



Fort of Many Cultures



A British Company administered Fort Vancouver, but people of many different ethnic backgrounds called the Fort home. French-Canadians, Native Americans, Hawaiians, and people of mixed-ancestry made up a large part of the Fort's workforce.

Within the palisade walls lived the gentlemen of the fort and their families. Many of the Hudson's Bay Company's commissioned officers and clerks were British. Their cultural origins were powerful symbols of their status. Even in the wilderness, they dressed in proper attire, wearing frock coats and tall beaver-felt hats. A number of them married "daughters of the country," as women of Native American ancestry were sometimes called. The children from these marriages often lived with one foot in each world.

West of Fort Vancouver's stockade walls was the Company Village, a large community including Hawaiians, French-Canadians, Iroquois and local Indians, and groups from the British Isles employed by the HBC as laborers and craftsmen. Out of this diverse community grew a new culture, that of the *métis*, children of company employees and Native American women. Below are a few of the individuals who were part of this complex social mixture.

Thomas Lowe Scottish Clerk



Born on November 30, 1824 in Scotland, Lowe signed on as an apprentice with the Hudson's Bay Co. at the age of 16. He was quickly shipped off to the Columbia Department, first working at Ft. Durham, Alaska, then Ft. Victoria, British Columbia, and finally at Fort Vancouver in 1843. As a clerk, Lowe had many different responsibilities. Clerks made hand written copies of all paper work regarding the fort. They recorded transactions in the trade shops and the Fur Store and were in charge of distributing the daily work among the laborers. All of these responsibilities required that Lowe and the other clerks were fluent in English, French and Chinook Jargon, a trade language.

Despite long hours of work and occasionally having to relinquish their rooms to important visitors, clerks enjoyed some privileges not afforded to laborers. Clerks like Thomas Lowe were served meals in the Chief Factor's House, attended the balls in Bachelor's Hall, and frequently accompanied Dr. McLoughlin and James Douglas riding in the country or sailing on the Columbia River.

Maria Pambrun Barclay Daughter of the Country



Like nearly all the women at Fort Vancouver, Maria Pambrun Barclay was a person of “mixed blood.” Born on October 5, 1826 at Fraser Lake, New Caledonia (present day British Columbia), her father was Pierre Pambrun, who became Chief Trader at Fort Nez Percés. Her mother was Catherine Humpherville, a *métisse* woman.

While living at Fort Walla Walla, Maria attended Narcissa Whitman’s mission school where she learned to read and write. She also spent some time living at Fort Vancouver, where she would often read to Dr. McLoughlin at night. There she married the fort’s physician, Dr. Forbes Barclay, on May 12, 1842. The couple eventually moved to Oregon City, like Chief Factor Dr. John McLoughlin and his wife Marguerite.

Simon Gill Adventures of a Voyageur

French-Canadian Simon Gill was born in 1822 in St. François, Montreal. He signed on with the Hudson’s Bay Company when he was only about 14 years old. He worked as a trapper in New Caledonia, and within his fur brigade, he had the position of *milieux*, or middleman, in a canoe. He was responsible for paddling and for portaging the 90-pound bales of fur. The fur brigades spent the winter months out in the high mountains trapping all the fur-bearing animals they could find. Since beaver were so valuable, much of their time was spent setting beaver traps in the icy, river water, making for a very rough life.



When the trapping season ended, Simon and his fur brigade returned to the Columbia River and Fort Vancouver. Once they arrived, the trappers would break open the bales of fur, clean them, weigh them, and repackage them for shipment to England. For the next two to three weeks, Simon could recuperate from his winter of trapping before it was time to do it again.

Opunua Hawaiian Laborer



Opunua was one of the 119 Hawaiians employed at Fort Vancouver in 1845. At the age of 20, he signed on as an *engagé* with the Hudson’s Bay Co. for 3 years, after which he would be free to return home to Honolulu, or establish himself in the Oregon Country. While working at Fort Vancouver, Opunua was married to a woman from the Cascade tribe, and they lived together in the Village. An average working day for Opunua meant rising at 5 am to the ringing of the bell and working until 6pm. He often worked in the fields, the sawmill, or the gristmill, and was employed as a cook in the kitchen of the Chief Factor’s House.

For his work, he was given a weekly ration of twenty-one pounds of salmon and a bushel of potatoes, along with a yearly salary of £10. Though they were the lowest paid workers of the Company, Opunua and other Hawaiian laborers were vital to the success of Ft. Vancouver.

“Old Cox” (A Hawaiian Servant)
by Paul Kane