

FORT VANCOUVER

A Brief History and Account of its Restoration

By Tom Laidlaw

As I entered the re-created blacksmith shop at Fort Vancouver, I walked into a different world. It was dark, dirty and smoky. Four huge overhead bellows were whooshing up great tongues of flame in the forges. Hammers were rhythmically pounding out nails, hinges, and axes, from red-hot strips of steel. The smith's leather apron and gloves were worn and torn with years of use and his leathery face was smudged with soot. I was thoroughly fascinated as he demonstrated his craft. "The beaver trap," he said, "was the most popular item made here. We made thousands of them back in the years 1825–1845. Would you like to see how it works?"

Of course I would! He explained all the parts and how it was used, then placed it on the ground and, with great effort, opened the jaws of the trap and set it just as a trapper might have in some remote mountain stream. Then he calmly stepped into it. WHANG! The trap sprang shut around his leg, and I gasped. He had rigged the trap to close only so far and no further.

The trap had not really caught him, but it did catch me. It drew me back in time to learn more about the British Hudson's Bay Company and its Columbia Department headquarters, Fort Vancouver. I wanted to become a part of this unique place and tell of its history. And I did. For eight years now I have been telling the story in many different ways. My work at Fort Vancouver led me the Oregon Trail, Lewis and Clark, Native Americans and the fur trade, and to OCTA. Fort Vancouver is the place they all came together.

EARLY HISTORY

Christopher Columbus bumped into a new continent on the way to the East Indies. When Europe figured that out, they continued to seek a waterway to China. Consequently, the Northwest Passage was invented and a great search was begun to locate it.

Cartier traveled the St. Lawrence River from the Atlantic to Montreal, and Hudson discovered his bay. Neither explorer had found a Northwest Passage, but both routes led to the interior fur trade, and eventually to the site of Fort Vancouver and the mouth of the Columbia River. The French trappers were first, working out of Montreal, and in 1670 England's King Charles II chartered the Hudson's Bay Company.

By the time serious exploration was being conducted on the Pacific Coast, the Canadian fur trade was in full swing. The Hudson's Bay Company was flourishing and trampling the many small and independent companies in the field. In desperation several of these smaller companies merged in 1779 to become the North West Company. This touched off a fierce trade war that lasted another forty-two years.

In 1728 and 1741 Vitus Bering conducted the first meaningful explorations of the northwest coastline. Soon Russia had a large sea otter trade with China. In response, Spain sent Juan Perez north. Perez anchored in Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island in 1774, but did not land and claim the territory, as he had been ordered to do. That honor fell to England and James Cook four years later. The sea otter pelts



From a modern oil painting by Richard Schlecht, Fort Vancouver in 1845.
 Courtesy Fort Vancouver, NHS. Used by permission.

Cook's crew had bought trinkets from the Indians fetched astronomical prices in China. When this news got out, fierce competition ensued for control of the trade, but it soon became a contest between Boston and London.

Despite all the activity on the Pacific Coast, there were really only four navigators who stopped at the mouth of the Columbia River, and considered it as the western end of the Northwest Passage. The irony of their explorations show that the destiny of the United States to become a continental nation was manifesting itself as far back as 1775, seventy years before the coining of the phrase "Manifest Destiny."¹

On August 17, 1775, Bruno de Hezeta of Spain saw the Columbia River, but could not enter, "despite my ardent desire to do so" because he was short of men and those he had were sick with scurvy.

¹This is severely condensed, but a more complete story can be found at <http://tomlaidlaw.com/essays>.

Next came the Englishman John Meares, in 1788. The wind and the breakers would not let him cross the Columbia River Bar, so he declared:

The name Cape Disappointment was given to the promontory, and the bay obtained the title of Deception Bay. . . . We can now with safety assert, that no such river as that of Saint Roc exists, as laid down in the Spanish charts.

In April 1792 Britain's George Vancouver saw river-colored water at Columbia's mouth, but thought it was "not worthy of further attention."

Finally, American sea-otter trader Robert Gray crossed the bar into the great River of the West on May 11, 1792, and named it "Columbia's River" after his ship.

When Vancouver learned of the discovery, he decided it was worthy of further attention after all. In October he sent his lieutenant, William Broughton, to investigate. Broughton and his men rowed a long-

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Part of Mackenzie's map in his *Voyages from Montreal Through the Continent of North America*, showing his conjecture that he was on the Columbia River. It was really the Fraser.

boat a hundred miles upriver to today's Washougal, Washington, where he formally claimed the land for England. On the way he named Mount Hood, Pillar Rock, Mount Coffin, and Bellevue Point, near the location of Fort Vancouver. Vancouver felt that this exploration gave England a greater claim to the territory—Gray, he said, had not really been in the river, only the estuary. Thus began a controversy that would continue for fifty-four years. Eventually it became known as The Oregon Question.

LAND EXPLORATION

By 1788, British fur traders had decimated the beaver population further and further west to the Rocky Mountains. Supply lines were getting longer from Montreal and Hudson's Bay, and the companies began to look for a river to take their furs out to the Pacific and trade directly with China—that same old Northwest Passage.

In 1789, Alexander Mackenzie of the North West Company explored a river flowing west out of Great Slave Lake in Northwest Territory. Finding that it emptied into the Arctic Ocean, he called it River Disappointment (later named Mackenzie River). In 1792 he went west from Fort Chippewyan up the Peace River. On June 12, 1793, he wrote in his log:

We landed and unloaded, where we found a beaten path leading over a low ridge of land eight hundred and seventeen paces in length, to another small lake . . . we are now going with the stream.²

Mackenzie eventually struck a river that emptied into the Pacific, but the Indians warned him of a fearful canyon that made it impassable. Mackenzie completed his journey by land at Dean channel on the Bella Coola River in British Columbia—the first European to cross the North American continent north of Mexico.

Mackenzie published his journals in 1801, by which time he had learned of the discovery of the Columbia River. He thought he had been on it and even drew a dotted line extending southward, labeled Columbia River, but it was the Fraser. Mackenzie recommended that Great Britain establish a line of trading posts along the Columbia River to its mouth.

Mackenzie's report of a short portage from eastern to western waters galvanized Thomas Jefferson to once again attempt an exploration west of the Mississippi. The Corps of Discovery led by Lewis and Clark was born. On June 20, 1803, President Thomas Jefferson wrote to Meriwether Lewis:

The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri River, and such principal streams of it, as, by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean, whether the Columbia, Oregon, Colorado, or any other river, may offer the most direct and practicable water-communication across the continent, for the purposes of commerce.

On September 23, 1806, when the Corps of Discovery returned to St. Louis, Clark wrote a letter to

²Mackenzie volume II, 109. Complete bibliographical information is listed at the end of this article.

