

Whitman Mission

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historic Site
Washington



The Mission at Waiilatpu

Waiilatpu, meaning, “place of the people of the rye grass,” is the site of a mission founded in 1836 among the Cayuse Indians by Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. As emigrants began moving across the continent into the Pacific Northwest during the 1840’s, the mission also became an important station on the Oregon Trail.

Stirred by accounts of explorers and traders, missionaries had become interested in the Oregon country in the 1820’s, but the remoteness of the area discouraged them. In 1833, an article in a New York Methodist publication described the visit to St. Louis of some western Indians seeking teachers and the white man’s “Book of Heaven”— the Bible. Although it was mostly fictional, the story stimulated missionary interest in work among the Native Americans in the Oregon country.

In 1835, the American Board of Foreign Missions, representing several Protestant churches, sent the Rev. Samuel Parker and Dr. Marcus Whitman to the Oregon country to select mission sites. On the way, the men talked to some Indians at a fur traders’ rendezvous and became convinced that the prospects were good. To save time, Parker continued on to explore Oregon for sites, and Whitman returned east to recruit more workers. Soon, the Rev. Henry Spalding and his wife, Eliza, William Gray, and Narcissa Prentiss, whom Whitman married on February 18, 1836, were headed westward in covered wagons.

The journey was a notable one in the story of the Oregon Trail. Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spalding were the first white women to cross the continent overland, and the missionaries’ wagon, reduced to a cart, was the first vehicle to travel as far west as Fort Boise. Their successful trek inspired many families to follow.

The party reached the Columbia River on September 1, 1836. After a brief visit at Fort Vancouver, the Hudson’s Bay Company headquarters, the men returned up the Columbia to select their mission stations.

The women remained temporarily behind as guests of Chief Factor John McLoughlin.

Other mission societies were already active in Oregon. In 1834, Methodists under Jason Lee began work in the Willamette Valley. Later, Catholic missions were established along the lower Columbia.

The Whitmans opened their mission among the Cayuse at Waiilatpu, and the Spaldings among the Nez Perce at Lapwai, 110 miles to the east. The missionaries learned the Indian languages and assigned the words English spellings. Spalding printed books in Nez Perce and Spokane on a press brought to Lapwai in 1839—the first books published in the Pacific Northwest.

For part of each year the Indians went away to the buffalo country, the camas meadows, and the salmon fisheries in search of food. Whitman realized that the mission could not fulfill its purpose if the Indians remained nomadic. He therefore encouraged them to begin farming, but he had little success.



These portraits, thought to be Narcissa and Marcus Whitman, were painted by Drury Haight. There are no known photographs of the Whitmans, who were killed before the advent of cameras in the West. The Haight paintings are based on unidentified sketches by Paul Kane, who visited the mission in July 1847.

The Kane sketches are in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

The mission expanded gradually. Other missionaries, including the Rev. and Mrs. Cushing Eells, and the Rev. and Mrs. Elkanah Walker, arrived, and new stations were established. At Waiilatpu, the large adobe house, gristmill, sawmill, and blacksmith shop were constructed. William Gray built a house for himself that later served as an “emigrant house” for travelers.

But progress in spiritual matters was slow. The Indians were indifferent to religious worship, books, and school. In 1842, reports of dissension and the lack of funds caused the Board to order the Waiilatpu and Lapwai stations closed. Convinced that the missions should remain open, Whitman undertook a remarkable overland journey in mid-winter to plead his case personally with the Board. Accompanied by Asa Lovejoy, he left Waiilatpu on October 3, 1842. Pushing through blizzards and fording icy rivers, they traveled by way of Fort Hall, Taos, and Bent’s Fort. Whitman reached St. Louis on March 9, 1843, and arrived three weeks later at Boston, after stops at Washington, D.C., and New York. The Board, moved by his arguments, rescinded its orders.

The Oregon Trail.

Whitman returned to Oregon with a wagon train in the Great Migration of 1843, serving as physician and guide. The year before, the first large group of emigrants passed almost the same way on what became known as the Oregon Trail, and they stopped for rest and supplies at the mission. They had taken wagons as far as Fort Hall, where they repacked their belongings and traveled the rest of the way by horse and foot. Whitman led the first wagon train all the way to the Columbia River on his return journey.

