

EXCAVATING FORT VANCOUVER

by Louis R. Caywood



This photo, looking up the Columbia towards Mount Hood, was taken in 1940. An outline of Fort Vancouver has been superimposed to show the approximate position of the palisade.

THE eyes of the Pacific Northwest have recently been focused on an excavation in Vancouver, Washington, sponsored by the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. History made by the Hudson's Bay Company was unearthed; history which goes back to the days when a few British subjects searched for a site to establish a trading post in the wilderness of the vast Oregon Country. The site which was chosen and established was to become the hub of all trading activities in the West—from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean and from Alaska to California.

For many years movements have been under way by historically conscious citizens to find, preserve and restore old Fort Vancouver. The fruition of these efforts has been partially realized as a result of a Congressional conference committee report, which requested that funds of the National Park Service appropriation be utilized for the purpose of determining its exact location and extent.

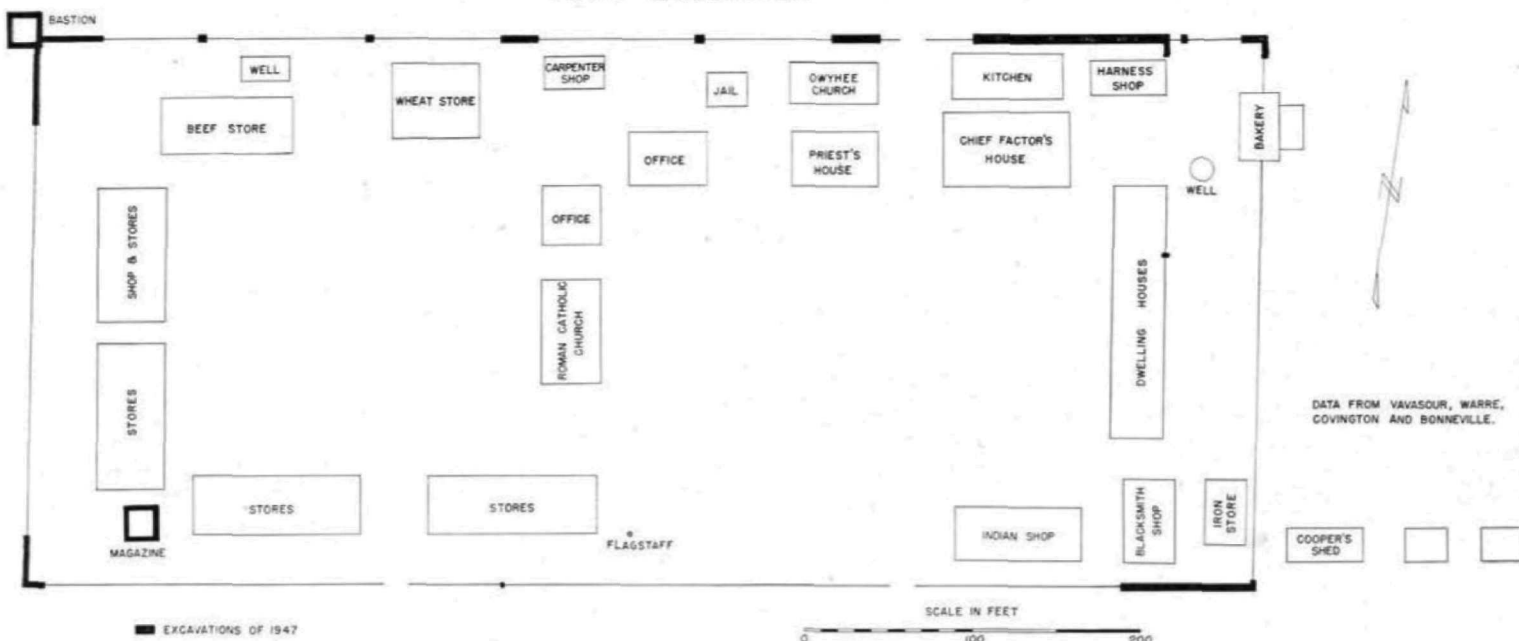
Fort Vancouver was founded in 1824-5 on the north bank of the Columbia River at the time that it was decided to abandon Fort George, which was located on the south bank of the river at its mouth. The site selected by Chief Factors Kennedy and John McLoughlin was on a terrace overlooking the Columbia and the plain where the later fort was to be constructed during 1828 and 1829. The 1824 location of Fort Vancouver was intended to be only a trading post, as the plan was to establish the headquarters depot on the Fraser River. On March 18, 1825, Governor George

Simpson prophesied in his journal that the new fort "will in Two Years hence be the finest place in North America, indeed I have rarely seen a Gentleman's Seat In England possessing so many natural advantages and where ornament and use are so agreeably combined. This point if situated within One Hundred Miles of London would be more valuable to the proprietor than the Columbian Trade." Next day he "Baptised it by breaking a Bottle of Rum on the Flag Staff," and called for three cheers for King George IV.

