



This painting of Fort Vancouver, reputedly by John Mix Stanely, dates from about 1845. Yale University Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Outpost of An Empire



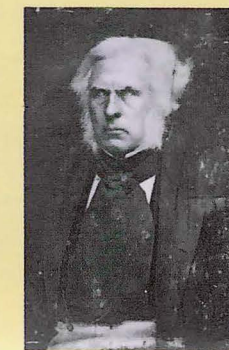
The coat of arms of the Hudson's Bay Company

As the 19th century dawned, the United States and Great Britain were locked in a struggle for control of North America's northern Pacific coast, a region rich in furs. By 1818 the two nations had agreed to share access to the Oregon Country, as they had come to call the region, until they could decide upon a boundary. Seven years later, in a bold move designed to anchor Britain's claim to all of Oregon, the Hudson's Bay Company—the giant fur trading organization—moved its Columbia Department headquarters from Fort George at the mouth of the Columbia to the newly established Fort Vancouver, 160 kilometers (100 miles) upstream. For the next two decades, Fort Vancouver was directed by strong-willed, capable men who built it into the fur trade capital of the Pacific coast.

Primarily responsible for the post's success was Dr. John McLoughlin, an energetic man and a genius at organization who served as chief factor during most of those years. In the 1830s and 1840s American settlers were attracted to the rich farm lands of Oregon's Willamette Valley. McLoughlin made supplies and credit available to the needy settlers. This influx of Americans resulted in a division of the Oregon Country in 1846 along the 49th parallel, a decision that left—contrary to British hopes—Fort Vancouver on American soil. For a few years the Hudson's Bay Company continued to trade with the settlers and Indians, but trade diminished and the company moved out in 1860. By 1866 fires and decay had destroyed all the structures.

John McLoughlin, 1784–1857, was born in the Province of Quebec and trained as a physician near Montreal. He joined the North West Company as a physician at its post at Fort William (now Thunder Bay, Ontario). When the North West and Hudson's Bay companies merged, McLoughlin was named head of the Columbia Department. His job was to keep peace with the Indians, squeeze Americans out of the market, and firmly establish the British claim to

all of Oregon. As a businessman, McLoughlin succeeded. But he was hospitable and generous to the growing number of American settlers who came to Oregon, selling them supplies and extending them credit. His superiors became more and more critical. When the new boundary was agreed upon in 1846, McLoughlin retired, moved to Oregon City, Oregon, and became an American citizen. To Oregonians he has become the "Father of Oregon."



Sir George Simpson, 1786–1860, head of the Hudson's Bay Company's North American operations, chose John McLoughlin to take charge of the Columbia Department because of McLoughlin's administrative and leadership abilities. Simpson and McLoughlin, however, never warmed to one another and throughout their careers could barely control the irritation and hostility that they felt for one another.



Hudson's Bay Company Library

The Trapper and the Hatmaker

Long before the American West was settled, it had been crisscrossed by lone scouts and hunters and trappers searching for new, untouched trapping grounds. At the center of this fur trading enterprise stood the Hudson's Bay Company and its main post, Fort Vancouver. As the vagaries of fashion carried the beaver hat to the heights of popularity, the demand for that animal's fur increased enormously. From Fort Vancouver the Hudson's Bay Company sent out brigades of trappers that included from 50 to 200 men, women, and children. Trapping was hard and often dangerous work, particularly because most of it was done in the

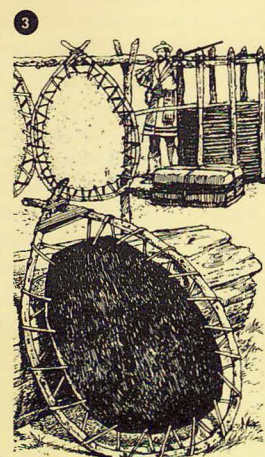
winter, when the pelts are the thickest.

The earliest trappers had adopted the Indians' method of breaking into a beaver lodge and taking the animals, but soon the steel trap came into use. 1 The trap, designed to catch the beaver by the leg, was set in shallow water. It was attached by a chain to a sharpened stake implanted in deeper water. The traps were baited with castoreum, a scent obtained from glands in the hind legs of the beaver. All this activity was going on while the trapper stood in the water, often ice-cold, so that he did not leave his scent on the bank. 2 The curious



beaver, attracted by the castoreum, stepped into the trap. The next morning the trapper skinned his catch. 3 Back at camp, he or his Indian wife scraped the flesh from the skins and stretched them to dry.

After almost a year in the wilderness, the trapping brigades made their way to the Columbia and Fort Vancouver where the people awaited their arrival. It was a festive time of year and the trappers themselves made a show of their arrival, donning their best and most colorful clothes, swag-



gering out of their boats, and jauntily unloading their furs. The winters in the wilderness had convinced them that they were superior to the regular work force at the fort.

Now the company clerks took over, appraising the furs, paying the trappers, and preparing the furs for shipment to London.

Turning the beaver pelts into the fashionable hats involved a number of steps. The hats were not made from the whole pelt as is sometimes assumed. First, the coarse guard hairs were pulled off. Then, the soft and desirable underfur was shaved off and set aside.



