

FORT VANCOUVER

A HISTORICAL TOUR



Established 1825

The London-based Hudson's Bay Company established an extensive fur trading network throughout the Pacific Northwest, utilizing two dozen posts, six ships, and about 600 employees during peak seasons. Fort Vancouver was the administrative center and principal supply depot of the Columbia Department until 1849, controlling 700,000 square miles stretching from Russian Alaska to Mexican California, and from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. This was also the collection point for furs being shipped to London. The Fort became a center of activity and influence, with a profound effect on the development of this region.



Outside the Walls

The Columbia Region

Surrounding Landscape—Company Governor George Simpson and Chief Factor John McLoughlin chose this location for its situation on the Columbia River, its open prairies and amenable climate. After four years on a nearby bluff, the Fort was relocated to this plain, known as Jolie Prairie or Belle Vue Point for its natural beauty. This location had easy access to water, but was just beyond the floodline. Nearby dense fir forests provided needed timber. Its well chosen position allowed agriculture and trade to flourish. The Fort grew to become the political, cultural, and economic center of the region.



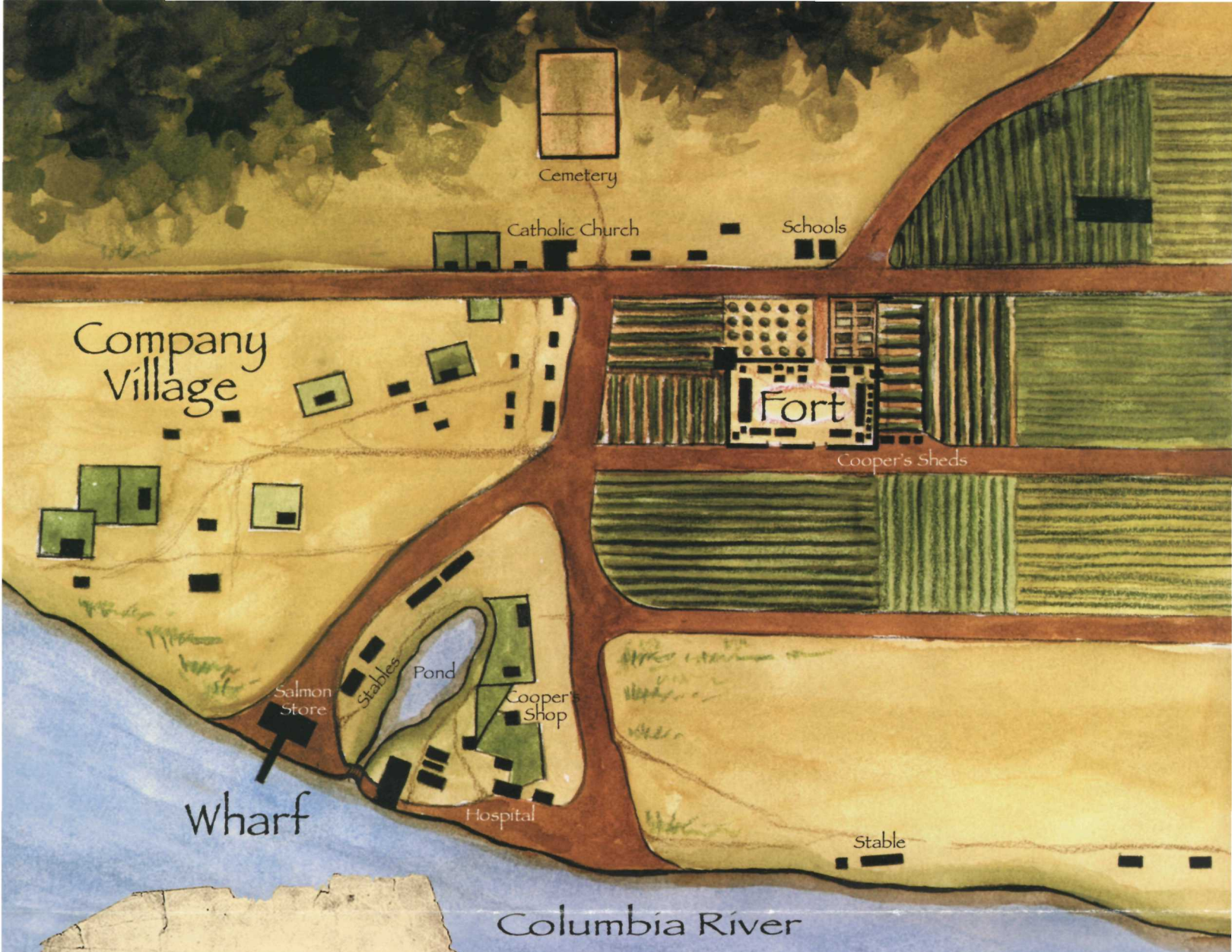
Trade with Native Tribes—

The Columbia River was a main avenue of navigation and communication for much of the Northwest. Native American tribes developed trade routes along the river long before the Hudson's Bay Company arrived and established a trade monopoly. Goods offered by the Company were extremely popular with local Native Americans, who brought pelts directly to the Fort or to subsidiary posts. Unfortunately European settlement and the introduction of unfamiliar diseases ultimately destroyed Native American populations and cultures to a great degree. However, the economic opportunities provided by the Fort were undeniably attractive, and trade continued until the fur supplies were exhausted.



Gates—The southeast gate was the front door of Fort Vancouver, since the Columbia River was the main means of transportation for people arriving here. Coming through this gate gave visitors a grand first impression of the Chief Factor's House. The north gate was used mainly for bringing in harvests from the garden and fields, and for travel to the upper plains. All the gates were closed from 6:00 pm to 9:00 am, though a considerable number of people would be let in between those hours. Laborers, tradesmen, and school children would all enter around 6:00 am to begin the day's work, and employees and Native Americans were often allowed in during the evening to attend religious services or social events. A watchman was posted at the gate, to screen visitors and let them in through the small postern door set within the large main gate. He was also responsible for shouting "all's well" every half-hour throughout the night. This level of security was to guard the stock of furs and goods, and to watch for fire.





Columbia River