Fort Vancouver would have served its purpose well except for a number of factors which made its move imperative. First, the Fraser River was not suitable as a headquarters depot for a route to the interior, and second, the original site of the fort was not adequate as a district headquarters. It proved to be too far from the river for the easy transportation of furs and commodities. There was not an available water supply nearer than the river, which made it necessary to keep one man constantly at work supplying water by tank cart. Third, since the boundary dispute between the United States and Great Britain had not been settled it was decided that a strong establishment should be located on the north bank of the Columbia.

In the fall of 1828, it was decided to move Fort Vancouver nearer the river, where water would be available from wells within the stockade. There the high ground of a small plain overlooked the majestic Columbia, and a picturesque lagoon leading in from

FORT VANCOUVER



National Park Service plan of the fort. The heavy lines show the extent of the excavations made last year.

the river would facilitate loading and unloading of the trappers' bateaux. The observations of the famous fur trader, Jedediah Smith, who was wintering at Fort Vancouver, are interesting. He describes the larger fort as being three hundred feet square and under construction when he left in the spring of 1829.

Situated as it was at the headwaters of navigation, about one hundred miles from the river's mouth, the post developed into the emporium of trade for the Columbia Department. Dr. John McLoughlin had been appointed to head this immense area from Fort Vancouver, in 1826. Under his able leadership and with the direction of Governor Simpson, the fort also became the seat of political and military authority for a vast wilderness region.

The three volumes of *McLoughlin's Fort Vancouver Letters* published for the Hudson's Bay Record Society are of extreme value to the study of the history of the period. However, Dr. McLoughlin was not systematic by nature and his letters were devoted to subjects of special concern to the particular authority he was addressing. Unfortunately, nothing of value about the construction details of either fort is contained in any of his correspondence. During Dr. McLoughlin's leave of absence to London in 1838-1839, James Douglas wrote, "We have since harvest completed the new Granary which may contain about 18 thousand Bushels of Grain and lastly we have renewed 350 yards of the Fort Stockade. Other improvements are becoming daily more necessary, in consequence of the age and decaying state of the buildings, to which we will give attention as means permit."

Some information about the size and construction of Fort Vancouver has been obtained from other sources. One of the best descriptions comes from the journal of Lieutenant George F. Emmons written in 1841. (The original document is in the Yale University Library.)

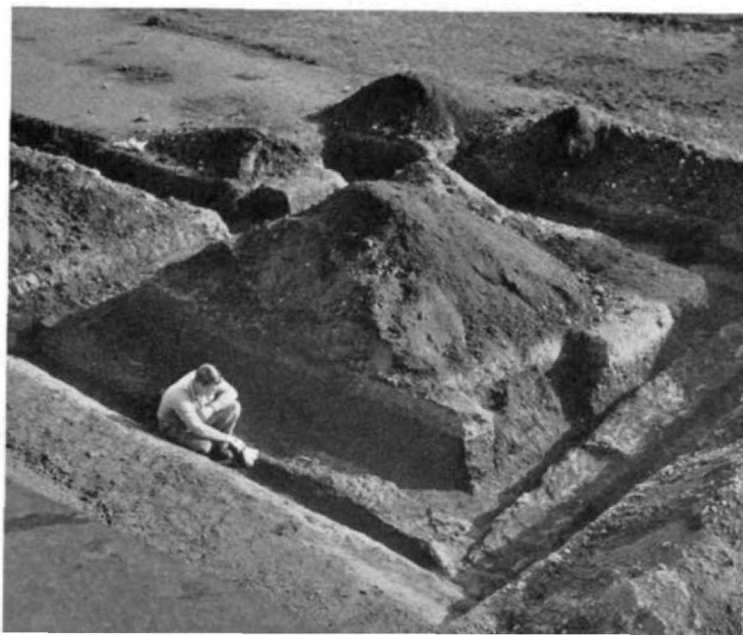
Lieutenant Emmons was at Fort Vancouver from July 25 to August 2 after the U.S. Sloop of War, *Peacock*, of the U.S. Exploring Expedition, was lost on the Columbia bar on July 17. He gives a rough diagram in his journal and states that the size of the fort was approximately 400 by 700 feet, more than twice the size of the structure described by Smith in 1829. The

layout is of great interest since it shows no evidence of fortifications. Commander Wilkes, who was in charge of the U.S. Exploring Expedition, mentions in his description of the fort the absence of bastions, galleries, and loop holes. Emmons' diagram and description indicate that the stockade was constructed of pickets about twenty feet long, buried from two to three feet in the ground and supported on the inside by scantlings and braces.