From experience the hat-makers knew how much fur was needed to make one hat. They weighed out the proper amount of fur and piled it in a small mound. 4 Twanging a bow string through the fur spread it out evenly and caused the microscopic hairs to hook onto one another.

This "batt" was stacked with others separated by wet cloths from which the batts absorbed moisture. Two batts, which were needed for each hat, were joined together in the shape of a hood. 5 These hoods, or hat bodies, were boiled for six to eight hours to produce the compact and tight body needed for the final step.



6 The body was placed on a wooden mold in the shape of a hat and carefully shaped so that it fitted smoothly. In the hatter's capable hands this step was soon completed and except for finishing touches the work was done.

In the 1830s silk hats were introduced. As the beaver population of the Northwest declined through overtrapping, silk replaced beaver on the market. By the 1860s the demand for beaver pelts had declined and the large scale commercial trapping of beavers came to an end.

Illustrations by John Dawson

Exploring Fort Vancouver

Since 1966 Fort Vancouver's palisade and nine buildings have been reconstructed on their original locations. Together they can give you an idea of what life was like when Fort Vancouver was the most important settlement in the Pacific Northwest. Use this diagram and the accompanying text to guide yourself around the fort.

1 Blacksmith Shop

The blacksmith shop served as the fort's principal smithy. Here blacksmiths made items of iron and steel that were needed for the fur trade. They made hardware, which was used for construction at the fort and at the other Hudson's Bay Company posts in the Columbia District.

2 Bakehouse

The bakehouse was a two-story structure set in the east wall. It contained two fire-brick ovens. As many as four men baked sea biscuits for the 200 to 300 fort employees. The biscuits were also baked for the brigades, for use by ship crews and other posts, and for trade.

3 Indian Trade Shop and Dispensary

In keeping with Hudson's Bay Company practice, the Indian Trade Shop was under the immediate charge of the fort's doctor. This building housed the fur trading operations at Fort Vancouver, and also the hospital, doctor's office, and his residence.

4 Wash House

The wash house appears on several maps of Fort Vancouver drawn in the early 1840s. Very little is known of its appearance or use. The building was probably destroyed by fire in 1852.

5 Chief Factor's Residence

Early visitors to Fort Vancouver called the "Big House" "very handsome" and "commodious and elegant." Built to replace an earlier structure, it was impressive—with white clapboard siding and a large front veranda. Grapevines climbed on iron trellises, and two spiked cannon stood in front. Clerks and officers ate meals in a large mess hall, where parties and dances were also held.

6 Kitchen

Few details are known about kitchens used at Fort Vancouver over the years. The 1845 kitchen evidently contained a cooking area, pantry, a larder, and living quarters for some of the kitchen staff. The kitchen provided meals for the gentlemen of the fort and for special guests.

7 Shipping

Transportation was vital to the Hudson's Bay Company's success in the Pacific Northwest. Ocean vessels crossed the treacherous bar at the mouth of the Columbia River, bringing supplies and trade goods. On return trips they loaded the year's returns of furs, tallow, lumber, flour, salmon, and other products of the fort's economy.

8 Farming

Many of the Pacific Northwest's agricultural firsts can be traced to Fort Vancouver. Both McLoughlin and Simpson agreed that the post should be self-sufficient. Fences enclosed more than 2,500 acres. Peas, oats, barley, wheat, and vegetables fed the fort community. The Northwest's first orchard included apples, pears, peaches, plums, and cherries. Cattle, horses, sheep, hogs, and goats made up the livestock.

9 Palisade

Expanded at least five times, by 1845 the fort's palisade enclosed an area 734 feet by 318 feet. Douglas fir posts about 15 feet high, afforded privacy as well as protection from theft and attack.

10 Bastion

The 1845 bastion was built to protect the fort against threats and to fire salutes to arriving ships. It was three stories high; the top floor held eight three-pounder cannon.

11 Fur Warehouse

The multitude of animal pelts, primarily beaver, brought to the fort were kept in "stores," or warehouses. The furs were cleaned and pressed into bales before being transported to England.

12 The Village

This community of up to 300 Company laborers was home to a culturally diverse people: French-Canadian, local American Indians, Iroquois, Europeans, and Hawaiians.

13 Carpenter Shop

Three to four carpenters and several apprentices were employed at the fort. These skilled carpenters and other laborers constructed buildings for the fort. They also produced window frames and sashes, doors, furniture, carts and wagons, and wooden parts for tools.

