Fort Dalles Museum

Fort Dalles Museum sits on a bluff in a residential neighborhood in The Dalles, overlooking the Columbia River, the hills in Washington State, and, on a clear day, distant Mt. Adams. The weathered 1856 Gothic Revival building gives little hint that it was once an officer's home at the Northwest's busiest U.S. Army post. Founded in 1850, Fort Dalles in 1856 became headquarters for the U.S. 9th Infantry Regiment and the main military depot for supplies shipped upriver by steamboat.

The military value of Fort Dalles dwindled after the Yakima Indian War ended in 1858. It remained active through late 1867, after which it was supervised by a caretaker until the property became part of the city in the mid-1880s. Fires had already destroyed the three larger officers' residences; remaining structures, left to squatters and the elements, fell apart, were moved, or were incorporated into new buildings.

But Oregon Trail pioneers, remembering their journey west, were looking for ways to preserve emigrant history, and a handful of women focused on the fort's derelict Surgeon's Quarters. They recalled dashing officers and their cultured wives; hard-drinking, free-spending soldiers; and army wagons headed east toward Fort Walla Walla. They decided to save the little house.

An act of Congress secured the building for the Oregon Historical Society (OHS) in 1904, and OHS authorized the Old Fort Dalles Historical Society to turn it into a museum. George Himes, long-time curator at OHS, guided the group in its early preservation efforts. Dedicated volunteers fixed up the building, filled it with pioneer artifacts and memorabilia, and, in 1905, opened what is now Oregon's oldest museum. OHS oversight continued until early 2002 when the museum became the property of Wasco County. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Fort Dalles Museum has been managed by a city/county commission since 1953.

The museum was enlarged in the 1970s by the donation of the hand-hewn log buildings of the Lewis Anderson Homestead, originally part of a Swedish emigrant community located south of The Dalles. The Anderson House is a National Landmark.

Written by Paula Kuttner

Further Reading:

Fort Dalles Museum and the Anderson Homestead. http://www.historicthedalles.org/fort_dalles/home.htm

Knuth, Priscilla. *"Picturesque" Frontier: The Army's Fort Dalles.* Portlandm Ore.: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1967.

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