Another map, made by Lieutenant Vavasour, when he and Lieutenant Warre visited the post in 1845, shows a plan of the fort with a bastion in the northwest corner in addition to all of the buildings within the stockade. According to the scale given, the stockade would have measured 320 by 690 feet. In his written report, Vavasour recommended that a small bastion be added at the southeast angle to flank the south and east sides.

A drawing by R. Covington appears in the third volume of *McLoughlin's Letters* showing Fort Vancouver and the village in 1846. This plan differs in some respects from that of Vavasour. The locations of the employees' residences and structures used by

Excavating the foundation timbers of the bastion. The earth here was burned to a ruddy brown from the fire which destroyed it.





Members of the British Boundary Commission encamped at Fort Vancouver in May 1860. B. C. Archives

the Hudson's Bay Company make the drawing of considerable value.

After the U.S. Army established the military reservation embracing the stockade there were at least two different maps prepared. The first of these was made by Lieutenant-Colonel B. L. E. Bonneville in 1854 and the other was a survey by order of Brigadier General W. S. Harney in 1859. Both of these maps show the stockade within the boundaries of the reservation. On the Bonneville map the fort was carefully plotted in and indicates the existence of stone markers at each corner. The excavation failed to reveal stone markers at any of the corners. A map accompanying a report, published in 1870, on barracks and hospitals of military posts does not show the stockade. The text of this report, however, tells of "the extensive stockade and trading houses of the Hudson's Bay Company near to which was a village of half-breeds, Kanaka, and other employees. The bottom lands between the garrison and river, as well as those east and west are subject to overflow, and it has been not unusual to have all communication with the Hudson Bay Fort cut off except by bateaux and rafts."

The end of activity for the old fort came in 1860 when it was vacated by the Company. Dr. McLoughlin had retired and moved to Oregon City about the beginning of 1846, and James Douglas had transferred the district headquarters to Victoria in 1849. The Hudson's Bay Company licence for the control of British trade in the territory west of the Rocky Mountains expired on May 30, 1859. A board of U.S. Army officers examined the buildings and stockade after abandonment and recommended that most of them be burned as they were unfit for use. It is known that by 1866, nothing remained to mark the site of the old fur trade capital on the Columbia River.

The fascinating project of finding the exact location of the old stockade proved to be a game of hide and seek. Many pioneers knew its approximate location, but none were able to tell exactly where it had been. The early maps were of value, because they indicated the approximate site, after they had been plotted on modern maps. Surface indications also revealed some evidence of the old fort. Fortunately, there are only a few military buildings in the area today. A small airport for the use of private airplanes covers the southern end of the reservation. It was on one of the airport runways, which had recently been scraped, that historic objects such as rusty iron trap springs, broken

china, trade beads, bits of clay pipes, and gun flints appeared. Trenching here revealed a wealth of such material, but no evidence of foundations.

Several times while walking over the area a few half-hidden flat stones were noticed. When they proved to be the remains of the foundation of the powder magazine, the location of the west stockade wall was soon plotted approximately *on the ground* by measurements scaled from the Vavasour map. The next step was to locate definitely the rotted stockade posts. The spot chosen for trenching was in the northwest corner of the stockade. Trenches were dug to intercept both the west and north walls, and strangely the remains of both walls were found simultaneously.

After the rotted Douglas fir posts of the stockade wall began to come to light, the greatest problem was solved—that of location. The next step was to determine the extent. The condition of the posts differed according to location. In compact, damp earth, there was hardly any trace of them unless they had been burned; in which case the charcoal was in good condition. In dry, loose earth, the posts were remarkably well preserved in spite of the fact that they had been buried for more than a century. The depth at which the posts were found varied from six inches to two feet from the present surface, depending upon whether there had been a fill or removal of earth. Almost all of the posts showed signs of having been sheared off by ploughs; so it is no wonder the exact site of the fort was unknown. Why the stone foundation of the powder magazine had not been torn out of the ground by ploughing will never be known. In the area of the northeast corner, huge blocks of reinforced concrete flooring, which had been broken up and buried by the U.S.

Pomade jar covers dug up on the site of the fort.



Spruce Division after 1919, not only hindered the work of excavation, but had obliterated all traces of sections of the stockade wall.