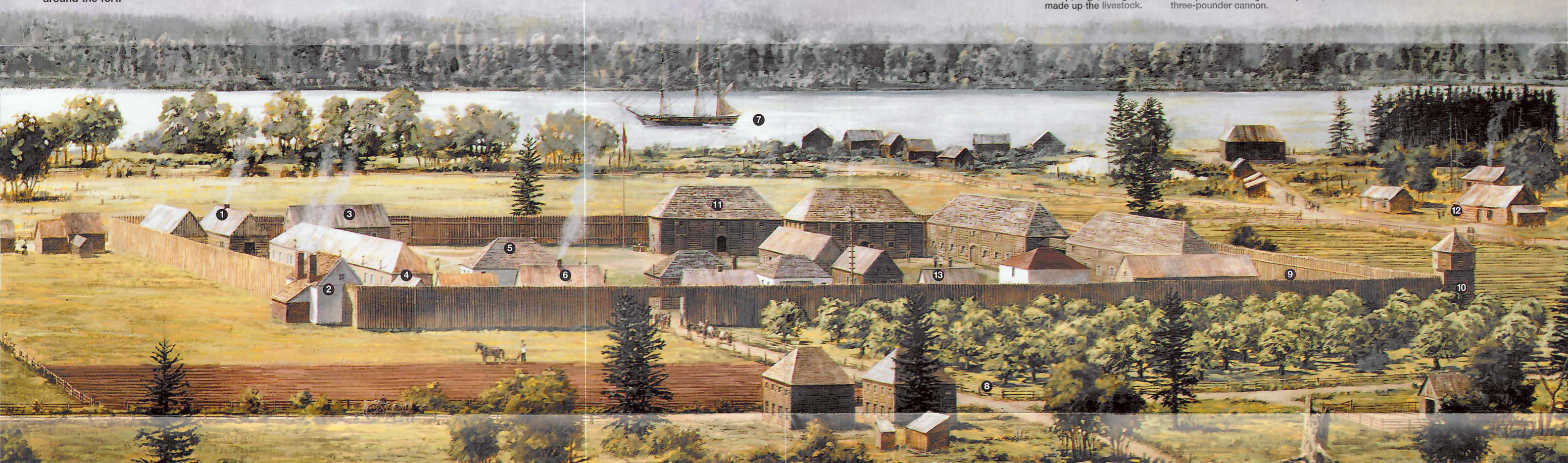


Illustration: Richard Schlecht

Hub of the "Oregon Country"

Fort Vancouver was headquarters for the Hudson's Bay Company's Columbia Department, embracing present-day British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. The trading post also represented Britain's business and governmental interests in competition with the United States.

The fort's warehouses stocked supplies for the fur brigades, the Indian and settler trade, and for the 20 to 30 other Company posts in the Department. Most Indians were shrewd traders, so trade goods were carefully chosen. Almost all trade items were imported from or through Britain, so there was a two-year lapse between ordering and receiving.

The fort's shops bustled with activity, manufacturing as many items as possible. The fort echoed to

the sounds of carpenters hammering and sawing, of blacksmiths making new tools and repairing old ones, and of coopers making barrels. Carts rumbled to and fro piled high with supplies and with firewood for the bakehouse's large brick ovens. Indians arrived to trade, passing by farmers and herders tending crops and livestock. Company clerks bent over account books figuring out how much who owed whom. Frequent visitors were welcomed and eagerly quizzed for news and gossip of the outside. The arrival of a supply ship or a Royal Navy vessel was cause for celebration.

Although everyone worked hard and for long hours—Sunday was the only day of rest in the early years—free time was enjoyed to the fullest.

Hunting, riding, picnicking, footracing, and other competitive feats of strength were favored pastimes. Once a group of naval officers produced a play, the first known theatrical performance in the Pacific Northwest.

Clerks and officers, who came from the British Isles and Canada, formed the "gentlemen" class. The working lower class, or "engagés," made up most of the employees. Gentlemen and their families lived a comfortable, somewhat elegant life within the fort's palisade, while laborers resided in crude dwellings in the village.

The workers at the fort represented many nationalities. George Simpson wrote a description of a trip down the Columbia River that indicated the

diversity of Fort Vancouver. "Our crew of ten men contained Iroquois who spoke their own tongue; a Cree halfbreed of French origin, who appeared to have borrowed his dialect from both his parents; a North Briton who understood only the Gaelic of his native hills; Canadians who, of course, knew French, and Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islanders, who jabbered a medley of chinook and their own vernacular jargon. Add to all this that the passengers were natives of England, Scotland, Russia, Canada, and the Hudson Bay Territories."



Visiting the Park

Today Fort Vancouver's structures are reconstructions. Starting in 1948, archeologists excavated the site of the original fort, taking more than one million artifacts. Study of these objects and documentary material formed the basis for the reconstructions. The painting, (above), shows the fort in its prosperous times.

To visit the park, in the city of Vancouver, Washington, turn east off I-5 at the Mill Plain Boulevard exit, and follow the signs to the visitor center on East Evergreen Boulevard. From I-205, exit at Wash.

14. Go west on Wash. 14 about six miles, and take I-5 North. Exit on Mill Plain Boulevard; follow signs to the park.

Safety The ground at the fort is uneven. Don't let a slip or fall spoil your visit. Watch your children.

More Information Write: Superintendent, Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, 612 East Reserve Street, Vancouver, WA 98661-3811. Call 360-696-7655. Or www.nps.gov/fova on the Internet.

© GPO: 1999-454-767/00053 Reprint 1997 Printed on recycled paper.