

Whitman Mission

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historic Site
Washington



The Mission at Waiilatpu

Waiilatpu—"place of the people of the rye grass"—is the site of a mission founded in 1836 among the Cayuse Indians by Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. As emigrants began moving across the continent into the Pacific Northwest during the 1840s, the mission also became an important station on the Oregon Trail.

Stirred by accounts of explorers and traders, missionaries had become interested in the Oregon country in the 1820s, but the remoteness of the area discouraged them. In 1833 an article in a New York Methodist publication described the visit to St. Louis of some western Indians seeking teachers and the "Book of Heaven"—the Bible. Although it was mostly fictional, the story stimulated missionary interest in work among American Indians in the Oregon country.

In 1835 the American Board of Foreign Missions, representing several Protestant churches, sent Rev. Samuel Parker and Dr. Marcus Whitman to the Oregon country to select mission sites. On the way, the men talked to some Indians at a fur traders' rendezvous and became convinced that the prospects were good. To save time, Parker continued on to explore Oregon for sites, and Whitman returned east to recruit more workers. Soon Rev. Henry Spalding and his wife Eliza, William Gray, and Narcissa Prentiss Whitman, his new wife since February 18, 1836, were headed westward in covered wagons.

The journey was a notable one in the story of the Oregon Trail. The Whitmans and the Spaldings were the first American families to cross the continent overland. The missionaries' wagon, reduced to a cart, was the first vehicle to travel as far west as Fort Boise. Their successful trek inspired many followers.

The party reached the Columbia River on September 1, 1836. After a brief visit at Fort Vancouver, the Hudson's Bay Company headquarters, the men returned up the Columbia

to select their mission stations. The women remained temporarily behind as guests of Chief Factor John McLoughlin.

Other mission societies were already active in Oregon. In 1834 Methodists under Jason Lee began work in the Willamette Valley. Later, Catholic missions were established along the lower Columbia. The Whitmans opened their mission among the Cayuse at Waiilatpu, and the Spaldings among the Nez Perce at Lapwai, 120 miles to the east. The missionaries learned the Indian languages and assigned the words English spellings. Spalding printed books in Nez Perce and Spokane on a press brought to Lapwai in 1839—the first books published in the Pacific Northwest.

For part of each year the Indians went away to berry-picking grounds, the grassy camas meadows, and the salmon fisheries. Whitman realized that the mission could not fulfill its purpose if the Indians continued moving with the seasonal food supply. He encouraged them to settle onto small nearby farms, but with little success.



There are no known photographs of the Whitmans, who were killed before the advent of cameras in the West. These portraits were painted by Drury Haight. The Haight paintings are based on unidentified sketches by Irish-Canadian artist Paul Kane, who visited the mission in July 1847.

The mission expanded gradually. Other missionaries arrived and new stations were established. At Waiilatpu, the large adobe house, gristmill, and blacksmith shop were constructed. William Gray built a house for himself that later served as an "emigrant house" for travelers.

The Cayuse interest in religious worship, books, and school waxed and waned with their trust and acceptance of Whitman's new ideas. In 1842 reports of dissension caused the Board to order the closing of the Waiilatpu and Lapwai stations. Whitman undertook a remarkable overland journey in midwinter to plead his case personally with the Board. Accompanied by Asa Lovejoy, he left Waiilatpu on October 3, 1842. Pushing through blizzards and fording icy rivers, they traveled by way of Fort Hall, Taos, and Bent's Fort. Whitman reached St. Louis on March 9, 1843, and arrived three weeks later at Boston, after stops at Washington, DC, and New York. The Board, moved by his arguments, rescinded its orders.

The Oregon Trail

Whitman returned to Oregon with a wagon train in the Great Migration of 1843, serving as physician and guide. The year before, the first large group of emigrants passed almost the same way on what became known as the Oregon Trail, and they stopped for rest and supplies at the mission. They had taken wagons as far as Fort Hall, where they repacked their belongings and traveled the rest of the way by horse and foot. Whitman helped lead the first wagon train all the way to the Columbia River on his return journey.

Although the main trail bypassed the mission after 1844, those who were sick and destitute turned to the mission for shelter and comfort. One such wagon brought the seven Sager children, who had been orphaned on the trail. With kindness and compassion, the Whitmans took the children into their family, as they had taken in three children of fur traders.