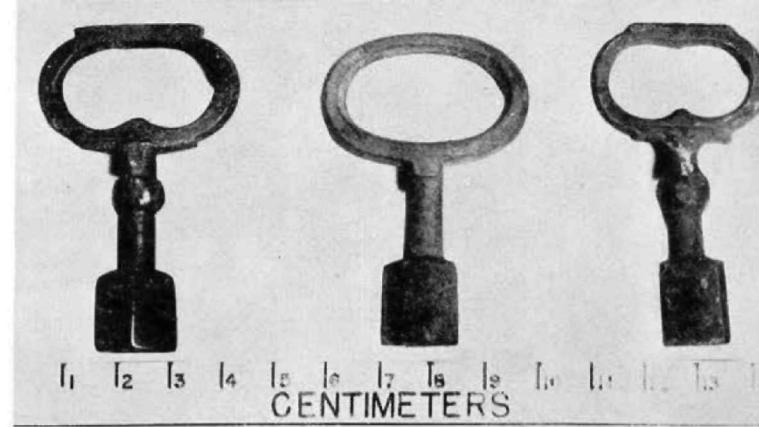
Each one of the four corners was uncovered and the dimensions of the fort were found to be 326 by 733 feet. At the northwest corner the charred foundation timbers of the bastion were uncovered. It is believed that the only reason these remains were preserved from the plow was because of the construction of a barn over this area by the U.S. Army soon after the conflagration. The earth in this section was hard packed and black as though it had been trampled by stock over a period of many years.

Thousands of broken objects of historic interest were found, all of which were of European or American origin. Not a thing of Indian manufacture was found in connection with the excavation. The importance of Fort Vancouver as a centre of operations is emphasized in the finding of such large quantities of English earthenware, china, glass, iron, and clay pipes. It was the rendezvous for the Company's western fur trade as well as the depot for all goods brought from England.

An iron store and blacksmith shop were part of the stockade establishment, and a cooper's shed was located immediately outside the southeast corner. Quantities of standard size strap, bar, and rod iron were delivered to the fort by vessels sailing from England. Thirty-eight sizes of strap iron were uncovered in addition to six thicknesses of plate iron, six sizes of bar, and ten sizes of rod. The strap iron ranged in thickness from one-sixteenth inch to one inch, with widths from one-half inch to three and one-half inches. In all, some 3,555 pieces of iron came to light. The fact that so much standard size strap, rod, bar, and plate iron was found would indicate that many of the iron tools and supplies were fabricated by blacksmiths at Fort Vancouver.

Fragments of broken English earthenware were found everywhere. A total of 6,252 pieces was collected during the excavation. The greater percentage of this ware was manufactured by Copeland & Garrett between the years 1833 to 1847. Sixty-four pieces were sent to Copeland & Thompson Inc., the Spode representatives in the United States, for identification and for dates of manufacture. Almost all of the patterns were Spode and fell within the years 1820 to 1860. However, two of the Spode's patterns, according to identifications, were considerably earlier than 1820. The names of these patterns were Spode's "Italian" and "Tower." The colours in which the Spode glazes were printed include blue, green, gray, puce, brown, and pink. A number of other kinds of earthenware and some Chinese porcelain were also found, but all have

A few of the hundreds of clay pipe fragments found during the National Park Service excavations.



Brass keys that probably served for door handles.

not been identified. The Chinese porcelains consist of both dinnerware and utility jars commonly called "ginger jars."

Portions of pomade jar covers were also found. Two of these identified themselves as belonging to a cold cream jar and to a shaving cream jar by the advertising on the covers which was in black. Pomade jars were a specialty of Pratt's and the covers are still in great demand by collectors, because they were done artistically, both in pattern and colour. The pomade cover advertising shaving cream fitted the only jar found. The bottom of the jar bears the imprint "COSNELL" and "1 1/2 oz."

The glass count amounted to 1,615 fragments. Broken bottles, window glass, and a few choice items of table glass make up the collection. The bottles probably contained wine, rum, and brandy. In addition, about 2,000 trade beads of various colours and sizes were found near one of the store houses in the west portion of the stockade. These were undoubtedly all of Venetian origin.

All things considered, the exploratory excavations proved successful. The primary purposes of finding the stockade and determining its dimensions were achieved. In addition, many historic objects dating from the period when the Hudson's Bay Company occupied the area were uncovered and are being preserved for study and possible exhibition. It is the hope of the local population that time may produce a museum which will be built near the site of the old fort. The foundations of buildings within the stockade still remain to be uncovered.

The author points to some of the remains of the fort stockade at the northeast corner. The concrete flooring and the tile belonged to a mill erected about 1917.