From *Sources of the River*, by Jack Nisbet.
Used by permission.

his brother reporting their success, and that letter was published in many newspapers. It outlined the route, confirmed that the country had plenty of beaver just waiting to be made into fancy hats, and advised the president thus:

If the government will only aid, even in a very limited manner, the enterprise of her citizens I am fully convinced that we shall shortly derive the benefits of a most lucrative trade from this source, and that in the course of ten or twelve years a tour across the continent by the route mentioned will be undertaken by individuals with as little concern as a voyage across the Atlantic is at present.³

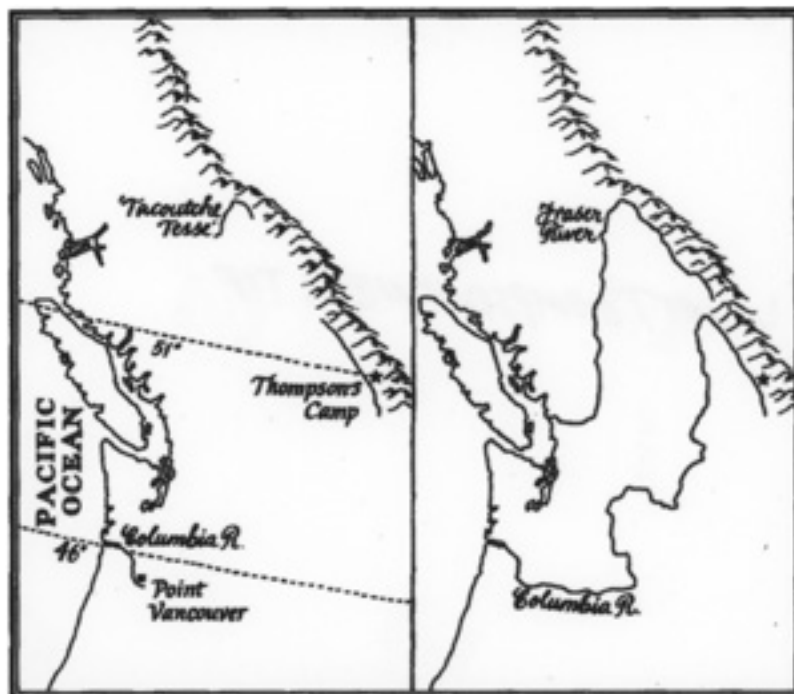
ASTORIA

John Jacob Astor, who formed the American Fur Company in 1808 and a subsidiary Pacific Fur Company in 1810, was inspired by Lewis's ideas regarding the fur trade. He outfitted two expeditions: one by sea around South America in the *Tonquin*, and another by land following Lewis and Clark's route. Few Americans, however, had the experience or desire to join this new venture. Astor's crews were composed mostly of North West Company rejects. Even his first three partners, Alexander McKay (who had been with Mackenzie), Duncan MacDougall, and David Stuart, were former North Westers.

These three would sail on the *Tonquin*. Astor's first American partner was a St. Louis merchant, Wilson Price Hunt, who would command the land party.⁴ The Pacific Fur Company's first settlement was established

³Jackson, 322.

⁴Both the ocean voyage and the cross-country journey had great difficulties and hardships, which are well documented in Washington Irving's great book *Astoria*, so I will not go into detail here.



WHAT THOMSON KNEW / WHAT HE DIDN'T KNOW

on the south side of the Columbia River near its mouth by the *Tonquin* contingent in April of 1811. The North West Company's David Thompson showed up three months after Astoria had been established as the first American settlement on the Columbia River.

DAVID THOMPSON, SIMON FRASER, AND THE NORTH WEST COMPANY

In 1801 David Thompson had unsuccessfully tried to traverse the Rocky Mountains and find the Columbia River. In 1807 he finally succeeded in crossing the mountains and establishing a trading post, Kootenay House, on a north-flowing river that, unknown to Thompson, was the Columbia River. In the next three years Thompson built three more forts on tributaries to the Columbia.

At the same time another North Wester, Simon Fraser, followed Mackenzie's Peace River route, over the 817-pace portage and down to the river with the terrible canyon that had daunted Mackenzie. He presumed he was on the Columbia, but like Mackenzie, he had found the Fraser. While failing to find the prac-

tical route to the sea, Fraser did claim thousands of square miles for Great Britain, and built several trading posts. The trading posts built by Thompson and Fraser would eventually come under the control of Fort Vancouver.

In late 1810 Thompson made the discovery that the Columbia flows north before it flows south, and in 1811 he became the first white man to travel the entire Columbia River, though not in one stretch.

OVERLAND ASTORIANS

In early 1812, Wilson Price Hunt and the weary overland Astorians arrived at Astoria; however, the war of 1812 put an end to the Pacific Fur Company. In 1813 Astoria was sold to the North West Company.

But who owned the Columbia Drainage? Both England and America recognized that the other had some valid claims by discovery and exploration. Logically, the country should be split between them, but where to put the border? In 1818, they finally decided not to decide for ten years, but to have a policy of Joint Occupancy—like two kids sharing a room—and this was a mighty big room, from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific and from California at 42° north latitude to Alaska at 54° 40'. The policy was renewed indefinitely in 1827, allowing either country to call for a border with one year's notice.

Back in Canada the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company began to talk merger. One of the most voluble proponents of merger was Dr. John McLoughlin of the North West Company. Eventually, in 1821, the two companies merged, keeping the Hudson's Bay name. A Scotsman named George Simpson was appointed governor of operations. For the next three years he visited all of the trading posts, cutting both the work force and wages quite drastically. He got to the mouth of the Columbia River in Novem-

ber 1824, bringing a new chief factor to take over the region, the same Dr. John McLoughlin.

One of Simpson's first decisions was to move the trading post at Astoria to a better spot. By this time the British were pretty sure they would never get the territory south of the Columbia, so he wanted a new post on the north side. He also wanted the post to be more self-sufficient, so he sent Dr. McLoughlin upstream on the Columbia to find a spot for the new headquarters, one that would support agriculture.

About one hundred miles upriver, six miles east of the Willamette River, McLoughlin selected a site for his new post. Meriwether Lewis had camped there March 30, 1806, and had written that this was the most suitable spot for a settlement his men had seen and that it would support forty to fifty thousand souls. (They could not anticipate the great packing of people that would multiply that estimate more than ten times.)

Thus in the winter of 1824–25, the first Fort Vancouver was built on a hilltop about a mile north of the river and a mile east of where it would be rebuilt in 1829—where the recreated fort stands today on its original footprint. McLoughlin chose the elevated spot for its beautiful view of the river and defensive position. He also needed to observe the flood plain below before considering a location closer to the river. In the beginning this was only to be a temporary fort because George Simpson thought the Fraser River, above the 49th parallel, would give better access to the interior to bring out furs. He was already thinking about the eventual border. The U.S. proposed the 49th parallel, the borderline east of the Rocky Mountains, while England wanted the 49th parallel to its junction with the Columbia River, where it would then follow the river down to its mouth. This dispute would not be settled until 1846.