Although the main trail bypassed the mission after 1844, those who were sick and destitute turned to the mission for shelter and comfort. One such wagon brought the seven Sager children, who had been orphaned on the trail. With kindness and compassion, the Whitmans took the children into their family.

About Your Visit

Begin your visit at the visitor center, which is open daily except on Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. Self-guiding trails lead to the mission site, the grave, and the monument. There is a picnic area, but camping and fires are not permitted. Overnight accommodations and meals are available in nearby towns. The site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Contact: Superintendent, Rt. 2, Box 247, Walla Walla, WA 99362; www.nps.gov/whmi

For Your Safety

We want your visit to be a safe one. Please watch your children carefully, especially near the millpond and on the hill.

All areas in the National Park System are created for the use and enjoyment of the public in such a way that they are left undamaged for future generations. All animal and plant life, as well as other features in the park, are protected by law. Leave the flowers, birds, and park facilities in good condition when you leave.



“Here we are, one family alone, a waymark, as it were, or center post, about which multitudes will or must gather this winter. And these we must feed and warm to the extent of our powers.”

—Narcissa Whitman, 1844

Tragedy at Waiilatpu

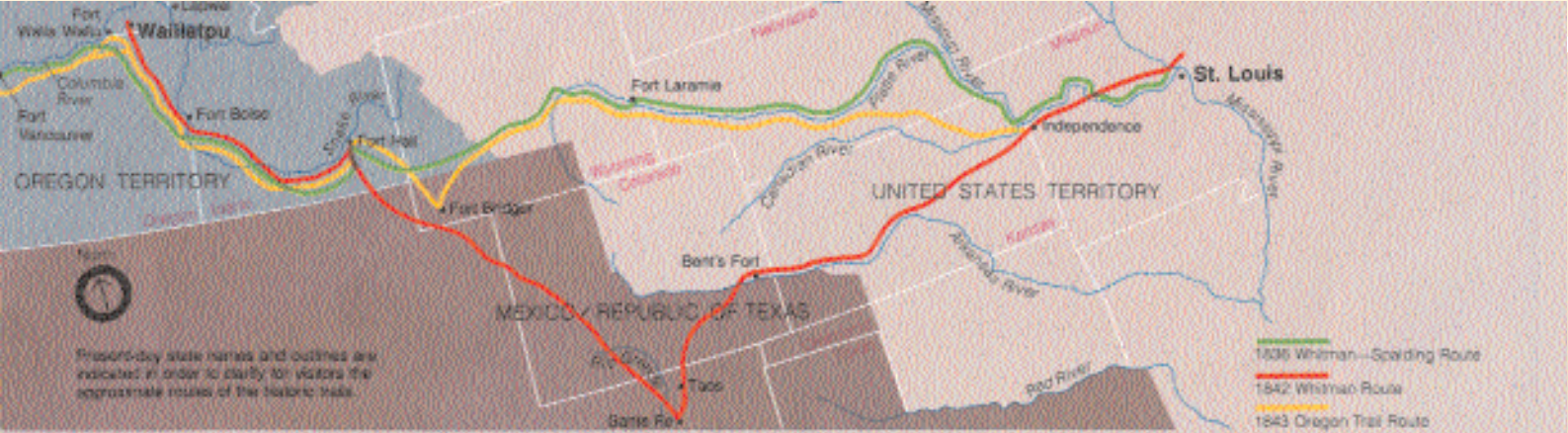
After 11 years of working with the Indians, the mission effort ended in violence. There were several causes behind the Indian unrest. Deep cultural differences between the white and Indian ways of life had caused tension and misunderstanding. Increasing numbers of emigrants, and stories of settlers taking Indian land elsewhere, convinced the Cayuse that their way of life was in danger. A measles epidemic, brought in 1847 by the emigrants, spread rapidly among the Cayuse, who had no resistance to the disease, and within a short

time half the tribe died. When Whitman's medicine helped white children but not theirs, many Cayuse believed they were being poisoned to make way for the emigrants.

Then, on November 29, 1847, a band of Cayuse attacked the mission and killed Marcus Whitman, his wife, the Sager boys, and nine others. A few survivors escaped, but 50, mostly women and children, were taken captive. Two young girls—Louise Sager and Helen Mar Meek—and a small boy died from the

measles. The others were ransomed a month later by Peter Skene Ogden of the Hudson's Bay Company. The killings ended Protestant missions in the Oregon country and led to war against the Cayuse by settlers from the Willamette and lower Columbia Valleys.

