

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 Spanish explorers who sailed the rugged coastline in the 18th century. Russian traders, following the quest for sea otter and beaver pelts, explored and trapped as far south as Fort Ross in California. About the time of the American Revolution, British seamen visited the Northwest Coast and obtained valuable furs in trade with the Indians. Soon traders from Canada and the United States 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 160 kilometers (100 miles) upstream near 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 2.4 kilometers (1.5 miles) southwest of the first site. The new fort, which was closer to the river and the cultivated fields, 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 along the north bank of the Columbia. Lumber, pickled salmon, ale, 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.

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.

FINAL YEARS

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.

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Please use common sense for safety. The ground at the fort is unlevel. Don't let a slip or fall spoil your visit. Watch your children.

LOCATION OF THE PARK

Fort Vancouver National Historic Site is located in the City of Vancouver, Washington. It is about 10 kilometers (6 miles) from Portland, Oregon, which is on the other side of the Columbia River. The park is reached by turning east off I-5 at the Mill Plain Boulevard interchange, and then by following the signs to the Visitor Center on East Evergreen Boulevard. The reconstructed fort is about 500 meters (550 yards) south of the Visitor Center toward the river.

ADMINISTRATION

The park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The superintendent's address is Vancouver, WA 98661.

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

FORT AND VILLAGE

At the height of its prosperity—from about 1844 to 1846—Fort Vancouver was an imposing establishment. The log stockade enclosing the fort measured 224 meters (734 feet) by 97 meters (318 feet). A single bastion in the northwest corner housed eight 3-pounder cannon. The guns were fired to salute company ships in port and their presence probably discouraged a threatened attack upon the fort by American settlers during the 1846 boundary dispute.

Inside the fort, new buildings appeared at frequent intervals as the company trade prospered. Among 24 major structures were four large storehouses, an Indian trade shop, a granary, a bachelors' quarters, blacksmith shop, bakery, office buildings, and an impressively large house for the chief factor.

Outside the stockade, houses, barns, and workshops sprawled over the company's landholdings. Only about 30 people lived inside the fort. Most of the employees of the company, more than 300 of them, lived in an area that came to be known as "Kanaka village," a neat cluster of 30-50 dwellings built along lanes. Other houses were scattered widely over the floodplain. The company wharf was built on the riverbank at the entrance to a small lagoon encircled by more company buildings, including a storehouse, boatsheds, and a hospital.

FORT VANCOUVER TODAY

Today's Fort Vancouver is a partial reconstruction of the stockade and buildings as they appeared during the busy period of the 1840s. Since 1966, when the National Park Service began its reconstruction of the fort, the stockade walls, bastion, bakery, chief factor's residence, kitchen, and wash house have been completed. Each structure is positioned exactly where the original stood as verified by extensive archeological excavations.