The Growing Community

The Company Village—Birthplace of the city of Vancouver, this community was located just west of the palisade and stretched south to the riverbank. It housed Company laborers and their families—over 600 people during peak seasons. The village was the heart of the exceptionally diverse population living in the area, including French-Canadian, Scottish, Irish, Hawaiian, and people from over 25 Native American groups, whose homelands spanned the continent. Additionally, as the number of marriages *à la façon du pays* (marriages performed without clergy) increased, they gave rise to the *Métis*, a culture of mixed European and Native heritage.

Dwellings were arrayed along broad lanes, and there is some evidence that they were divided into ethnic “neighborhoods.” As the supply of furs in the area decreased, and immigration and settlement expanded, the population shows a gradual shift from a fur trade focus to mercantile and agricultural activities. During this period the number of Hawaiians in the village grew steadily. By the early 1850s the community was known as Kanaka Village, using a Hawaiian word for “person”.

The village formed a necessary support system for Fort Vancouver in its role as an immense supply depot and farm. Company employees, their wives, and children formed the backbone of the Pacific Northwest fur trade while on brigade, and also provided the labor that allowed Fort Vancouver’s operations to grow to an unprecedented scale.



Cooper’s Shop—The coopers manufactured the incredible number of barrels needed to store and transport salted salmon, other meats, and agricultural products. Barrels in a variety of shapes and sizes came out of this shop, plus pails, buckets, and other wooden containers. During 1845, four or five coopers were employed at Fort Vancouver.

Cemetery—The final resting place for many Company employees, their families, and local Native Americans lies to the northwest of the Fort. It was used by the Hudson’s Bay Company and the Church of England, as well as the Catholic Church. The Cemetery was used as early as 1829 and use continued until 1856 when U.S Army soldiers from the expanding Vancouver Barracks removed the wooden grave markers and fences.

Shipping—Fort Vancouver, once called the “grand emporium,” was one of the busiest ports on the West Coast. Every year supply ships would arrive via the Columbia River with European goods for trade or internal use, and goods and raw materials from the Hawaiian Islands. They would sail with tens of thousands of furs, and products for export to Hawaii, England, California, and Alaska.

Farming and Industry—The Fort Vancouver farm was the pride of the Company. The agricultural enterprise covered several hundred square miles—including grazing areas, crops, garden, and orchard—and employed more people than any other activity at the Fort. Sawmills, grist mills, and dairies were built. Many trades flourished, including blacksmithing, carpentry, and cooperage. A riverside complex developed on the bank of the Columbia, with areas for shipbuilding, a salmon store, tanneries, distillery, and hospital.