DR. JOHN McLOUGHLIN, 1784–1857
 Chief Factor, Fort Vancouver Hudson's Bay
 Company Columbia Department, and Father
 of Oregon. Painting by Louise L. Wilson. *Cour-*
tesy Fort Vancouver, NHS. Used by permission.



By March 18, 1825, the basic fort had been built and George Simpson wrote to the home office in London:

The Fort is well picketed, covering a space of about $\frac{3}{4}$ ths of an acre and the buildings already completed are a Dwelling House, two good Stores, an Indian Hall and temporary quarters for the people. It 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.⁵

The next day Simpson formally christened the establishment Fort Vancouver, in honor of the famous navigator.

Three-fourths of an acre would be about 156 feet square. No records exist to tell us the exact dimensions. Work on the fort went slowly, because Simpson had cut the work force so sharply. Men were needed to bring up the goods from Fort George and to protect it from Indian thievery. The coastal natives were not exactly happy that the trading station had moved so far up the river. Farms were started, in accordance with Simpson's wishes. Eventually they would cover over three thousand acres.

From this time forward, the Columbia River would be used to transfer goods and furs back and forth to England around Cape Horn. In addition to this there was also established an "express" from Fort Vancouver to York Factory on Hudson's Bay. This was used to transport records, letters, and orders back and forth. The route took the Columbia up to Boat Encampment at its northern reach. The "express" then crossed the Rockies over Athabaska Pass, discovered by Thompson in 1811, and then down eastern rivers the rest of the way.

⁵Merk, 124.

DR. JOHN McLOUGHLIN

Born near Quebec in 1784, John McLoughlin was seven years old when the family moved to Quebec. Shortly before his fourteenth birthday he apprenticed himself to a local doctor, James Fisher, and was granted his own license before his nineteenth birthday. A well-documented legend has it that the young doctor, with a fine young lady on his arm, was about to walk a plank across a puddle when he was confronted by a king's officer coming the opposite way. McLoughlin not only objected to giving way to the officer, but also pushed him off the board into the mud. Tradition has it that he hastily joined the North West Company as an apprentice clerk. His granduncle, Simon Fraser (Fraser River), was a partner in that company.

McLoughlin was sent to Fort William at the western edge of Lake Superior, where he plied his medical trade and added the duties of a fur trader. He had a flair for administration and soon became a "wintering partner," one of those hardy souls who went to the frontier posts and traded with the natives for the valuable beaver pelts. By 1821 he had enough clout



Artist's interpretation of early Fort Vancouver, F. J. Schlaepfer.
Courtesy Fort Vancouver, NHS. Used by permission.

to become a major factor in the merger of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company.

McLoughlin had now achieved the highest rank, chief factor, and would control not only Fort Vancouver, but also a tremendously large district. Officially he reported to George Simpson and the committee in London, but being so far removed from the seat of power he had immense autonomy. Thompson's and Fraser's forts came under control of Fort Vancouver, and more forts were built: Fort Colville on the Columbia at Kettle Falls in 1826, and Fort Langley on the Fraser in 1827. All reported to McLoughlin.

In George Simpson's mind Fort Langley would become the headquarters of the Columbia Department. But in 1828 he made his own trip down the Fraser River and found it unacceptable as a trade route. Fort Langley became an important regional fur trade post, but Fort Vancouver was the headquarters, and in 1829 McLoughlin started building on the lower plain where we find the fort today. Many histories of the fort talk about "old LaPierre," who made two trips a day hauling water up the hill to the original fort in a cart pulled by two oxen, Lion and Brandy. The new fort was about 396 yards from the river, but above the flood plain. There was also a pond, which could bring small boats as close as six hundred feet to the front door.

AMERICAN VISITORS

On August 8, 1828, the first American visitor to Fort Vancouver was a bedraggled trapper, Arthur Black, of Jedediah Smith's expedition into southern Oregon from California. Smith was part owner of Smith, Jackson & Sublette, the American trapping company that would become the HBC's chief rival. Black related that Kelawasset Indians had attacked the party. Smith and two others, who had been off hunting when the attack occurred and thus survived, arrived at Fort Vancouver shortly after Black. McLoughlin sent a party to retrieve Smith's furs and horses, which had been stolen in the attack.

Smith and his men spent the winter at the fort, and expressed a willingness to pay for their accommodations, but George Simpson charged them nothing and even paid Smith for his furs and horses, and offered escort the next spring with his own return party to the Red River in Winnipeg. During the winter, news came in that Smith's partner, David Jackson, was trapping around the Flathead Post on the Clark Fork River near today's Plains, Montana. Smith changed plans and left Fort Vancouver on March 12, 1829, several days ahead of Simpson. According to Dale Morgan, he found his partner on the Flathead River somewhere

above Flathead Lake. On October 29, 1830, Smith wrote a report of Smith, Jackson & Sublette's fur trading activities. His letter, written in the third person, is a revelation of the future route of overland migration by hundreds of thousands:

Pack-horses, or rather mules, were at first used; but in the beginning of the present year, it was determined to try wagons; and in the month of April last, on the 10th day of the month, a caravan of ten wagons, drawn by five mules each, and two dearborns, drawn by one mule each, set out from St. Louis. . . . Our route from St. Louis was nearly due west to the western limits of the State; and thence along the Santa Fe trail about forty miles; from which the course was some degrees north of west, across the waters of the Kansas, and up the Great Platte river, to the Rocky mountains, and to the head of Wind River, where it issues from the mountains. This took us until the 16th of July, and was as far as we wished the wagons to go, as the furs to be brought in were to be collected at this place [Riverton, Wyoming], which is, or was this year, the great rendezvous of the persons engaged in that business. Here the wagons could easily have crossed the Rocky mountains, it being what is called the Southern Pass, had it been desirable for them to do so, which it was not for the reason stated.

