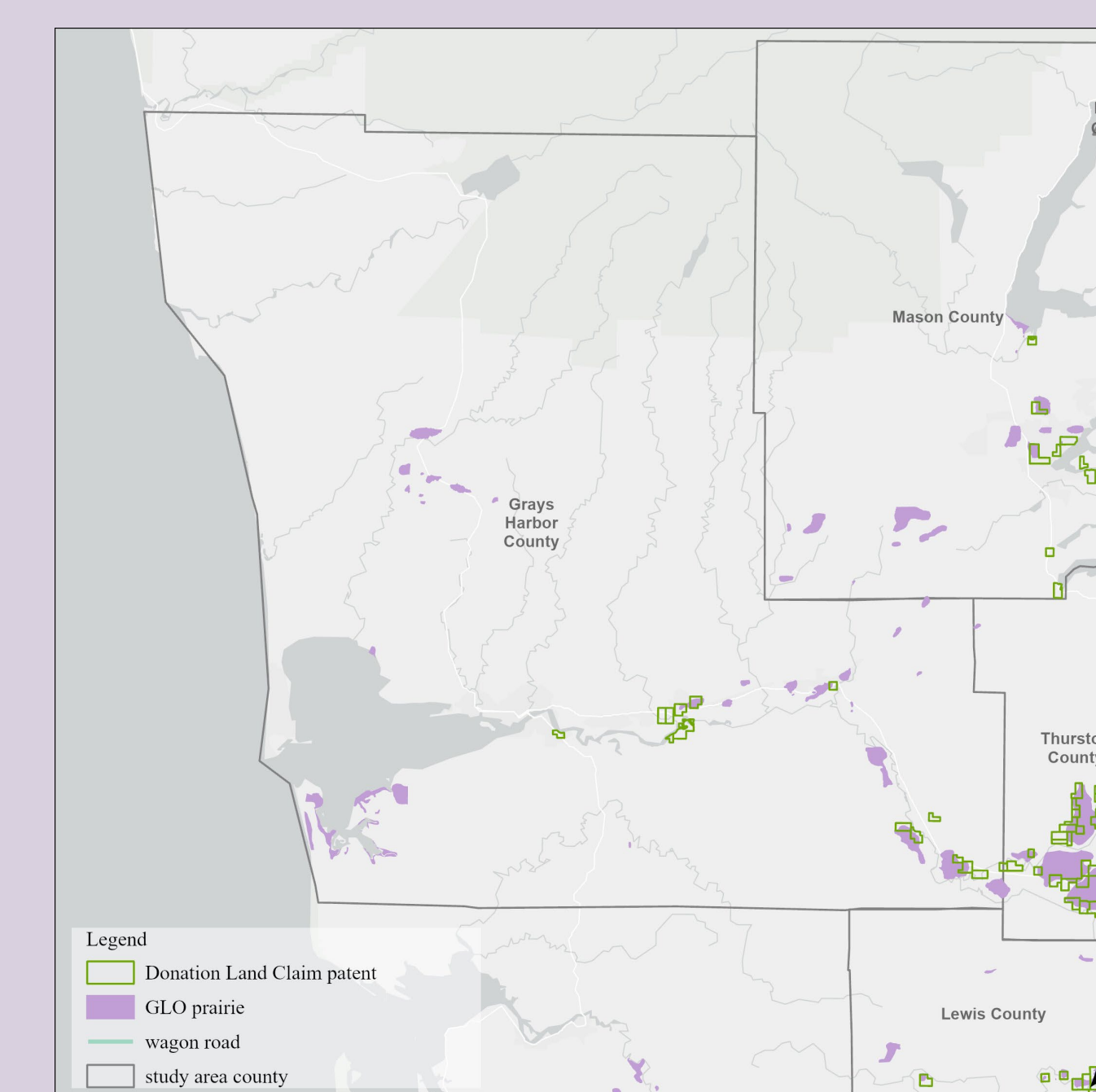


Figure 3. Map of Washington Donation Land Claim patents and prairies, Grays Harbor county.