Inside the Fort



1 Owyhee Church Fort Vancouver housed the first school in the Pacific Northwest, and classes were most often held in this building. Students were the children of Fort employees, plus it was a boarding school for the children of high-ranking employees at other posts, orphans of deceased employees, and some Native American children. At its peak, the school had about 60 students taught by Martha Roberts, the wife of a clerk and the only English woman at the Fort. Reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography, and morality were taught along with religious training—though there was controversy over whether it should be Anglican or Roman Catholic instruction. For boys lessons were followed by farm work for the remainder of the day. The building's name comes from its later function. William and Mary S. Kaai Kaululelele were sent from the Hawaiian Islands to be teachers, religious instructors, interpreters, and examples of good character for the growing numbers of Hawaiians recruited to work here. William used the Owyhee (Hawaiian) Church for services for several years until he moved into the village.



4 Carpenter Shop Construction was continual at Fort Vancouver and its outlying mills and farms. Three or four carpenters were employed along with several apprentices. It was a normal practice for boys to begin at a young age. One apprentice working here was thirteen years old. Carpenters constructed the heavy post-on-sill buildings, and did finish work and joining. They made most of the Fort's furniture, window frames, sashes, and wooden farm implements. The wheelwright may also have used this building to build and repair carts and wagons. Window glass and paint may have been stored in the building, or in an enclosed area just behind it.

2 Priest's House The high numbers of French-Canadian employees in Company service led to a request for a Roman Catholic mission, which was begun in 1839 with its headquarters at Fort Vancouver. The priests held mass and performed baptism, marriage, and burial services. The Priest's House was the periodic residence for the clergy, between their frequent trips to outlying posts and missions. Visitors and employees sometimes resided here as well, due to perpetual housing shortages. Later the priests moved to St. James Church just 1/4 mile northwest of the Fort near the cemetery.

3 Jail There is speculation that the Jail was first built at Chief Factor John McLoughlin's command to house suspects after his son was killed at Fort Stikine. Whatever the reason, it was common for headquarters to have a place to confine prisoners. McLoughlin was the representative of law in the Columbia Department. His word held highest authority. Neither McLoughlin, nor Chief Factor James Douglas, believed in harsh treatment, but standard punishments of the 19th century are now regarded differently. High-ranking prisoners were confined to quarters. Employees who deserted were jailed until money was pledged to assure against a second desertion. More serious transgressors were lashed or flogged at the cannons in front of the Chief Factor's House, then they spent a number of days in the Jail. Serious offenders were kept in the Jail until they could be sent back east to face trial. Whether a prisoner was put in irons or not, the Jail was a rough place: cold, dark, and lonely. The Jail continued to function during American jurisdiction, when Douglas became a judge under the Oregon Provisional Government.

5 Belfry The bell was an indispensable feature at all fur trading posts. During a time when few people carried watches, its ringing regulated the daily work routine, calling employees to start work, eat meals, and stop work at the end of the day. It was also rung to signal the beginning of church services on Sundays and the bell tolled for important events in the life of the Fort: deaths, weddings, and during emergencies such as fire.

6 Counting House The Old Office was one of the oldest structures in the Fort, so construction of a new counting house began in 1845. Because living space inside the Fort was at a premium, clerks often had to room in their office when visitors filled Bachelors' Hall. Due to the overcrowding, on its completion the Counting House was given to Captain Thomas Baillie, of HMS *Modeste*, as his shore quarters. The Counting House became a lively place, the scene of frequent balls, plays, and parties hosted by Baillie. After he left in 1847, the contents of the Old Office were transferred, and the building became the Counting House.

7 Old Office The Old Office was the center of Company administration prior to the construction of the Counting House. Clerks who worked here were held to high standards of penmanship, spelling, and accounting. In order to keep business affairs private, the Company kept information restricted to as few people as possible, so the three clerks worked long hours. They were responsible for vast amounts of book keeping, including the daily entry in the *Journal of Occurrences*, correspondence books, and business records for the entire Columbia Department, plus numerous "clean copies" of all records. Clerks often worked from daylight until eleven o'clock at night, and worked weekends preparing records for departing vessels. During slow times the clerks sometimes got an afternoon off to bathe in the river, picnic, sail, or hunt.