In 1848 Joseph Meek, carrying news of the tragedy and petitions from the settlers to Congress, reached Washington, D.C. Congress created the Oregon Territory in August of that year, the first formal territorial government west of the Rockies.



Nez Perce Indian

Rabbit-Skin-Leggings (above), a Nez Perce chief was a member of an 1831 Indian delegation to St. Louis. The chiefs sought information about the white man's sources of power and requested the Bible for Native Americans in the Oregon country. George Catlin painted this chief in 1832.

Smithsonian Institution



Covered Wagons on the Oregon Trail

The 2,000 mile long wagon path from Independence, Missouri, to the mouth of the Columbia River that became known as the Oregon Trail in the 1840s had been explored by fur traders earlier in the century. But it was rarely used before “Oregon fever” began sweeping the country in 1842, the year the first large caravan made the long trek. The next year in the “Great Migra-

tion,” waves of covered wagons like the one pictured above crossed the plains and the western mountain ranges via South Pass and the Blue Mountains all the way to the Columbia. The arduous journey took a heavy toll of lives. By the 1850s wagon travel had left the road so deeply rutted that it remained visible long after the Oregon Trail had become a matter of history.

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Memorial Monument

Built in 1897 on the 50th anniversary of the Whitmans' deaths, this monument stands on the hill Narcissa used to climb to watch for her husband's return from his trips of mercy. The monument, which is 27 feet high, overlooks the Walla Walla Valley. To the east are the Blue Mountains, over which the emigrant wagons once rolled on the most difficult part of their journey.

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Missionaries

William Henry Gray, (left) and the Rev. Henry Harmon Spalding traveled to the Oregon country with the Whitmans in 1836 as missionaries sponsored by the American Board of Foreign Missions. Gray who



was a carpenter and mechanic helped to build the station at Waiilatpu. Spalding and his wife Eliza opened the Lapwai station among the Nez Perce in 1836.

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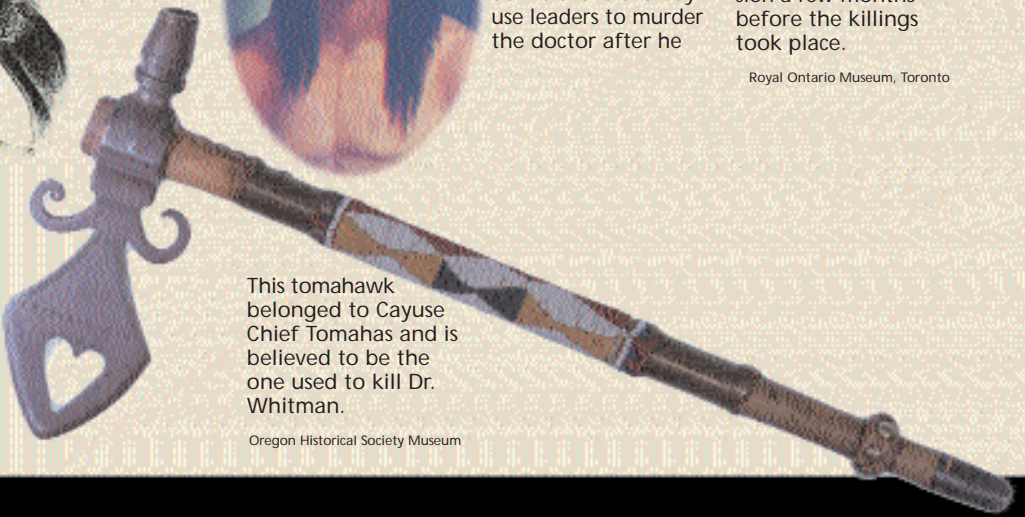


Cayuse Indian

Tomahas, a Cayuse chief, killed Dr. Whitman during the Indian uprising at the mission in November 1847. A measles epidemic drove the Cayuse leaders to murder the doctor after he

was unable to help them. Paul Kane painted this portrait of the chief from a sketch he made during a visit to the mission a few months before the killings took place.

Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto



This tomahawk belonged to Cayuse Chief Tomahas and is believed to be the one used to kill Dr. Whitman.

Oregon Historical Society Museum