Later in the report Smith talked about Fort Vancouver:

One of the undersigned, to wit, Jedediah S. Smith, . . . arrived at the post of the Hudson's Bay Company, called Fort Vancouver, near the mouth of Multnomah (Willamette) River. He arrived there in August 1828, and left the 12th of March 1829, and made observations, which he deems it material to communicate to the Government. Fort Vancouver is situated on the north side of the Columbia, five miles above the mouth of the Multnomah, in a handsome prairie, on a second bank about three quarters of a mile from

the river. This is the fort as it stood when he arrived there; but a large one, three hundred feet square, about three quarters of a mile lower down, and within two hundred yards of the river, was commenced the spring he came away. Twelve pounders were the heaviest cannon, which he saw. The crop of 1828 was seven hundred bushels of wheat; the grain full and plump, and making good flour; fourteen acres of corn, the same number of acres in peas, eight acres of oats, four or five acres of barley, a fine garden, some small apple trees and grape vines. The ensuing spring eighty bushels of seed wheat were sown: about two hundred head of cattle, fifty horses and breeding mares, three hundred head of hogs, fourteen goats, the usual domestic fowls. They have mechanics of various kinds, to wit, black-smiths, gunsmiths, carpenters, coopers, tinner and baker; a good saw mill on the bank of the river five miles above, a grist mill worked by hand, but intended to work by water. They had built two coasting vessels, one of which was then on a voyage to the Sandwich Islands. No English or white woman was at the fort, but a great number of mixed blood Indian extraction, such as belong to the British fur trading establishments, who were treated as wives, and the families of children taken care of accordingly. So that every thing seemed to combine to prove that this fort was to be a permanent establishment. At Fort Vancouver the goods for the Indian trade are imported from London, and enter the territories of the United States, paying no duties; and from the same point the furs taken on the other side of the mountains are shipped. The annual quantity of these furs could not be exactly ascertained, but Mr. Smith was informed indirectly that they amounted to about thirty thousand beaver skins, besides otter skins and small furs. The beaver skins alone, at the New York prices, would be worth above two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. To obtain these furs, both trapping and trading are resorted to. Various parties, provided with traps, spread over the country south of the Columbia to the

neighborhood of the Mexican territory; and in 1824 and 5; they crossed the Rocky Mountains, and trapped on the waters of the Missouri river.

This last is a reference to Peter Skene Ogden's first Snake River Brigade, where some of his trappers deserted with many furs. No recompense was ever sought by HBC, because Simpson thought Ogden had been wrong to trap in American territory. So Smith has told us how colonization may be accomplished and later he lays out this warning and recommendation:

As to the injury which must happen to the United States from the British getting the control of all the Indians beyond the mountains, building and repairing ships in the tide water region of the Columbia, and having a station there for their privateers and vessels of war, is too obvious to need a recapitulation. The object of this communication being to state facts to the Government, and to show the facility of crossing the continent to the Great Falls of the Columbia with wagons, the ease of supporting any number of men by driving cattle to supply them where there was no buffalo, and also to show the true nature of the British establishments on the Columbia, and the unequal operation of the convention of 1818.⁶

WYETH, BONNEVILLE, AND FRENCH PRAIRIE

At about this time the visionary teacher Hall Jackson Kelley started writing about the wonderful Willamette Valley. He spoke all over the East and enrolled several hundred people in an emigrating society, but could not keep it together. One of his converts, Nathaniel J. Wyeth, unhappy with the delays, went ahead on his own, intending to set up a salmon salting operation on the Columbia.

In 1832 Wyeth, a Boston Ice merchant, emulated

Astor by putting together a land brigade as well as sending a ship around South America. He started with twenty-five men, but only eleven arrived with him at Fort Vancouver and one of those died early on. He was well received at the fort, but his ship did not arrive, so he was out of business before he started. When his men asked to be released, his disappointment was complete, but he took it philosophically:

. . . they were good men and had persevered as long as perseverance would do good. I am now afloat on the great sea of life without any stay or support, but in good hands i.e. myself, providence and a few of the H.B. Co. who are perfect gentlemen.⁷

One of the things Wyeth wrote about in his journal was the small community of HBC retirees on the Willamette, near today's Newberg, Oregon. Company rules said that retirees had to go back to Canada to muster out, but McLoughlin saw a problem—what would happen to the native wives and children? Again the good doctor exercised his humanity and autonomy and helped them start their farms while ostensibly keeping them on the books. McLoughlin sold them seed wheat and tools on credit and lent them cows. They settled in an area called French Prairie because the retirees were mostly French-Canadians.

One of Wyeth's party, John Ball, became the first schoolteacher at Fort Vancouver, teaching the *engagées'* children. He was also, of course, the first teacher in Washington. After a year he went to the French Prairie and became the first American to farm land in what is now Champoeg State Park. A year later he returned east. Solomon Smith of the Wyeth party, who stayed in the area the rest of his life, replaced him as a teacher.

Like Wyeth, in 1832 U.S. Army captain Benjamin

⁶Smith in Morgan, 346–348.

⁷Johnson, 32.

Eulalie de Bonneville took leave of absence to enter the fur business. He brought twenty wagons west and, as Smith had predicted, easily took them over South Pass and on to the Green River, where he set up a trading post in a poor area. Bonneville did not get to Fort Vancouver that year, but stopped at Fort Walla Walla. He was treated kindly by the HBC's manager, Pierre Pambum, but was sold nothing that would help him compete with the company. McLoughlin's and other managers' policy was to meet people's basic needs, but stop at giving or selling them supplies which might be turned against them in business.

Wyeth returned east in 1833. In 1834 he went west again, eventually establishing a Fort Hall on the Snake River near today's Pocatello, Idaho. With Wyeth on this trip were Methodist missionaries Jason and Daniel Lee. Shortly after Wyeth began building Fort Hall, Lee preached the first protestant sermon west of the Rocky Mountains.

When HBC employee Thomas McKay (a former Astorian) saw Wyeth's new fort he appointed some of his men to conduct Lee to Fort Vancouver, while he went to the Boise-Snake confluence and built Fort Boise to cut off potential trading traffic before it got to Fort Hall. Within three years his strategy had worked and the Hudson's Bay Company owned Fort Hall as well as Fort Boise. These British forts, reporting to Fort Vancouver, became important stopping places on the Oregon and California trails.

McLoughlin convinced Jason Lee to go south to the Willamette Valley rather than east to the Flathead Indians. This was a mistake if McLoughlin expected the country to become British. Lee set up his mission halfway between today's Newberg and Salem. He built farms, shops, stores, and houses. And he called for reinforcements.

In 1836 Dr. Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, Pres-

byterian missionaries from New York, arrived in Oregon Country with their partners, Henry and Eliza Spalding. Theirs was the first family wagon, and these were the first white women, to actually cross South Pass. At Fort Hall the wagon was broken down to a two-wheel cart, which was then left at Fort Boise.

When Narcissa Whitman arrived at Fort Vancouver she wrote to her mother:

We are now in Vancouver, the New York of the Pacific Ocean . . . what a contrast this to the rough barren sand plains through which we had so recently passed. Here we find fruit of every description. Apples, Peaches, Grapes. Pear, plum and fig trees in abundance. Cucumbers, melons, beans, peas, beets, cabbage, tomatoes, and every kind of vegetable too numerous to be mentioned.

The Whitman's mission was established near Walla Walla, Washington, and the Spaldings at Lapwai, Idaho, near present-day Lewiston.

