

# Fort Vancouver

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE • WASHINGTON

Henry J. Warre, a lieutenant in the Royal British Army, drew this sketch of Fort Vancouver from the southwest in 1845.



*Fort Vancouver . . . for two decades this stockaded fur-trading post—headquarters and depot of the Hudson's Bay Company west of the Rocky Mountains—was the economic, political, social, and cultural hub of the Pacific Northwest.*

The fur resources of the Pacific Northwest were discovered by British seamen who visited the northwest coast and obtained valuable furs in trade with the Indians about the time of the American Revolution. Soon traders from Canada, the United States, and several European countries were competing on land and sea for the riches thus uncovered. After years of strenuous contest, the Hudson's Bay Company (a British firm chartered in 1670) gained ascendancy in the northwest fur trade over the rival Northwest Company, which had opened posts in the Oregon Country at least 13 years earlier.

#### **FORT VANCOUVER ESTABLISHED**

In 1824 the Hudson's Bay Company decided to move its western headquarters from Fort George, at the mouth of the Columbia River, to a site about 100 miles upstream (within present-day Vancouver, Wash.). This shift was made to strengthen British claims to the territory north of the Columbia and to be near lands better suited for farming and trading. The post was named Fort Vancouver in honor of Capt. George Vancouver, the explorer. Five years later a new fort was built 1 mile west of the first site and closer to the river. It grew rapidly in size and importance.

#### **FUR-TRADE CAPITAL**

Chief Factor John McLoughlin, a British subject who had learned the fur trade in eastern Canada, commanded Fort Vancouver between 1824 and 1846. Under his energetic leadership, the Hudson's Bay Company won a virtual monopoly of the fur trade in Oregon country. The firm's Columbia Department was expanded until it stretched from the Rockies to the Pacific, from Russian Alaska to Mexican California, with outposts on San Francisco Bay and in Hawaii.

Fort Vancouver was the nerve center of this vast commercial empire. Its warehouses supplied the interior posts, the fur brigades which ranged as far as present-day Utah and California, and the vessels and forts which dominated the Alaskan coastal trade. Each year the fur returns of the western trade were gathered at Fort Vancouver for shipment to England.

The fort was also the center for an important farming and manufacturing community. The company started an orchard near the fort, and cultivated fields and pasturelands extended for miles along the north bank of the Columbia. Lumber, pickled salmon, and other products of Fort Vancouver's mills, drying sheds, forges, and shops supplied not only the wants of the fur trade, but also a brisk commerce with such distant places as the Hawaiian Islands, California, and Russian settlements in Alaska. It marked the beginning of large-scale agricultural and industrial development in the Pacific Northwest.

In addition, much of the cultural and social life of the Oregon Country revolved about Fort Vancouver. Here were established the first school, the first circulating library, the first theater, and several of the earliest churches in the Northwest.

#### **FORT AND VILLAGE**

At the height of its prosperity—from about 1844 to 1846—Fort Vancouver was an extensive establishment. The fort proper measured about 732 feet by 325 feet. It was surrounded by a stockade of upright logs, with a bastion at the northwest corner mounting seven or eight 3-pounder cannon. These defenses were never tested, since the nearby Indians were not hostile and the American settlers never acted upon occasional threats uttered during the period of tension before and after the boundary treaty of 1846.

Within the stockade were about 22 major buildings and several lesser structures. Among the former were four large storehouses, an Indian trade shop, a granary, an impressive residence for the chief factor, dwellings for other company officers and clerks, and a jail.

The lesser employees at Fort Vancouver—the tradesmen, artisans, boatmen, and laborers—lived mainly in what was known as "the village," on the plain west and southwest of the stockade. It consisted of from 30 to 50 wooden dwellings, some ranged along lanes and others dotted "all over the plain for a mile." Near the village and extending to the river was a lagoon, around which were a number of other company buildings and a wharf. The buildings included a storehouse, boatsheds, and a hospital.

## **AMERICAN SETTLERS**

As American missionaries and settlers began to flow into the Oregon Country, British-owned Fort Vancouver was of necessity their immediate goal. Here were the only adequate supplies of food, seed, and farm implements in the Northwest. In spite of Dr. McLoughlin's kind treatment of the American pioneers, their desire for the Hudson's Bay Company's land led them to turn against the generous chief factor. However, Dr. McLoughlin's role in the development of Oregon has justly given him the title "Father of Oregon."

When Dr. McLoughlin retired from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1846, he moved to Oregon City and afterward became a U.S. citizen. His house, still standing, is a national historic site, maintained jointly by the McLoughlin House Memorial Association and the municipality of Oregon City.

## **A U.S. MILITARY RESERVATION**

The treaty of 1846 between the United States and Great Britain established the 49th parallel as the southern boundary of Canada. It was a compromise between British desire for everything north of the Columbia River and the American goal expressed by the slogan "54-40 or Fight." Fort Vancouver thus found itself in American territory. Thereafter the influence of the post and the Hudson's Bay Company declined rapidly south of the Canadian line. Settlers began to take over the land near Fort Vancouver, and to protect itself the company welcomed the establishment here of a U.S. Army camp in 1849.

Shortly afterward a military reservation was created around the old fur-trading post. The last factor of Fort Vancouver handed over the keys to the Army quartermaster in 1860. Six years later it was reported that all traces of the old stockade had been destroyed by a fire.

## **RECONSTRUCTION**

In 1966, the National Park Service reconstructed the north stockade, north gate, and a portion of the east stockade of Fort Vancouver. These structures are on the exact location of the old stockade as verified by archeological excavations.

## **ABOUT YOUR VISIT**

Fort Vancouver is within the city of Vancouver, Wash. It is easily reached by turning off Int. 5 at the Mill Plain Boulevard Interchange. The visitor center, on East Evergreen Boulevard, contains exhibits depicting the early history of the fort.

There are no picnicking facilities available in the park, but there is a children's playground.

This is an artist's concept of what Fort Vancouver looked like from the northeast in 1845.



GATE

GATE

BLACKSMITH

IRON STORE

SHOP

INDIAN TRADE STORE

STORES

STORES

POWDER MAGAZINE

BACHELORS' QUARTERS

STORES

ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

SHOP AND STORES

WELL

OLD OFFICE

ROOT HOUSE

BAKERY

WASH HOUSE

CHIEF FACTOR'S RESIDENCE

PRIESTS' HOUSE

NEW OFFICE

WHEAT STORE

BEEF STORE

HARNESS SHOP

KITCHEN

OWYHEE CHURCH

JAIL

CARPENTER SHOP

WELL

GATE

BASTION

Be careful. The ground at the fort site is unlevel. Don't let a slip or fall spoil your visit. Please watch your children and exercise common sense and caution for your safety.

## **ADMINISTRATION**

Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, established on July 9, 1954, and containing 89 acres, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Vancouver, WA 98661 is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

**National Park Service**

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**