



Foundation Document Overview

Whitman Mission National Historic Site

Washington



Contact Information

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Purpose



At WHITMAN MISSION NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE, the National Park Service is entrusted with preserving a sacred piece of Weyúletpuu homeland, interpreting the tragic events surrounding the early 19th-century Christian mission, memorializing those who died here, promoting a deeper understanding of the lasting impact of this history, and seeking to heal the associated trauma together with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.



Significance

Significance statements express why Whitman Mission National Historic Site resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

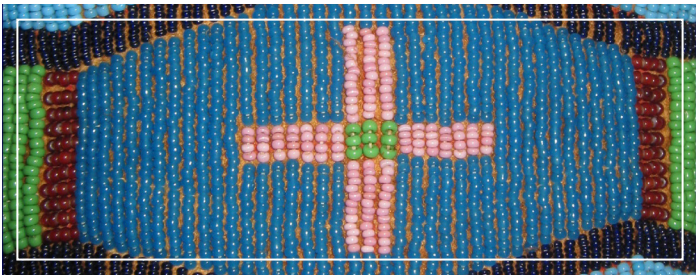
- **Sacred Site within a Sacred Landscape.** The events associated with the Christian mission established by Marcus Whitman led to many deaths. Native and nonnative blood and last breaths were left here. This site provides an opportunity to begin healing from the associated historical trauma.
- **A Pivotal Moment.** Throughout its short history (1836–1847), the mission complex provided a site for early interactions between citizens of the United States and Indian nations. These interactions culminated from competing interests and ideologies and were the direct catalyst for U.S. colonization and establishment in the Pacific Northwest. These events continue to influence attitudes and practices today.
- **Differing Land Management Ideologies.** The history of the mission at Weyúletpu illustrates the ideological conflict between indigenous land management practices and the land use approaches of the Whitmans and offers insights on sustainable alternatives to stewardship that are increasingly crucial in the face of diminishing resources and global climate change.
- **Social Justice.** The mission's history and violent aftermath provide a discrete narrative within the larger issues of global colonization and dispossession of indigenous nations, international conflicts arising from competition for resources or conflicting worldviews, and universal social justice.



Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Tamáalwit.** These unwritten laws define native ecological knowledge and govern stewardship of the land. Partnership with individuals schooled in tamáalwit is fundamental to park management.
- **The Land.** The park is sacred land. Humans, fauna, and flora have drawn strength and power from this place and cannot be separated from it.
- **Ancestors.** Those who lived, died, and are buried here have continued meaning to the nation. Their presence is experienced through feelings of spirit that impart a sense of sacredness.
- **People Entwined with Place.** This place’s human communities and landscape are inseparable by time or distance. These diverse connections continue to provide ever changing sources of personal identity.
- **Titooqatímt (Native Languages) and Other Records.** The site’s history is preserved in both living language and written record. Native languages document a literal indigenous world view, whereas texts, maps, and other records reveal the world views of immigrants.
- **Inclusive History.** Understanding this history requires bravery and exposure to multiple perspectives. The National Park Service provides a forum for multiple voices sharing this history.
- **Sovereignty, Treaty Rights, and Federal Trust Responsibility.** The National Park Service recognizes the sovereignty, treaty rights, and trust assets of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.



Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- The events surrounding the Whitmans’ mission—a mere moment in a long native history—were a catalyst for the expansion of the United States into the Pacific Northwest. These included the 1848 congressional establishment of the Oregon Territory in response to the Whitman killings, as well as the 1855 treaties in which tribes ceded land to the U.S. government. These changes came rapidly but with lasting impact. This history is part of larger global movements dispossessing indigenous peoples of their land.
- Cayuse and Walla Walla spirituality, tamáalwit, is rooted in stewardship of homeland in accordance with natural cycles. Abiding by tamáalwit, native peoples enjoyed stable cultural and political communities coupled with sustained economic success. Many elements of the Christianity introduced by the Whitmans were in conflict with these beliefs and threatened to destabilize tribal society. Deadly conflict resulted. Looking back upon these intercultural conflicts may yield peaceful resolution to similar conflicts today.
- The agrarian lifestyle promoted by the Whitmans was at odds with native land management practices, which focused on enhancing indigenous resources rather than cultivating imported crops and livestock. In the nearly two centuries since, agriculture and other development activities have altered the native grassland and riparian zones that once dominated the landscape.
- The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions formed in 1810 during a period of religious zeal in the United States. In addition to sponsoring the mission to the Weyíletpuu, the group sent missionaries to other American Indians and abroad and profoundly influenced U.S. policies toward native peoples.
- One-sided representations that portray the Whitmans as martyrs and depict a native “massacre” of non-Indians have further marginalized the associated native peoples. Addressing the mission’s complex historical context—including the complicated legacy of Manifest Destiny and its continued impacts on native populations—will promote healing and understanding.

Description

Brief Description of the Park

Whitman Mission National Historic Site is west of the Blue Mountains in southeastern Washington, near the confluence of the Walla Walla River and Mill Creek. The site is known as Weyíletpe, “place of waving, as grass waves,” to the land’s original stewards, the Weyíletpuu (Cayuse) and Walúlapam (Walla Walla). It is the location of the 1836 American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) Christian mission established by Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. The present 139-acre national park unit is approximately seven miles west of Walla Walla, in Walla Walla County.

The Mission to the Weyíletpuu

An 1833 article in a Methodist newspaper described a visit to St. Louis by four western Indians said to be seeking a Christian education. Though inaccurate, the report encouraged Marcus and Narcissa Whitman to open the ABCFM mission at Weyíletpe, among a large population of Cayuse.

Native interest in the Whitmans’ teachings waned. Over time, increasing waves of immigrants convinced Weyíletpuu leaders that their economy and sovereignty were threatened. An 1847 measles epidemic, coinciding with massive immigration, resulted in the death of half of the native population at Weyíletpe. On November 29, 1847, a group of Weyíletpuu killed Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and 11 others. This conflict and ongoing unrest were the catalyst for negotiation and ratification of the 1855 treaties negotiated in Walla Walla between tribes and federal agents and the extension of the United States into the Pacific Northwest.

A Look to the Future

Whitman Mission National Historic Site was established to preserve the site of the mission at Weyíletpe and connect visitors to its history. The park and the events that took place here continue to resonate in the lives of descendants, who endeavor to share this history and its ongoing impacts with future generations. The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and the National Park Service seek to learn from the site’s past, overcome the associated trauma, and find mutual understanding and respect.