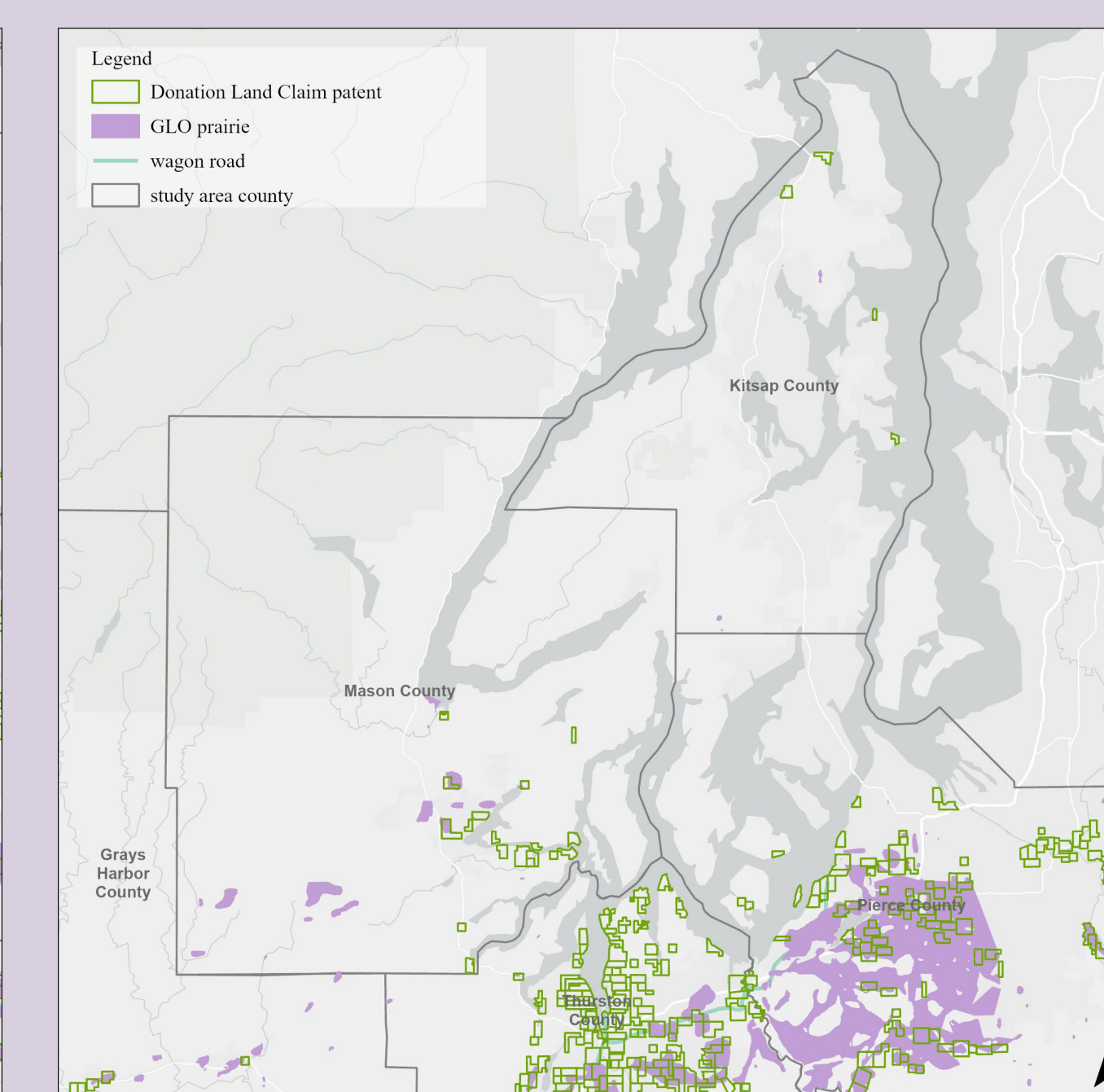


Figure 4. Map of Washington Donation Land Claim patents and prairies, Mason and Kitsap counties.