Planning Your Visit

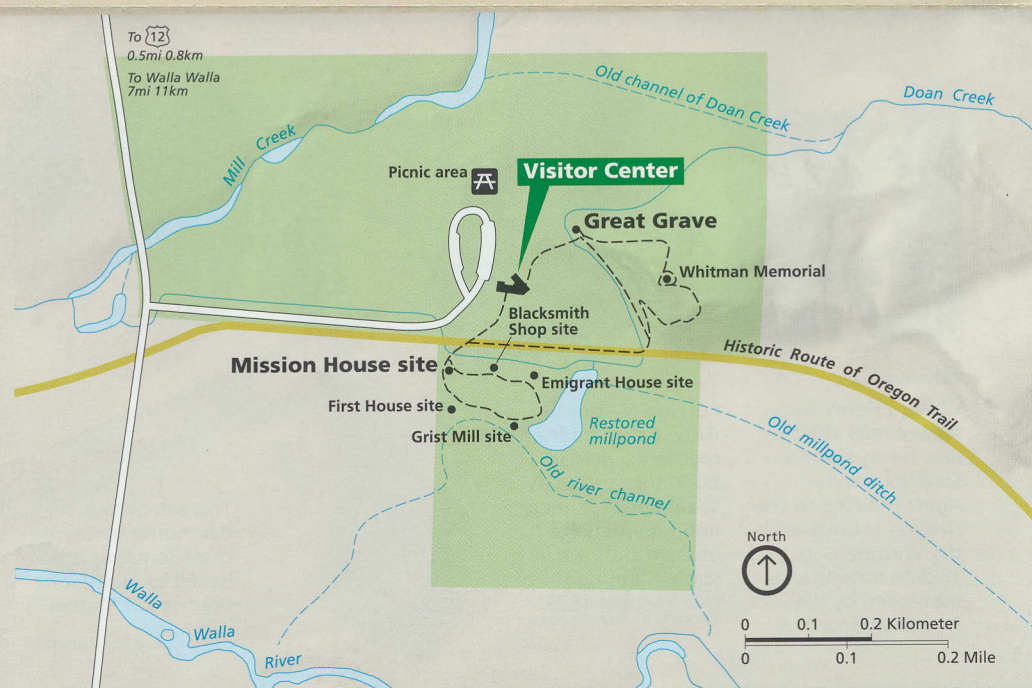
Park grounds are open year-round 8 am to 4:30 pm except federal holidays October through April. The Visitor Center is open daily 9 am to 4 pm Memorial Day through Labor Day. Winter hours vary.

Self-guiding trails and a picnic area are available. • Fires are permitted in the grills only. • Camping is prohibited. • Lodging and meals are available at Walla Walla, 7 miles away. • Flowers, birds, and park facilities are protected by law. • Watch children carefully, especially near the millpond and on the hill. • Service animals are welcome. • For firearms regulations check the park website.

More Information

Whitman Mission National Historic Site
328 Whitman Mission Rd.
Walla Walla, WA 99362
509-522-6360
www.nps.gov/whmi

Whitman Mission National Historic Site is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. Learn about national parks at www.nps.gov.



Here we are, one family alone, a waymark, as it were, or center post, about which multitudes will or must gather this winter. And these we must feed and warm to the extent of our powers.

—Narcissa Whitman, 1844

Tragedy at Wailatpu

After 11 years of working with the Indians, the mission effort ended in violence. There were several causes behind the Indian unrest. Deep cultural differences between the white and Indian ways of life had caused tension and misunderstanding. Increasing numbers of emigrants, and stories of settlers taking Indian land elsewhere, convinced the Cayuse that their way of life was in danger. A measles epidemic during the fall of 1847 spread rapidly among the Cayuse, who had no resistance to the disease. Within a short time half the tribe died. When Whitman's medicine helped

white children but not theirs, many Cayuse believed they were being poisoned to make way for the emigrants.

Then, on November 29, 1847, a group of Cayuse attacked the mission and killed Marcus Whitman, his wife, the Sager boys, and nine others. A few survivors escaped, but 50, mostly women and children, were taken captive. Two young girls—Louise Sager and Helen Mar Meek—and a small boy died from measles. The others were ransomed a month later by Peter Skene Ogden of the Hudson's Bay Com-

pany. The killings ended Protestant missions in the Oregon country and led to war against the Cayuse by a volunteer militia from the Willamette and lower Columbia valleys.

In the spring of 1848 Joseph Meek traveled to Washington, D.C., with news of the tragedy and petitions from settlers to Congress seeking territorial status for Oregon. In August of that year Congress created the Oregon Territory, the first formal territorial government west of the Rocky Mountains.



Present-day state names and boundaries are shown to help visitors locate the approximate routes of the historic trails.



SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Nez Perce Indian

Heyuuxc tohon, a Nez Perce chief known as Rabbit-Skin-Leggings, was a member of an 1831 Indian delegation to St. Louis. The chiefs sought information about the white man's sources of power and requested the Bible for American Indians in the Oregon country. George Catlin painted this chief's portrait in 1832.



