



# Reference Series #62

## Fur Trade Posts In Idaho

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**D**uring the profitable years of the Idaho fur trade, trapping expeditions or parties searched the country for beaver. But right at the beginning of the fur trade, and toward the end as well, some trading companies maintained forts or posts as bases for their operations. The early ones lasted only for a short time, but the later ones remained in business long after the fur trade ceased to be profitable.

Kullyspell (Kalispell) House, built by David Thompson and Finnan MacDonald on Lake Pend d'Oreille in the fall of 1809, proved to be the earliest post in the part of the Pacific Northwest that became part of the United States in 1846. This North West Company establishment gave the Montreal fur traders a base among the Kalispell or Pend d'Oreille Indians (two names for the same Salish bands) when Thompson extended the Canadian trade south from the upper Columbia, which he had reached two years earlier. Spokane House, built in 1810 west of the present city of Spokane, soon replaced this post. "Learning from Bercier & Methode that the [Pend d'Oreille] Lake Indians do not hunt, but only gamble & keep the men starving," Thompson decided, November 14, 1811, to have them remove their furs and operations from the original establishment on Lake Pend d'Oreille to Spokane House. A small outpost on Kootenai River a few miles northwest of present Bonners Ferry was also maintained for a time between 1810 and 1812 by Michel Kinville of the North West Company, but little information is available on this enterprise.

Henry's Post, on Henry's Fork of the Snake River a few miles southwest of St. Anthony, is the earliest American fur trade establishment west of the Continental Divide. Andrew Henry took a party of trappers for his Missouri Fur Company up the Missouri, where he got into trouble with the Blackfeet around Three Forks in the summer of 1810. So he sought safety by going south across the Continental Divide. Descending Henry's Fork almost to the Teton River, he built a few cabins for a winter shelter on the east side of that stream. After a hard winter, he and his men split up into three bands: he took one group back north to the upper Missouri; a second band headed southward toward New Mexico; John Hoback and some others went east, where



they encountered W. P. Hunt's expedition of Astorians. Guided by Hoback and his men, Hunt's expedition reached Henry's Post the fall that it had been abandoned. After Hunt and his Astorians came on down Snake River on their westward journey, Henry's Post offered no further service in the fur trade.

MacKenzie's Post, like Andrew Henry's, served as a winter shelter. One of the Astorian partners, Donald MacKenzie left Astoria, June 29, 1812, to establish a post on the lower Clearwater in the Nez Perce country. He returned to Astoria, January 13, with news from Montreal that the War of 1812 had broken out, and after he made another trip to his Clearwater post (March 31-June 12) to bring out the season's fur catch, the Pacific Fur Company (which operated Astoria and a number of interior posts, including MacKenzie's) was dissolved as a failure. So MacKenzie's post was abandoned.

Reid's Post, another winter shelter, had substantially less success than Andrew Henry's or Donald MacKenzie's. Located on Boise River where it enters the Snake, this outpost was intended to be temporary. After dissolution of the Pacific Fur Company, John Reid took a party of men to the Boise region to trap during the winter of 1813-1814 and to let the Astorians then in the Snake country know that their company was pulling out. Not long after this winter post was built, a Bannock band led by The Horse (at least in later years) wiped out Reid's party there. The only survivors, Madame Pierre Dorion (an Iowa Indian) and her children, had to make a tough winter trip over the Blue Mountains to the Columbia, where they brought news of John Reid's misadventure and the ruin of his winter post early in January, 1814.

Fort Hall, established in the later years of the fur trade, soon turned into an emigrant's supply station. Built in the summer of 1834 by a Boston fur trader, Nathaniel J. Wyeth, the post was intended originally to serve as an outlet for supplies brought out for the trappers' rendezvous on Ham's Fork, farther east. Wyeth wished to develop his enterprise cooperatively with the Hudson's Bay Company, and when this did not work out, he sold Fort Hall to that company. Under British management after June 16, 1838, the mountain men who continued to trap in the region, until fur prices sank too low, and local Indians also, could be persuaded to bring in fur to Fort Hall. When emigrants on the Oregon and California trails began to come by after 1840, large numbers of them depended upon Fort Hall for essential supplies. They also traded worn out cattle for new ones from the herds there. Hudspeth's Cutoff, a California gold rush route



running through the hills to the south, diverted a large share of the Forty-niners away from Fort Hall, but thousands of wagons came by in 1849 regardless of that loss. Then the importance of Fort Hall, as an emigrant center declined, and after Indian disturbances farther west interfered with access to the upper Snake country, the post was abandoned in 1856.

Fort Boise, erected originally by Thomas McKay in the fall of 1834 to meet the challenge offered by Fort Hall farther up Snake River, stood on the east bank of the Snake where the Boise flowed in. Originally McKay's private venture (with a guarantee, October 14, 1834, that the Hudson's Bay would cover any losses), the new fort definitely became a company post by 1836. Managed from 1835-1844 by Francois Payette, Fort Boise was staffed mostly by Owyhee (Hawaiian) employees the greater part of the time. When James Craigie took over after Payette retired, the post continued to maintain its reputation for unusual hospitality to travelers who came by along the Oregon Trail. As was the case of Fort Hall, the fur trade declined within a few years: Fort Boise became more important as a salmon fishery than as a fur center. Built, like Fort Hall, of adobe, Fort Boise did not withstand the great flood of 1853 very well. Only partially rebuilt after the flood, the post could not be kept up following military retaliation after the Ward Massacre of 1854: Indian hostility forced the Hudson's Bay Company to withdraw the fort the next year, and when the United States Army followed up with a military Fort Boise after the gold rush to Boise Basin, the new post was put up the river where the city of Boise was built.