



## The Howard House: A Home for the Department Commander



*A troop review on the Parade Ground, ca. 1900. The Howard House is in the background. Courtesy of the Jim Raley Collection.*

### Vancouver Barracks Rises in Importance

In 1874, General Oliver Otis Howard became Commander of the Department of the Columbia (Oregon, Washington, Alaska and portions of Idaho territories). Taking residence in Portland, Oregon, he declared that there were no facilities at Vancouver Barracks adequate for someone of his military stature. This situation was temporary, however, as in 1878 the War Department ordered that all army personnel reside at the nearest post. Initially General Howard and his family lived in the Quartermaster's residence. Then the order came through in 1878 to build a residence at Vancouver Barracks for the use of the Department Commander.

### General Howard and Family in Residence

When the Italianate-style structure was completed late in 1878, it consisted of nine rooms on the main floor and nine rooms on the upper floor. General Howard and his family, wife Elizabeth, sons Guy (a Lieutenant), Jon, and Harry, daughter Grace, and Howard's aide-de-camp, C. E. S. Wood, took up residence in the house that now carries the General's name. Servant Kitty Traynor from Ireland and cook Mick Lai from China lived in the upstairs back of the home. After Grace's marriage to Captain James Gray of the Oregon Steam and Navigation Company in September of 1879, Gray also resided in the home.

The patriarch of this extended family, General O. O. Howard, had served in the Union Army during the Civil War, and

immediately afterward was assigned as Head of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Land. This bureau, a subsidiary of the War Department, was organized to address the rights and needs of refugees and freed slaves.

Later, after being posted in the West, Howard commanded military activities during the Nez Perce War, ultimately negotiating the treaty between the U.S. Government and Chief Joseph. Howard was then appointed by President Grant as a special envoy to the American Indians, often arguing against the unfair treatment that they generally received. General Howard left Vancouver Barracks in December of 1880 to take over as Superintendent of West Point.

### General Nelson Miles Initiates Many Changes

The General O. O. Howard House was soon home to another General, Nelson A. Miles, who arrived in August of 1881. Like Howard, Miles had served in the Union Army during the Civil War, and fought in Indian Wars throughout the West.

Miles arrived with his wife, Mary, and daughter Cecilia. A son, Sherman, was born here at the post in 1882. Undoubtedly the family included some of General Miles' prized foxhounds. Miles is quoted as having been very pleased with his command, but his wife, a niece of General William T. Sherman, longed for her life back east.

Many changes were implemented in the Columbia Department while Miles was in command. At Vancouver Barracks, he planted maple trees, many of which still stand along Officers' Row. He also instituted daily calisthenics for military personnel. Roads were improved, and telegraph and heliograph stations (signalling with mirrors), multiplied in order to improve communication throughout the vast Department. Miles dispatched several missions to Alaska to explore its possibilities, and the railroad came to town, changing the manner in which troops were deployed across the Pacific Northwest.

**The Center of Local High Society**



*A room of the Howard House while it was the Andersons' home, decorated for a special occasion. It shows the Victorian-era penchant for plants and clutter. Courtesy of the Clark County Historical Museum, P83.13.2.*

General Miles left the Department of the Columbia in the summer of 1885. Mary and the children delayed leaving until October as Sherman was ill. A year later, when the new residence for the Department Commander (now known as the Marshall House), was completed, the Howard House became the residence of the Post Commander. Vancouver Barracks had become a prestigious post with a regionally renowned band, which was in constant demand in Vancouver and Portland. Folks would take leisurely walks on the grounds, and Officers' Row was awash with radiant floral colors

and the bright green of meticulously manicured lawns.

Colonel Thomas M. Anderson, Post Commander from 1886 to 1898, and his family lived in the Howard House. The Anderson family was immersed in the society life of Vancouver and Portland. One afternoon Mrs. Anderson and several members of the Daughters of the Revolution were enjoying refreshments on the porch. To their surprise they were regaled with a dress parade of the troops, complete with music, on the Parade Ground in front of the home.



*Guests at the Anderson home would have enjoyed cuisine prepared by their Cantonese cook, Chin Wing (left, ca. 1890). Many men arrived from southern China in the 1860s hoping to strike it rich in mining and then return to their homeland. Unfortunately, they were universally limited to locations previously played-out by Americans. Essentially trapped with no funds to return home, many Chinese men entered domestic service, one of the few occupations allowed them by American society. Courtesy of the Clark County Historical Museum, P46.6.*

*Colonel Anderson and his family (right) on the porch of the Howard House during the 1890s. Courtesy of the Clark County Historical Museum, P48.7.*



**A Fire in the Barber Shop**

The division of American territories into military departments was abolished in 1912. Sometime after 1914, the Marshall House (which had been the residence of the Department Commander), became the residence of the Commander of Vancouver Barracks. The Howard House then served variously as quarters for Field Officers, the Officers' Club, and then the Non-Commissioned Officers' Club from World War II until the structure was badly damaged in 1986 by a fire started in the first floor Barber Shop.

The City of Vancouver leased the unrepaired and empty building in 1991, and embarked on a \$2.2 million rehabilitation, returning the structure to

its original 1878 floor plan and interior appointments. The rose garden on the north of the house was designed and planted by the Fort Vancouver Rose Society after the rehabilitation was completed. The General O. O. Howard House was deeded to the City of Vancouver in June of 1995.

For further information, please visit the Vancouver National Historic Reserve Visitor Center at 1501 E. Evergreen Boulevard, or call (360) 816-6230.

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