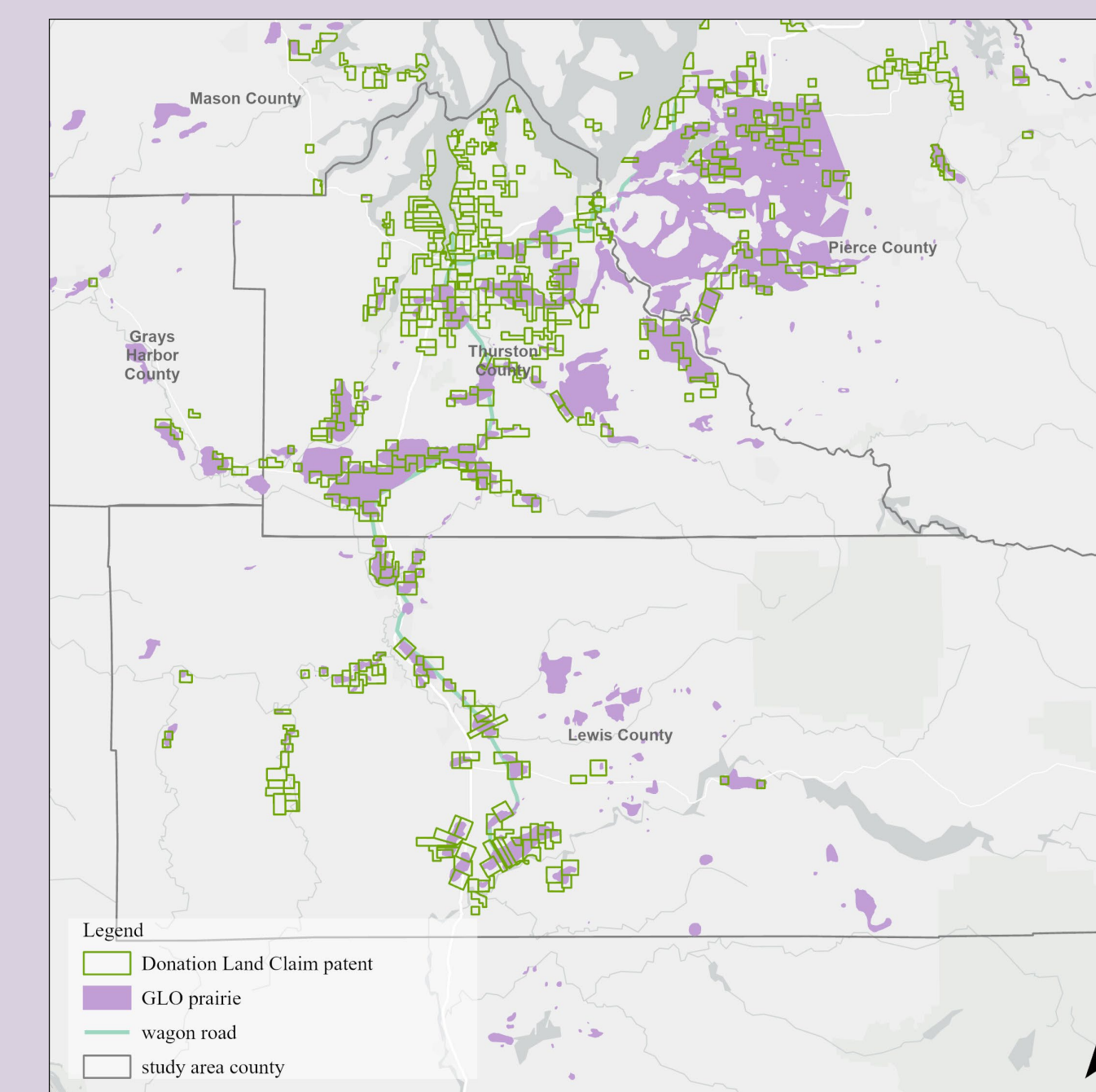


Figure 5. Map of Washington Donation Land Claim patents and prairies, Thurston and Lewis counties.