Shortly after Whitman's arrival, the American brig *Loriot*, Captain Slacum commanding, showed up at Fort Vancouver. News had been filtering back to the eastern states from travelers, missionaries, and settlers with rumors that the HBC was violating the terms of joint occupancy. This convinced President Jackson to send Slacum out to check on the situation. McLoughlin made him welcome at the fort.

Slacum's report to the president described the fort at that time as being 750 feet by 450 feet, containing thirty-four buildings, including dwelling houses for officers and shops for blacksmiths, carpenters, coopers, tinsmiths, and wheelwrights. He also mentioned an area outside of the stockade that had about forty-nine cabins for laborers, a hospital, several barns, and a huge threshing machine. This was the company village, also mentioned by Jedediah Smith. Slacum estimated the total population of Fort Vancouver at about 750 to 800.

Slacum's report to the government was favorable to McLoughlin personally, but not so to the company. He reported that the HBC practiced and encouraged slavery. He also said that the U.S. should hold out for 54° 40', retaining both the Columbia River and Puget Sound. Much of what he said was blatantly false, but it accomplished his ends. It helped to create bias amongst later travelers against the Hudson's Bay Company.

In 1838, Jason Lee went east to recruit more missionaries. He carried with him a petition from the settlement asking for the United States to take them under its wing. Lee's barnstorming tour through the eastern states once again stirred up interest in the Willamette Valley and he gathered fifty more people to help him at his mission. They boarded the ship *Lausanne* on October 9, 1839, and the *New York Journal of Commerce* had this to say:

The ship *Lausanne* has gone to sea, having on board the large Methodist Mission Expedition to the Oregon Territory. . . . The sending of this large expedition is an important event, whether considered in its religious or political bearings. Among other things it will expedite the settlement of the territory; and we may hope also that it will give a tone to the moral and religious character of the people. . . . With all our hearts we wish success to this mission and the noble objects, which it is designed to promote. Its primary object, we believe, is to carry the gospel to the Indians.

(The last seems almost an afterthought.)

The captain of the ship reported back to the government praising John McLoughlin personally, but condemning the HBC for exercising their power unreasonably. Thomas Jefferson Farnham of the Peoria Expedition wrote in the same manner. The general tone of most reports back to the states was: "McLoughlin is a good guy, but the company is evil."

By the late 1830s the fur trade was dying out, both from over-trapping and change of fashion. Silk top hats replaced beaver as the rage. The mountain men needed new work and many of them came to settle in Oregon. In 1840 Joe Meek, Robert Newell, and Caleb Wilkins, three brothers-in-law by their Indian wives, brought the first wagons from Fort Hall to Walla Walla. They removed the wagon beds to pull them over the sagebrush, but Dr. Whitman praised them for getting the job done.

On May 22, 1843, the first major wagon train started for Oregon. When that train reached the HBC's Fort Walla Walla, they were encouraged to leave their wagons and continue by pack train or canoe, since wagons could not proceed downriver from The Dalles. Chief trader Archibald McKinlay traded the emigrants' fresh cattle for the stock they had brought. The river route brought tragedy to the Applegate family: two young cousins drowned while the rest of the party looked on helplessly. Hearing of the tragedy McLoughlin sent boats to The Dalles to rescue the party. In the next several years many emigrants received aid from Dr. McLoughlin, even though it was contrary to his mandate. Oregon emigrant John Boardman wrote:

Well received by Dr. McLoughlin, who charged nothing for the boat sent up for us, nor for the provisions; but not satisfied with that, sent us plenty of salmon and potatoes, furnished us house, room and wood free of charge, and was very anxious that all should get through safe.

And James Nesmith wrote: "Dr. John McLoughlin, from his own private resources, rendered the new settlers much valuable aid by furnishing the destitute with food, clothing and seed, waiting for his pay until they had a surplus to dispose of."

THE DEPARTURE OF THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY

The HBC officials were well aware of what the increased immigration from the United States would mean. By 1842 George Simpson had ordered a new headquarters built in territory that would undoubtedly be British. He sent McLoughlin's assistant James Douglas up north to find a place. Douglas found it on the southern tip of Vancouver Island and proceeded to build Fort Victoria.

In 1845 McLoughlin was demoted by the company because of his generosity to the Americans. Unpaid bills of the Americans added up to about \$31,000. He became one of a three-person Board of Management, with James Douglas and Peter Skene Ogden his associates on the board. In anger and frustration the doctor built a house in Oregon City, which he had claimed and platted a few years earlier. He moved there in early 1846. On McLoughlin's retirement, John Work replaced him on the Board of Management.

Also in 1846 the boundary question with England was finally settled. President Polk was willing to settle on the 49th parallel, in no small part because his attention was distracted by the Mexican War. England agreed, with a few conditions of their own. The HBC would be paid for their properties, have free access to the Columbia River and be allowed to operate until the end of their own contract with England in 1859. The border itself would run along the 49th parallel to boundary waters then down the channel of the Straits of Georgia and Juan de Fuca to the sea, giving England all of Vancouver Island. The treaty was signed in June of 1846, but did not reach the Columbia until December. And it would be another twenty-six years before the final detailed negotiations were over.

In 1849 James Douglas was ordered to move the

administrative headquarters of the HBC from Fort Vancouver to Fort Victoria. He was not exactly happy with his new assignment, but went and made the best of it. He became the first governor of British Columbia and was knighted by Queen Victoria on his retirement in 1863. Fort Vancouver ceased to be the fur trade capital, but continued many years with a retail trade, supplying American settlers.

VANCOUVER BARRACKS

In 1849, with the HBC still at Fort Vancouver, the U.S. Army established Columbia Barracks, now Vancouver Barracks. Their job was to protect Americans on the Oregon Trail from Indian attack, and here began eleven years of uneasy cooperation between the army and the fort. The army appropriated some buildings for its use, and tore down others for building materials.

By 1860 the buildings of the fort were becoming dilapidated and unusable, and relations with the army were increasingly strained, so the Hudson's Bay Company left the Columbia River, and the U.S. Army had complete control. Some time in 1866 the remains of the fort were completely destroyed by a fire of unknown origin.

The barracks eventually became the western headquarters of the army. On the hill above the fort the army built nine log cabins for the officers. Benjamin Bonneville commanded the post from 1852 to 1855. Other notable officers stationed there included Otis O. Howard, E. S. Canby, and George C. Marshall. In the 1890s new frame houses were built next to the cabins, and the log houses torn down. Today's Grant House, however, is still the original log cabin covered with siding. This was always the commander's house. U. S. Grant, however, was never commander here, but only a quartermaster in 1852-53. The building was



Boundary Commission photo, 1860.
 Courtesy U.S. National Archives. Used by permission.

named for him on a visit in 1879 after his presidency. After World War II much of the barracks was declared surplus.