8 Catholic Church John McLoughlin was instrumental in obtaining a Roman Catholic mission for the Oregon Country, responding to the wishes of his French-Canadian employees. Prior to the establishment of the St. James Church, Catholic priests held services in a chapel inside the Fort walls. Once an old store, the priests were given this building as their church when they arrived in 1839. Fathers Norbert Blanchet and Pierre DeVos conducted services and religious teaching, did missionary work among the local Native American groups, and performed baptism, burial, and marriage ceremonies. They also consecrated marriages that had been made *à la façon du pays* ("in the fashion of the country", meaning they were performed without clergy). During the priests' frequent absences a lay person, often McLoughlin, would conduct the Catholic services.

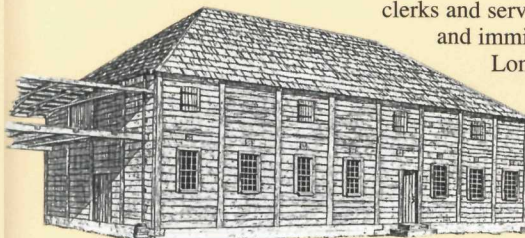
9 Wheat Store In 1826, Company employees planted two bushels of spring wheat, the beginning of wheat production in the Pacific Northwest. Agricultural activities, both at Fort Vancouver and in the fertile areas of the south Puget Sound region, produced enough wheat for the Company's own needs and more. As settlers in the Willamette Valley increased farming, McLoughlin purchased all of their surplus wheat, allowing them to meet earlier debts to the Company. These quantities of wheat were exported to Alaska, the Hawaiian Islands, and to California after the beginning of the Gold Rush. Wheat certificates were considered legal tender, and served an important role in the economy of the Oregon Country before the supply of cash increased. The Wheat Store, or Granary, could store 18,000 bushels of grain. It held wheat, the flour returned from grist mills, and other grains like barley and buckwheat. The total demand, for internal needs and export, was over 25,000 bushels per year.



10 Beef Store The Beef Store was a storage area for the salt meat consumed at posts, on Company ships, and for export. The Company's agricultural plans included purchasing cattle from California and having employees drive them up to Fort Vancouver. This stock was improved by interbreeding with cattle imported from England or driven across the Oregon Trail by American settlers. By 1844 the Fort Vancouver farm was at peak production with 718 horses, 14 mules, 1 donkey, 832 pigs, 172 oxen, 65 bulls, and 1034 cows, steers, heifers, and calves. In 1846, there were over 3,000 sheep.

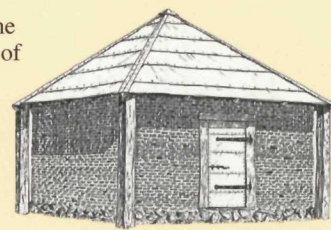
11 Bastion In its early years, Fort Vancouver did not have a bastion. Relations were generally peaceful between the Hudson's Bay Company and local Native Americans, as both depended on trade of furs for goods. The palisade enclosing the Fort was to protect the goods and furs from theft. As American immigration across the Oregon Trail increased, the Company thought that settlers, desperate for supplies after their arduous journey, might plunder the Fort. Even so, the Bastion wasn't begun until HMS *Modeste*, a British warship, arrived in 1845. It gave Fort Vancouver a proper salute: volleys from mounted cannon. The Fort officers were embarrassed that they could not return the greeting and the Bastion was constructed that year. Eight 3-pound cannons were mounted in the Bastion and used to salute vessels and departing brigades. The Bastion was a symbol that the Company and Great Britain would protect their claims, though the cannons were never fired in anger.

12 Sale Shop This large warehouse stored imported goods and provisions for sale at subsidiary posts in the Columbia Department. It also had a mercantile shop where employees, visitors, and local settlers could purchase clothing, utensils, and luxury goods, and augment their rations. From a small foyer customers looked through a window, facing shelves stocked with goods from Europe, the Hawaiian Islands, and China, along with farm produce and items manufactured at the Fort. Forms of payment varied. There was little coin in the Oregon Country, and the Company did not accept gold until after the California Gold Rush. Wages were not paid in cash, but credited to the account of the individual employee; transactions in the Sale Shop were simply deducted from their total credit. Accounts were also established for non-employees with notes or bills of exchange, or provisions like wheat that they sold to the Company. Although the rate varied considerably from year to year, in general the markup on goods depended on who was buying: officers paid 25-33%, clerks and servants 50%, and visitors and immigrants 100% over the London cost. During the 1840s, as the fur trade declined, the sales at the Shop became a large share of the Company's profits at Fort Vancouver.