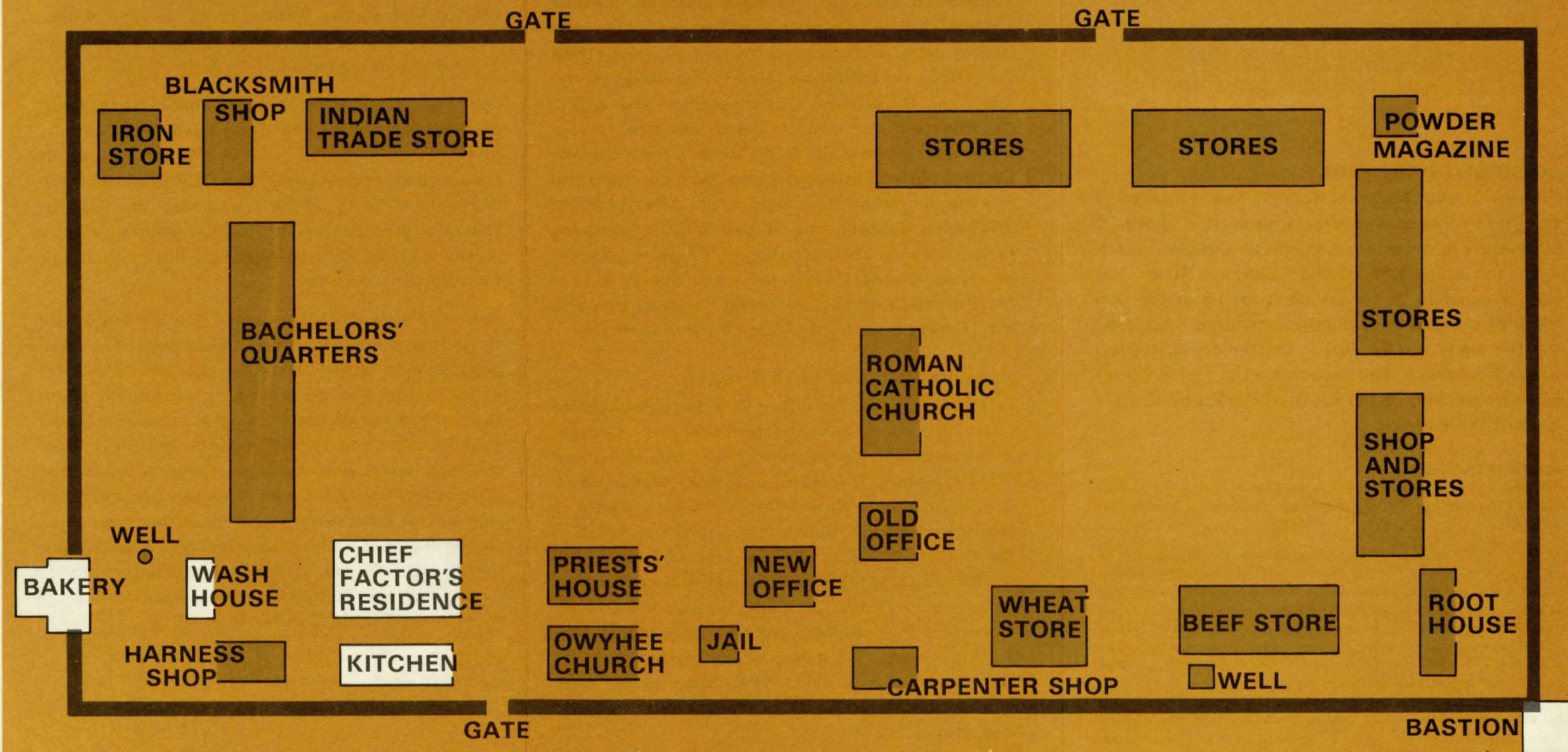
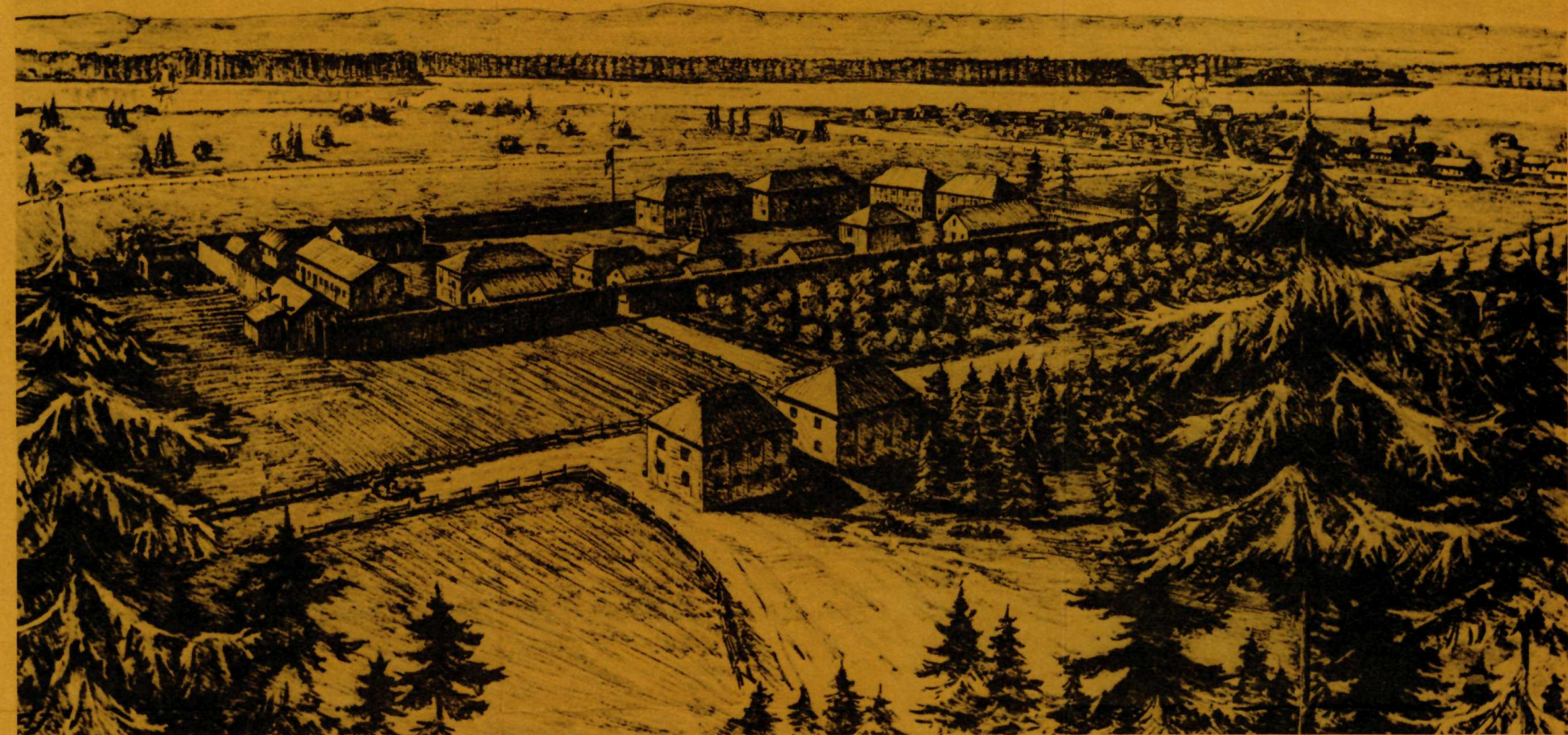
The Visitor Center has artifacts and exhibits depicting the Hudson's Bay Company era in a museum which can accommodate about 50 persons at any one time. Parking and a picnic area are adjacent to the Visitor Center, and a children's playground is 90 meters (100 yards) to the south.

The park is open all year except December 25 and January 1. Hours are 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays; 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. weekends. From September 30 to April 14 the Visitor Center hours remain the same, but the fort is open only from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Winter schedules may vary from this, so it is advisable to call ahead for current information.

WE'RE JOINING THE METRIC WORLD

The National Park Service is introducing metric measurements in its publications to help Americans become acquainted with the metric system and to make interpretation more meaningful for park visitors from other nations.

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



BUILDINGS SHOWN IN WHITE IN THIS GROUND PLAN OF FORT VANCOUVER ARE RECONSTRUCTIONS.