TODAY'S FORT VANCOUVER

As early as 1910 a marker had been placed on a possible fort site, and the Army created a historic monument in 1915. But no one knew the exact site of Fort Vancouver, and there was no funding for any preservation work or establishment of a historic site.⁸ World War I and the Spruce Production Division of the army put a stop to any preservation plans. Thousands of loggers harvested Sitka spruce on the Pacific Coast and shipped it by rail to Vancouver for processing into airplanes. A vast factory employing three thousand was

set up right on the grounds of the former fort. The Spruce Division operated about two years, from November 1917 to August 1919. After the war was over the operation was terminated, but many of the new buildings remained.

In 1921 a map by Benjamin Bonneville was located. It provided historians with better information to locate the actual site of Fort Vancouver. In 1922, and again in 1924, Washington's congressmen proposed bills to recognize the site and restore it, but they were defeated. The historical societies of both Oregon and Washington wanted to place a commemorative marker on the site in 1925 to honor its centennial, but these plans also fell through. Finally a bill which called for restoration of the fort by October 1, 1925, was pushed through Congress and signed by Calvin Coolidge. Despite the good words contained in the bill, no money was appropriated, and the centennial was celebrated with only a parade. There was no monument.

The years 1930 and 1932 produced more abortive efforts. In 1935–36 the Old Fort Vancouver Restoration committee, together with a coalition of civic groups—the Chamber of Commerce, County Planning

⁸In the following summary of the very long and complicated process of obtaining the land, legislation, and money to create the fort you see today, I am paraphrasing the *Administrative History of Fort Vancouver* by Jane T. Merritt. The entire text is available on-line at <<http://www.nps.gov/fova/adhi/adhi.htm>>. The point is that it took a lot of time and a lot of effort by many very dedicated people to create this national historic site. In fact, it took longer than the original Fort Vancouver held sway here. In reading this report I am amazed that it ever got accomplished.

Commission, and City Planning Commission—asked the National Park Service to look at three possible sites for reconstruction. Each member of the coalition had its own idea. One preferred the original site on the hilltop where the Deaf School now stands. That was the true beginning of Vancouver. Another wanted the waterfront, but that was not feasible. Strangely enough, no one favored the site where the fort stands today. That area was being used by Pearson Field, an Army Reserve aviation field. One of its runways actually crossed through part of the stockade area. On April 5, 1938, legislation was signed allowing Vancouver to build a replica of Fort Vancouver on the west edge of Vancouver barracks. But it was only permission, with no accompanying funding, so again nothing happened.

The big break for restoration came after World War II, on December 6, 1946, when the army declared much of Vancouver Barracks surplus. The Oregon Historical Society, Washington State Historical Society, and Fort Vancouver Restoration and Historical Society immediately and strongly implored Congress to obtain the needed property and declare Fort Vancouver a national monument. The National Park Service at first limited its proposal to just the portion originally covered by the stockade, but historian Burt Brown Barker of the Oregon said:

We want all the land south of the highway [today's Evergreen Boulevard], excluding if we must, the flying field. I realize that flying fields such as the one in Vancouver will very soon be outdated. But the significance of this old post will last as long as we are an independent people.

By the fall of 1947, \$7,500 was made available for Louis R. Caywood to excavate the site, in order to identify the stockade walls and other evidence. A map by Mervin Vavasour made in 1845 and another from Bonneville in 1854 pointed to the general location,

but now archeological digs began that would soon provide the exact location.

Legislation to create the Fort Vancouver National Monument was signed by President Truman on June 19, 1948. The maximum land asked for was 125 acres, but Sen. Russell Mack agreed to lower this to 90 acres, hoping agreement would come more easily with fewer acres involved. The monument could not be declared until the land was actually transferred, but the army still claimed portions of the fort site essential to the monument. And the City of Vancouver owned Pearson Air Park. Six more years of haggling ensued until the Park Service had the most essential property: the fort site itself and the parade ground. It was agreed the company village would be transferred later. On June 30, 1954, the secretary of the interior, Douglas McKay, established the Fort Vancouver National Monument. McKay was a descendant of one of the workers at the original fort, so he was very proud to be a part of the preservation effort.

Still the argument continued about just how much land was needed to adequately tell the story of the “cradle of Northwest civilization.” Should officer’s row be included? What about the parade ground? Certainly, to tell the whole story, the employee village area outside the stockade walls was needed. At first the Park Service resisted reconstruction because nothing was left of the original fort. They felt it would be almost impossible to make it accurate. A comprehensive boundary study in 1954–55 led to legislation, introduced by Rep. Russell V. Mack in 1958, which increased the maximum size of the monument to 220 acres. It could now include all of the important interpretive areas, including the historic waterfront. During this time pressure from the community prompted the Park Service to build, at least, a museum and visitor center, which are still used today.

Russell Mack’s death in 1960 almost killed the bill,

but fortunately his replacement, Julia Butler Hansen, was just as enthusiastic about Fort Vancouver as he had been, and she quickly went to work on the legislation. Hansen had grown up in Cathlamet, Washington, which was founded by the HBC's James Birnie. As a child Hansen knew some of the Birnie children, as well as other people who had worked at Fort Vancouver. She won the support of new Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, re-drafted Mack's bill, and presented it to Congress on January 25, 1961. It was the first bill of her career. Senator Henry Jackson introduced an identical bill in the Senate. Both the House and Senate approved the Fort Vancouver legislation and the bill (75 Stat. 196) was sent to President Kennedy, who signed it on June 30, 1961. In addition to the increased acreage, the designation of Fort Vancouver had changed from Fort Vancouver National Monument to Fort Vancouver National Historic Site.

"The significance of the change of status also heightened the growing importance of Fort Vancouver to the local community. Though a 'monument' was not much different than an 'historic site' according to Park Service terms and policies, in the public's eye the latter was far more descriptive. In the 1940s and 1950s, Fort Vancouver was considered primarily an archaeological site, and thus to be commemorated as a monument to its past use as a fur trade post. The Historic Sites Act of 1935, however, encouraged the Park Service to interpret and develop entire cultural areas, which included not just historic buildings and objects of national significance, but also representative historic periods and cultural events. By re-designating Fort Vancouver a national historic site, it seemed to become more significant than a static landmark; its new status would make people in the community take notice and perhaps persuade Congress to fund the fort reconstruction and encourage future planning of the

larger site. The act revised the Fort Vancouver boundaries, re-designated its status to national historic site, and increased the acreage limitation by 130 acres to a total of 220. The act also allowed the secretary of the Interior to 'acquire in such a manner as he may consider to be in the public interest the non-Federal lands and interests in lands within the revised boundaries.' With several reasons to celebrate, Fort Vancouver hosted a dedication of the new legislation and the recently completed museum and Visitor Center on March 18, 1962."⁹