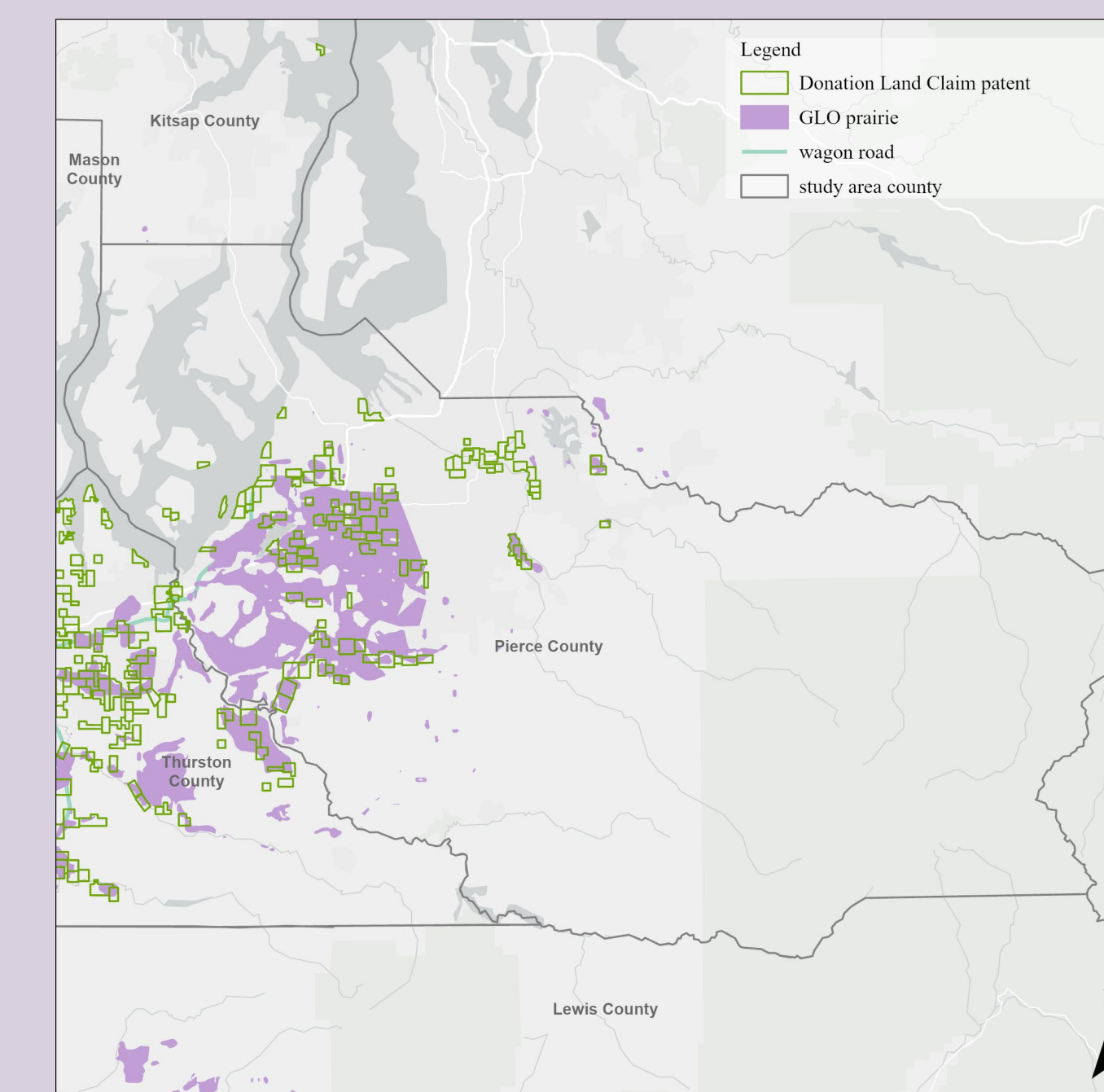


Figure 6. Map of Washington Donation Land Claim patents and prairies, Pierce County.