

Fort Vancouver

National Historic Site
Washington

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Founded by the Hudson's Bay Company during the winter of 1824-1825 as a fur-trading post and supply depot, Fort Vancouver for the next twenty years was the most important settlement in the Pacific Northwest, from San Francisco Bay to the Russian outposts in Alaska.

John A. Hussey The History of Fort Vancouver and its Physical Structure Washington State Historical Society

The Hudson's Bay Company

When the United States declared its independence from Great Britain, the Nation was a collection of scattered settlements along the Atlantic. Yet within a few short years, Americans had carried the flag all the way to the shores of the Pacific.

In the vanguard of this movement was the fur trapper and trader. He was the first European to explore large tracts of the American and Canadian West. His forts and outposts encouraged America's expansion to the West. Such a place was Fort Vancouver.

The early 1800s saw England, America, Spain and Russia competing for control of the Northwest fur trade. Russia and Spain soon limited their claims. In 1818, the United States and England agreed to share access to the Oregon Country until a boundary could be drawn.

Seven years later the Hudson's Bay Company moved its headquarters from Fort George at the mouth of the Columbia and founded Fort Vancouver 160 kilometers (100 miles) upstream. It was a bold move designed to anchor Britain's claim on Oregon. Five years later the fort was moved closer to the river.

For the next two decades, Fort Vancouver was directed by strong-willed, capable men who built Fort Vancouver into the fur trade capital of the Northwest. Chief Factor Dr. John McLoughlin was in charge of Company operations west of the Rocky Mountains. An energetic man and a genius at organization, he was primarily responsible for the post's success.

Under the watchful eye of George Simpson, governor-in-chief of the Company, McLoughlin reorganized the Snake River bri-

gades that trapped and traded as far south as Great Salt Lake. Company ships sailed up and down the coast collecting furs. Cultivated fields near the stockade continually expanded. By the time the first American settlers began arriving in the late 1830s, Fort Vancouver was a thriving center of English culture and authority. Indeed, British strategy was to make a strong case for retaining everything north of the Columbia.

Fort Vancouver's very success contributed to its downfall. When American settlers, weary and impoverished by the long overland trip on the Oregon Trail, needed supplies, the only place to turn was to the British trading post. McLoughlin traded with the settlers and even extended them credit, against Simpson's wishes. Simpson never had warmed up to McLoughlin and could no longer hide his irritation. The gulf between the two men widened.

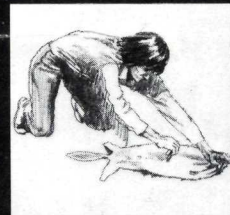
When McLoughlin's son was murdered at a small Company outpost and Simpson refused to make more than a cursory investigation, McLoughlin's festering anger flared into open hostility.

John McLoughlin resigned his post in early 1846, and moved to the American settlement of Oregon City. The Treaty of 1846 drew the boundary between the United States and Canada at the 49th parallel, which left Fort Vancouver on American soil. The first United States Army base in the Northwest was established nearby in 1849. For a few years, Fort Vancouver continued to trade with settlers and Indians. But returns diminished and Fort Vancouver closed its gates in 1860. By 1866, decay and fires had destroyed all remaining structures. John McLoughlin died a citizen in the land he had nurtured to the ways of English civilization. In time, many came to regard him as the "father of Oregon."

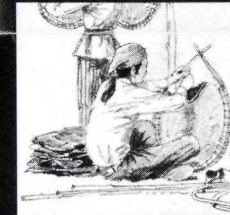
The Trapper and His Trade



Skinning the beaver (far left) for its pelt was the first step after the beaver was trapped.



The freshly skinned pelt had to be scraped (left) to remove any bits of flesh that adhered to it.



When the pelt had been dressed it was stretched and dried. Often the drying frame was of willow whose natural elasticity helped keep the pelt taut.



The last stage in the process was bringing the stretched, dried furs to the Hudson's Bay Company post where they were exchanged for goods and supplies.

As strange as it may seem, the fashion of beaver hats for gentlemen greatly influenced the opening of the West. In search of new trapping ground, traders and voyageurs pushed westward to the Pacific Ocean.

In addition to trading with Indians to obtain furs, the Hudson's Bay Company sent out brigades of 50 to 200 men, women, and children. Trapping was hard and often dangerous work. Most trapping was done in the winter months, when pelts are thickest. The earliest trappers adopted the Indians' method of breaking into a beaver lodge and taking the animals, but shortly the steel trap came into use. The trap, designed to catch the beaver by the leg, was set in shallow water. It was attached by a chain to a

sharpened stake that was implanted in deeper water. The traps were baited with castoreum, a scent obtained from glands in the hind legs of the beaver. All this activity was going on while the trapper stood in the water, often ice-cold, so that he wouldn't leave his scent on the bank. The curious beaver, attracted by the castoreum, would step into the trap. The next morning the trapper skinned his catch. Back at camp, he or his Indian wife scraped the flesh from the skins, and stretched them to dry.

After almost a year in the wilderness, the trapping brigades got ready to head back to Fort Vancouver. The pelts were loosely sorted by size and kind and pressed into 40-kilogram (90-pound) bundles and loaded into a bateau for the river journey back to

the main post. As the boat made its way down the tributaries and the Columbia, it joined up with others also heading back. It was a festive time of year and the people at the fort eagerly awaited the arrival of the trapping brigades. The trappers themselves made a show of their arrival, donning their best and most colorful clothes, swaggering out of their boats, and jauntily unloading their furs. The winters in the wilderness had convinced them that they were superior to the regular work force at the fort.