13 New Store and 14 Store These identical buildings were used to store imported goods, provisions, and hardware for Fort Vancouver and the entire Columbia Department. The second-floor walkway connecting the New Store to the Sale Shop made it easier to move heavy bales from one building to the other. Two years' worth of goods were stocked, in case the annual supply ship failed to reach Fort Vancouver. The post's officers ordered the supplies, and there was little room for error. After receiving a shipment the Department was expected to be self-sufficient for an entire year. The prosperity of each post depended on getting appropriate types and quantities of goods. Cargo came from London in huge bales, boxes, and barrels, which were later re-packed by clerks for transfer to other sites. Some supplies came in smaller bundles and kegs, designed to be carried by voyageurs on their backs during portage, and go directly to the fur brigades. The clerks developed many tricks to ensure shipment to other posts would be successful. For example, window glass was dipped into hot molasses before being packed. As it cooled it stuck the panes together into a shock-resistant bundle. After shipping, the molasses was melted off and added to the kitchen supplies.

15 Powder Magazine This stone and brick structure was used for the storage of gunpowder. With its tin roof and copper-covered door, it was designed to be fire and moisture-proof to safeguard the stores of powder. The Fort stocked several different types of powder, essential supplies for defense and hunting.



16 Fur Store All of the furs that came through the Fort were stored in this warehouse. Trappers spent the winter on brigade, when the animals' fur is longest. Then they would bring the season's take to Fort Vancouver. It was a difficult journey using an extensive transportation network that relied on the waterways. Most furs were transported by boat, but between waterways voyageurs would carry two or three 90-pound bales on their back, braced by a tumpline. Arrival at the Fort meant a period of rest and celebration for the trappers. They visited with friends and bought goods in the Sale Shop. But for the clerks, summer meant long hours in the Fur Store, as each pelt had to be dusted, sorted, and counted. Pelts were packed using a fur press that compressed them into 275-pound bundles, so firm they were almost impervious to moisture and insects. In the fall, they were shipped to England. In 1843, inventories report that Fort Vancouver shipped 61,118 "whole pelteries" and a number of tails, pieces, and damaged skins.



17 Flagpole The Flagpole was one of the first features of the Fort to be built. It was 100 feet high with a large flag that could be seen for miles. During the Fort's time, the flag was flown only on holidays, Sundays, and to celebrate the arrival and departure of ships or fur brigades. Most commonly, the HBC flag was flown. The Union Jack, the flag of Great Britain, was also flown, as was the "Governor's flag", a special one put up for the arrival of Chief Factors or the Company's Governor.

18 Trade Shop, Dispensary, Barclay Quarters
Indian Trade Shop—Native Americans brought furs, and other items like tule mats and salmon, to trade for goods in this shop. The stock here was similar to that of the Sale Shop, but with fewer items to choose from at lower cost. Only a small number of customers were allowed in to trade at a time, to reduce confusion and opportunities for pilferage. Each item in the shop was priced by its value in beaver furs whose trade rate fluctuated from year to year. Records from 1842 show that one 3-pound Hudson's Bay Company blanket cost two large beaver, while a trade gun was four large beaver. All other furs were based on the value of beavers and worth a certain percentage of this basic unit of trade. At many posts clerks exchanged tokens for furs, which were then traded back for goods. This allowed Native Americans to track purchases and the amount of credit they had remaining. In 1845, Native American trappers brought 3500 furs to the Indian Trade Shop.



Dispensary—Besides caring for employees and their families, the doctor also provided medical care to any missionaries, settlers, or Native Americans that the Chief Factor chose to assist. Medical services were provided to employees and Native Americans free of charge as a matter of policy. High ranking employees and their families were cared for in their own quarters, while other employees were seen in a hospital near the Columbia River. The Dispensary was where the doctor prepared medicines, and perhaps performed surgery. In addition to medical duties the doctor at Fort Vancouver also supervised the Indian Trade Shop, collected scientific specimens, and ran the post library.