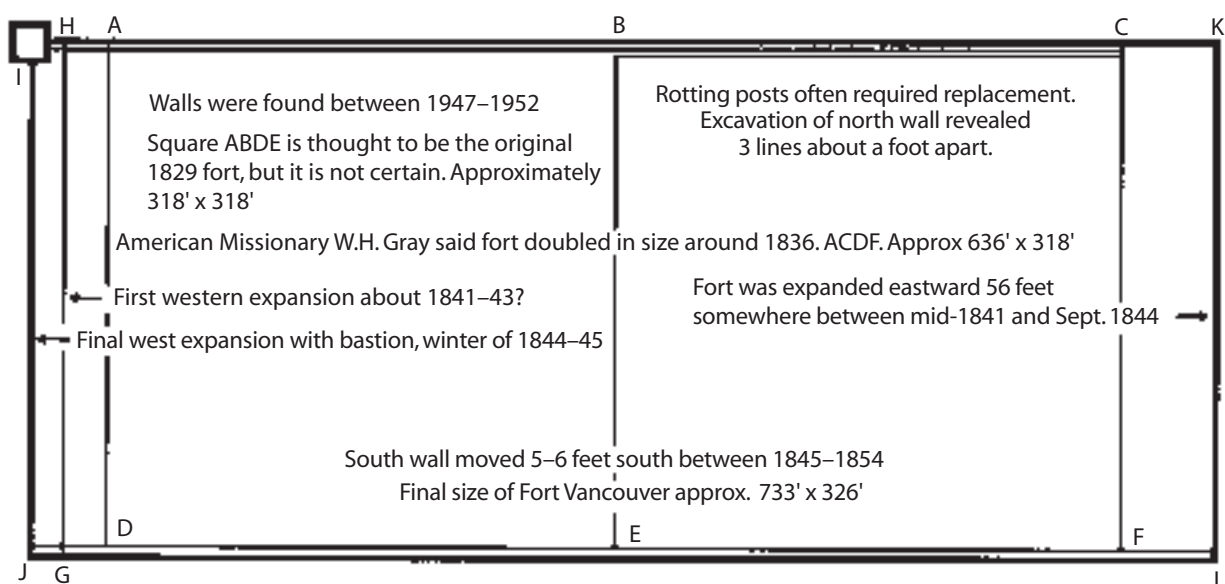
CAYWOOD, HUSSEY, AND HANSEN

While the political battles were being fought, the National Park Service in 1947 began the archeological work to find the remains of the fort. There were three major players in this phase: Louis R. Caywood, John A. Hussey, and David Hansen. Guided by Bonnevill's 1854 map, Louis R. Caywood went to work with a backhoe. He discovered all four corners of the stockade. The exact lengths of the walls were:

North Wall	731 feet	South Wall	733 feet
West Wall	326 feet	East Wall	323 feet

As work continued, several more stockade walls were found within the main rectangle, indicating that the stockade had been expanded several times. Journal entries by various Americans estimating different sizes of the fort allowed archaeologists to approximate the dates when each expansion occurred. The sketch on page 69 is based on the final report of Louis R. Caywood. All the walls on the sketch were found during excavations in 1947, 1948, 1950, and 1952. In addition to the walls of the stockade, the foundations of most of the buildings were found. Also uncovered

⁹Merritt, 33.



Author's diagram, inspired by Hussey, showing the various expansions of the fort, as discovered by archeologists.

were many foundational elements of the World War I spruce mill. With such compelling evidence, the case for rebuilding the fort became much stronger. The footprints of the buildings were laid out and treated with a commercial plant killer to mark them.

As evidence of structures accumulated it soon became evident that to truly understand their significance, a thorough historical study was needed. National Park historian John A. Hussey took on this project. Since no complete structure existed, it was necessary to pore through voluminous records, journals, maps, deeds, and diaries to build a picture. Fortunately, the Hudson's Bay Company demanded good record keeping, both then and now. The governor and committee of the Hudson's Bay Company were very helpful to Hussey in preparing his study. Another important resource was the report of the American and British Joint Commission, which thoroughly documented the holdings of the HBC at the time of the American takeover. Drawings, sketches, photos, and maps were made of Fort Vancouver by both Americans and British in these pivotal years. Many named the buildings they pictured, so the remains that Caywood found could be identified. Existing buildings at other forts helped greatly to determine the post-on-

sill type of construction used. Also, most trenches contained artifacts, which indicated the uses of the various buildings. Hussey's *Preliminary Survey of the History and Physical Structure of Fort Vancouver* was issued in 1949 as a mimeographed report. In 1957 a hardcover book was published which included the results of further research.¹⁰

By 1962 the view from the visitor's center included the replanted orchard and a group of asphalt pads to indicate the buildings of the fort. Public visitation greatly increased, and both the community and Park Service staff felt that the interpretive program would benefit from more structures. Finally, in 1966 reconstruction began with the rebuilding of the north stockade wall. It was hoped that the bastion could also be built at that time, but an aviation height restriction from Pearson Airfield prevented that until 1972, when NPS bought the airport property from the city. By January 1974 the bastion and the rest of the stockade had been completed. This completed phase one of the reconstruction. This view is actually from the

¹⁰I was lucky enough to find a copy on the internet for a mere seventy-five dollars. It is my main resource for this portion of article. In 1974 another updated study was released. This is online at <<http://www.nps.gov/fova/hsr/hsr.htm>>.



(above) Though not the best solution for interpretation of the fort site, the aviation easement restriction in the late 1950s only allowed marking the building sites with concrete pads and flat markers (Frank Hjort, National Park Service). Courtesy Fort Vancouver, NHS. Used by permission.



(left) After NPS purchased part of Pearson Air Park in 1972, the aviation easement was lifted allowing further construction. This much was completed by January 1974. Courtesy Fort Vancouver, NHS. Used by permission.

south, showing the asphalt pads and the relationship of the fort to Vancouver Barracks.

During 1974 Congresswoman Hansen found money to complete the archaeological work and begin construction of interior buildings. The first to be completed was the bakehouse, half in and half out of the stockade. At this time David Hansen, a historical furnishings specialist from Harper's Ferry and Julia Butler Hansen's son, joined the Fort Vancouver staff as curator. He would play a critical role in the building of the chief factor's house, kitchen, and washhouse. Hansen had attended Principia College in Illinois, and received his M.A. in history from the University of Washington. Using Hudson's Bay Company records and inventories, Hansen produced a brilliant Histor-

ical Furnishings Plan, a critical tool for interpretation. In the next few years, with a sharp eye for period, he roamed the country's antique shops and purchased the necessary items to furnish the chief factor's house and the kitchen.

By 1981 the blacksmith's shop, the first building of phase three, had been completed, and in 1982 Mike Darrig was hired to create an interpretive program for the shop. He set up an apprenticeship program for newcomers to the trade, and welcomed people with experience. This was the first living history exhibit. As other structures were built, authentic reproduction hardware for those buildings was made in the shop.