Now the company clerks took over, appraising the furs and paying the trappers. John McLoughlin paid good prices for the furs so that the trappers would be content. His strategy worked, and the brigades brought quality furs to Fort Vancouver.

Fort Vancouver

National Historic Site
Washington

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Since 1966 Fort Vancouver's stockade and five major buildings have been reconstructed on their original locations. Together they can give you an idea of what life was like when Fort Vancouver was the most important settlement in the Pacific Northwest. Use this diagram and the accompanying text to guide yourself around the fort.

Safety The ground at the fort is uneven. Don't let a slip or fall spoil your visit. Watch your children.

Bakery

The bakery was a two-story structure set in the east wall. It contained two fire-brick ovens. As many as four men baked bread and biscuits for the 200-300 fort employees. They also baked biscuits for the brigades, for use by ship crews and other posts, and for trade.

Wash House

The wash house appears on several maps of Fort Vancouver drawn in the early 1840s. Little is known of its appearance or use. The building was probably destroyed by fire in 1852.

Chief Factor's Residence

Visitors to Fort Vancouver described McLoughlin's house as "very handsome" and "commodious and elegant." Built to replace an earlier structure, it was an impressive building, with white clapboard siding and a large front porch. Grape vines climbed iron trellises, and two spiked cannon stood silently in front. Clerks and officers took their meals in a large mess hall, where parties and dances were also held.

Kitchen

Few details are known about any of the kitchens used at Fort Vancouver over the years. The kitchen used in 1845 evidently contained a cooking area, pantry, larder and living quarters for some of the kitchen staff. The kitchen provided meals for the gentlemen of the fort and for special guests.

Shipping

Transportation was vital to the Company's success in the Northwest. Ocean-going vessels crossed the treacherous bar at the mouth of the Columbia, bringing supplies and trade goods. On the return trip they loaded the year's returns of furs, tallow, lumber, salmon, flour, and other products of the fort's economy.

Farming

Many of the Pacific Northwest's agricultural "firsts" can be traced to Fort Vancouver. McLoughlin and Simpson agreed that the post should be self-sufficient. Fences enclosed more than 1,000 hectares (2,500 acres). Peas, oats, barley, wheat, and garden vegetables fed the fort community. The Northwest's first orchard included apples, pears, peaches, plums and cherries. Cattle, horses, hogs, sheep and goats made up the livestock.

Stockade

Expanded at least five times, the stockade by 1845 enclosed an area 224 meters (734 feet) by 97 meters (318 feet). Douglas-fir posts stood about five meters (15 feet) high, affording privacy as well as protection from theft and attack.

Bastion

The bastion was built in 1845 to protect the fort against American threats, and to fire salutes to ships arriving at the fort. It was three stories high, with the top floor containing eight 3-pounder cannon.

Hub of the Northwest Territory

Fort Vancouver was the headquarters of the Columbia Department, embracing present-day British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. The trading post also represented Britain's business and governmental interests in competition with the United States.

The fort's warehouses stocked supplies for the fur brigades, the Indian and settler trade, and for the 20 to 30 other Company posts in the Department. Most Indians were shrewd traders, so trade goods were carefully chosen. Most items were imported from England, causing at least a two-year lapse between ordering and receiving. Occasional shipwrecks were dangers that had to be lived with.

The fort's shops bustled with activity, manufacturing as many items as possible. The fort echoed to the sounds of carpenters hammering and sawing, of blacksmiths making tools and repairing old ones, and of coopers making barrels. Carts rumbled to and fro piled high with supplies, and with firewood for the bakery's large brick ovens. Indians arrived in throngs to trade, passing field hands tending crops and livestock. Company clerks bent over their account books figuring out how much they owed whom. Frequent visitors were welcomed and eagerly quizzed for news and gossip of the outside world.

Clerks and officers formed the "gentlemen" class, and came from the British Isles. The lower class, or "engagés", made up the bulk

of the employees. With few exceptions, they were illiterate and lived outside the stockade. Many nationalities were represented.

George Simpson once wrote a description of a trip down the Columbia and it indicates the diversity of Fort Vancouver: "our crew of ten men contained Iroquois who spoke their own tongue; a Cree halfbreed of French origin, who appeared to have borrowed his dialect from both his parents; a North Briton who understood only the Gaelic of his native hills; Canadians who, of course, knew French, and Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islanders, who jabbered a medley of Chinook and their own vernacular jargon. Add to all this that the passengers were natives of England, Scotland, Russia, Canada, and the Hudson Bay Territories."

About Your Visit

Fort Vancouver became a unit of the National Park System in 1949, a year after archeologists had begun the careful task of excavating the site. Since then almost one million artifacts from the fort's past have been taken from the ground, catalogued, and studied in the search for knowledge of days gone by.

To visit the park, which is located in the city of Vancouver, Wash., turn east off I-5 at the Mill Plain Boulevard interchange and then follow the signs to the visitor center on East Evergreen Boulevard. The park is administered for the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior by a superintendent whose address is Vancouver, WA 98661.