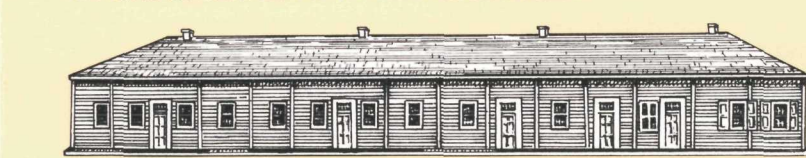
Barclay Quarters—The area next to the Dispensary has been furnished as living quarters for Dr. Forbes Barclay and his wife Maria Pambrun Barclay. The doctor and his family would have lived next to the Dispensary, along with her mother and several younger brothers and sisters. It is furnished in a style that reflects the doctor's status, but also the influences of his *Métisse* wife. However, historical and archaeological evidence does not provide absolute proof of this arrangement. It is also possible that the Dispensary and family living quarters were in Bachelors' Hall. This area could have been the Indian Hall, a large room where Native Americans waited to trade in the adjacent shop.

19 Blacksmith Shop The Blacksmith Shop was a busy place, where blacksmiths forged iron and steel into traps, hardware for buildings and boats, axes, agricultural tools, and other metal items needed at the Fort. Since local coal deposits were considered inferior, all the coal to heat the forges was brought over from England. Three or four blacksmiths worked here, with four or five assistants. Additional work was done at a second blacksmith shop up the river at the Company sawmill.



20 Iron Store This warehouse stored large quantities of iron and steel imported annually from England. The supplies came in many shapes and sizes, including flat bar, square, round bolt, sheet, hoop, and scrap iron. Racks for holding the metal lined the walls of the ground floor and extended down the center.

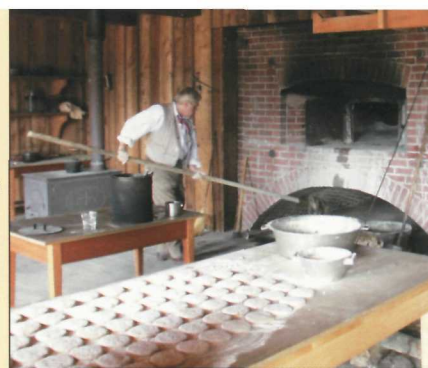
21 Bachelors' Hall This building was a series of small apartments, and was the residence for officers, clerks, their families, and some guests of the Fort. There were only about 15 rooms, so single residents were often temporarily displaced to make room for high-ranking visitors. A rigid class system was observed; traders, voyageurs, and laborers were not permitted to enter the quarters, even on invitation. In addition to living quarters, there was a common room where residents could smoke, talk, read, play cards or music, and hold dances and parties. This room may also have held the post's circulating library and a small museum of the scientific specimens collected by the doctor. There was also the "Strangers' Room", which was a dining place for visitors who did not eat in the Mess Hall of the Chief Factor's House.



22 Privies At night residents of the Fort used chamber pots in their own quarters, but during daylight hours the privies were their toilets. The privies, or "necessaries," were usually placed directly against the inside of the palisade, and behind each building. Although we don't know for sure, pieces of soft cloth or smooth stones were likely used as toilet paper. The five to seven foot deep holes were used not only for human waste, but also for trash and garbage. Because of this, privies are archaeologically rich, and yield many artifacts.

23 Well #2 During the time of the original Fort, the water in the wells rose and fell with the level of the Columbia River, as it still does today. At times the water was more than thirty feet below the ground surface. Water was drawn from the boulder-lined well by means of a sweep, a long, counter-balanced pole on a pivot post that lowered a bucket into the well. The original stones put in by the Company still line the walls.

24 Bakehouse Bakers cooked bread and sea biscuits for 200-300 people, supplying the Fort, its village, the brigades of fur trappers, and sailors on Company ships and other vessels. Fires kindled inside the vaulted ovens heated the bricks, then the ash was raked out. Food was put in to bake while the ovens slowly cooled. The Bakehouse was built with at least 5000 bricks manufactured in the Willamette Valley. Its two ovens were set outside the stockade to prevent the pickets from catching on fire, then a wooden shed was built to cover the outside. The wooden barricade around the bottom of the shed was likely built to keep animals out; residents of the Fort were frequently troubled by skunks!