The Indian trade store was also completed in 1981 and a portion of it was, and still is, used as offices. The



Aerial photo of today's Fort Vancouver. By Tom Laidlaw.

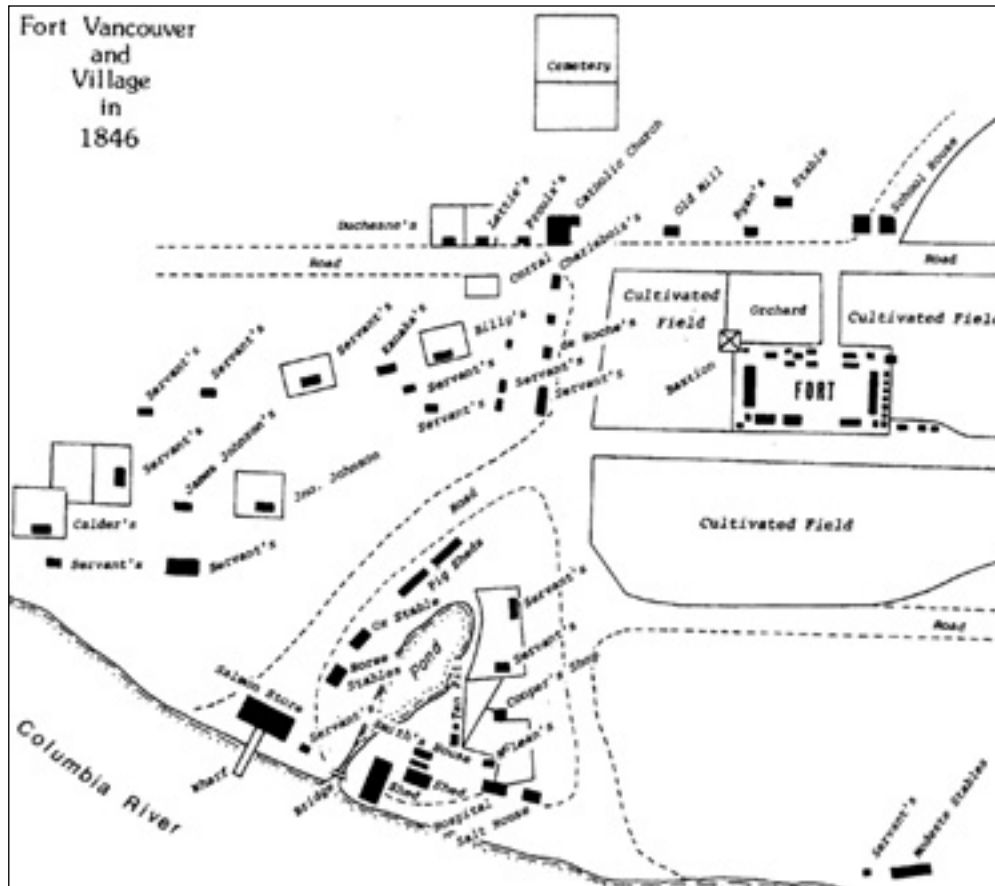
front of the building is furnished as the trade store, infirmary, and doctor's quarters. Portions of the chief factor's house and kitchen are also used for modern purposes. Money was getting extremely tight in the 1980s and it was not until 1993 that the fur store was completed. The fur store uses only about one-fourth of its space for interpretation of the historical fort. The rest is used for offices and the storage and curation of artifacts. To date about 1.6 million artifacts have been recovered, and more are discovered every year.

Since 1995 three more buildings have been completed: the carpenter shop (1997), jail (2001), and new office or counting house (2003). These were built largely with private donations and trees donated from national forests. Future plans call for nine additional buildings, including the European sale shop and another warehouse. These will be adaptive use buildings, with most of the space adapted to modern

usages such as a research library and archaeological laboratory.

THE VILLAGE

While the stockade and its buildings were the heart of Fort Vancouver, the bone and muscle existed outside the stockade in a worker's community that extended all the way to the river. The 1846 sketch on page 78, by schoolteacher Richard Covington, shows the layout. Until recently little attention was given to this company village, but plans are now being made to interpret this more fully. The village contained something like fifty houses, barns and shops. The road from the village to the fort is already in place, as well as a huge log arch. Several interpretive panels dot the landscape, with corners of various buildings marked. At least two complete buildings will be built, with others "ghosted." There will be many opportunities for living history.



From an 1846 sketch by Richard Covington.

THE WATERFRONT

The fort today, even including the village area, includes only about half of what once existed. The modern highway and railroad berm prevent us from seeing the vital connection to the Columbia River. The river area was the main entrance to the fort and included the salmon house, boat dock, and a stockaded hospital. Current plans now include building a land bridge over the highway and under the railroad to the waterfront. The walkway will be laid with vegetation that would have existed at the time. It will also contain a sculpture by Maya Lin as part of the Confluences Project. Scheduled completion of this phase is at the end of 2006.

HISTORIC RESERVE

In some ways this entire historic area is still disputed

territory. Just as in 1818, the opponents have now agreed to joint occupancy in the form of the Vancouver National Historic Reserve, established by Congress in 1996. Under this umbrella the National Park Service, U.S. Army, State of Washington, and City of Vancouver pledged to work cooperatively to showcase all of the historic properties in the area of the original Hudson's Bay Company headquarters. These properties include Fort Vancouver (NPS), Vancouver Barracks (Army), Officer's Row, the east half of Pearson Field, and Marine Park. The last three are owned by the City of Vancouver. As the biggest property owner, with 209 acres, the National Park Service will take the lead in interpretation. Each of the partners will still operate and manage its own land within broad guidelines of the reserve. A cooperative management plan outlines the various agreements and compromises.

The story of westward migration, and the role of

Fort Vancouver in that tale, includes innumerable turning points and moments of decision. I am forever amazed that the Oregon Territory was conquered not by military might, but by an army of ordinary people responding to extraordinary times and conditions. Let us end this article as I like to end my talks, with the thought that the “Oregon Question” was finally settled . . . by the settlers.

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Many people at Fort Vancouver helped me with this article. I would particularly like to thank Superintendent Tracy Fortmann, Curator David Hansen, Chief Ranger Greg Shine, Head Archaeologist Doug Wilson, and Chief of Interpretation Becky Railey. Especially helpful were Museum Technician Doug Magedanz, who helped me sort and select pictures, and Tessa Langford, who scanned them to disk for me. A bit of irony attaches to Doug Magedanz; many years ago he worked on research for the Cave Spring Santa Fe Trail site near Independence, Missouri.

Photos are courtesy Fort Vancouver NHS except where noted. Thompson map drawn by Jack McMaster for *Sources of the River: Tracking David Thompson across Western North America* by Jack Nisbet, Sasquatch Books, Seattle, Washington.

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