NPS

Covered Wagons on the Oregon Trail

The 2,000-mile-long wagon path from Independence, Mo., to the mouth of the Columbia River became known as the Oregon Trail in the 1840s. It was explored earlier by fur traders but rarely used before "Oregon fever" swept the country. The first large caravan made the long trek in 1842. The next year waves of covered wagons like the one

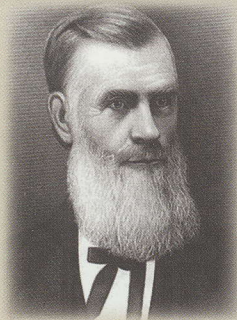
shown here crossed the plains and western mountain ranges via South Pass and the Blue Mountains all the way to the Columbia. The arduous journey took a heavy toll of lives. By the 1850s wagon travel had left the road so deeply rutted that it remains visible in places even today.



NPS

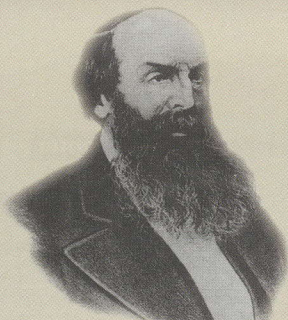
Whitman Memorial

Built in 1897 on the 50th anniversary of the Whitmans' deaths, this 27-foot-high monument overlooks the Walla Walla Valley. To the east are the Blue Mountains, which emigrant wagons once crossed on the most difficult part of their journey.



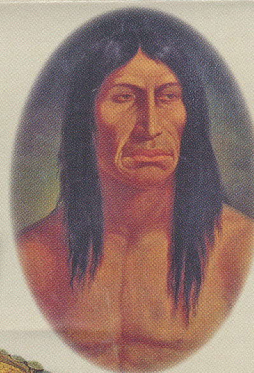
Missionaries

William Henry Gray (above left) and the Rev. Henry Harmon Spalding (above right) traveled to the Oregon country with the Whitmans in 1836 as missionaries sponsored by the American Board of



Foreign Missions. Gray, a carpenter and mechanic, helped build the station at Waiilatpu. Spalding and his wife Eliza opened the Lapwai station among the Nez Perce in 1836.

BOTH PORTRAITS — WHITMAN COLLEGE

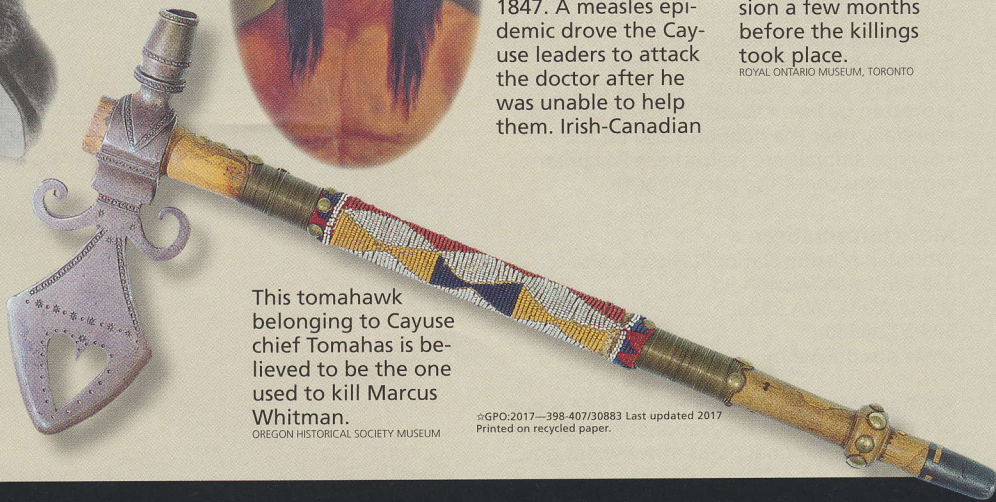


Cayuse Indian

Tomahas, a Cayuse chief, killed Marcus Whitman during the Indian uprising at the mission in November 1847. A measles epidemic drove the Cayuse leaders to attack the doctor after he was unable to help them. Irish-Canadian

painter Paul Kane created this portrait of the chief from a sketch he made during a visit to the mission a few months before the killings took place.

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM, TORONTO



This tomahawk belonging to Cayuse chief Tomahas is believed to be the one used to kill Marcus Whitman.

OREGON HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM

©GPO:2017—398-407/30883 Last updated 2017
Printed on recycled paper.