25 Wash House The exact function of the Wash House remains a mystery despite years of research. One historical account said it was used by "females of the Fort," but it is unknown whether this meant washing clothes and linens, or for bathing. Clerks and other male employees of the Company frequently went to the river for a swim in good weather, and it is possible that women had an enclosed space to bathe.

26 Harness Shop Agricultural and fur trading enterprises in and around the Fort created a heavy demand for saddlery, harness, and pack gear. The brigades to the Snake River country and California had to be outfitted, as did the long horse trains that carried supplies for other posts and returned with the year's furs. Oxen were needed for the sawmills and to bring large logs to construction sites. Many animals were needed for ploughing, harvesting, and hauling the produce in from the fields. Sizable quantities of tack were imported from England, but most of the need was filled by local manufacture. Tack was made, repaired, and stored in this Shop.

27 Kitchen Visitors to Fort Vancouver spoke in glowing terms of the meals, mentioning course after course of delicious and varied foods. Thanks to the extensive farm, the Kitchen was well-supplied with fresh vegetables and fruits throughout most of the year. Hunting parties brought in venison, geese, ducks, fish, and other wild meat. Cooking and housework inside the Fort was primarily done by men, who not only prepared the food for male employees and visitors in the Mess Hall, but also served meals to women and children in the women's mess. There were several servants working under the supervision of the Steward. The Kitchen, in addition to the cooking area, housed a larder, pantry, and scullery. There may also have been a washing and drying area for linens, as irons and washtubs were listed on the Kitchen inventories.



28 Chief Factor's House Residence of the Chief Factors, the "Big House" was the center of business and social activity for most of the Oregon Country. It made an imposing first impression for anyone visiting the Fort, with its high, wide veranda, grape vines twining up the posts, and two 18-pound cannons that flanked the front entrance. Guests of high status were frequently invited to stay here. John McLoughlin and his family lived in the west end, while James Douglas and his wife and daughters resided in the east end. The Douglas quarters would have been lively and crowded with their four children, who may have slept in beds that folded down from the walls at night.

Every day, all high-ranking male employees gathered in the Mess Hall for dinner, seated by rank down the table. The meal was the opportunity for daily discussions on economic and political affairs. Religious services, weddings, and often dance parties were held in this central hall. The furnishings of the Big House were luxurious compared to the residences of lower officers, but in general were still considered somewhat spartan. All of the possessions in the private quarters were personal belongings of the Chief Factors rather than Company property.



Preserving the Past

The Historic Site—Fort Vancouver National Historic Site joined the national park system in 1948, a recognition of its role in the development of the Oregon Country. The National Park Service's mission is to preserve this unique place. We work to protect its natural and cultural resources, such as the archaeological features and artifacts that remain from the original inhabitants of the Fort. Interpretive activities including guided tours of the reconstructed buildings, exhibits, and living history and educational programs, ensure that the story of Fort Vancouver and the people who lived here are shared with visitors.

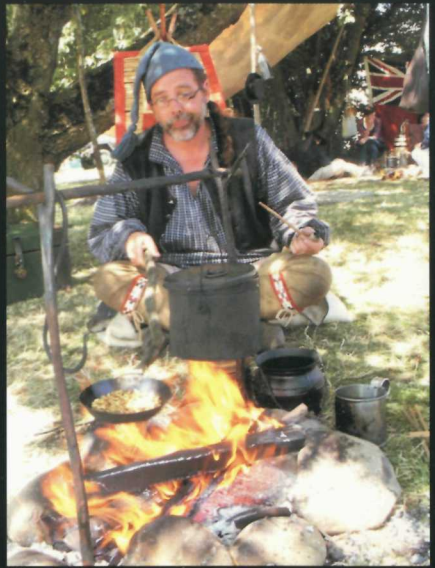
In 1996 Fort Vancouver became a part of the Vancouver National Historic Reserve, a partnership which manages adjacent, historically significant areas for public education and benefit. The Reserve contains Vancouver Barracks, Officer's Row, Pearson Air Field, Water Resources Education Center, and Marine Park.



FORT VANCOUVER

National Historic Site
612 E. Reserve Street
Vancouver, WA 98661
360-696-7655 or 1-800-832-3599

PART OF THE
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National
Historic Reserve



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Northwest Interpretive Association
909 First Ave., Suite 630
Seattle, Washington 98104-3627
206-220-4140
nwpubliclands.com

