

Wallace House (trading post)

By David Lewis (Takelma, Chinook, Molalla, Santiam Kalapuya)

Wallace House, built in 1812 north of the Kalapuya village of Chemeketa, was the first known building of European-American design in the Willamette Valley. As the first fur trading post in the valley, it provided part of the United States claim to the Oregon Country. Based largely on the journal of Alfred Seton, a clerk with the Pacific Fur Company, and a map drawn by expeditionist Nathaniel Wyatt, historians believe the House was most likely located in what is now the City of Keizer, just north of Salem along the east bank of the Willamette River. Living near Wallace House were the Chemeketa Kalapuyans, whose village was where Salem is today. The Chemeketans were a band of the Santiam Tribe whose territory extended to present-day Lebanon.

In 1811, John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company established Fort Astoria near the mouth of the Columbia River, in Clatsop tribal territory. The location gave the company connections with local Chinookan people and ready access to ocean-going trading vessels, but it did not allow for much agriculture, and hunting was limited. By the winter of 1812, the men at the fort were running out of food and were loathe to rely on what the local residents ate, including salmon. There was plentiful game in the mid-Willamette Valley, however, and they decided to send some men to live there over the winter and charged them with keeping Fort Astoria provisioned with meat.

Wallace House was named for clerk William Wallace, who with clerk John Halsey split off from a trapping and hunting expedition led by Astor partner Donald McKenzie in the spring of 1812 to establish an outpost on the Willamette River near Kalapuyan Tribes. The fur men traded with local Natives, explored farther into the interior, and hunted elk and deer to be sent to Fort Astoria. During 1812 and 1813, they returned numerous times to Fort Astoria to deliver provisions, including furs they had trapped and traded for with the Kalapuyans. It is likely that the Kalapuyans were eager to participate in the trade at Wallace House, where they gained valued products such as glass beads, metal tools, and fabrics. Because of the value beaver pelts fetched at the trading post, local people increasingly hunted beaver and other small fur-bearing animals.

Wallace House was mostly abandoned by 1813, when the Pacific Fur Company was sold to the Montreal North West Company. The sale was precipitated by news of the War of 1812 and the threatened arrival of a British warship at Fort Astoria. The Pacific Fur Company had been losing money each year, and the partners sought to get what value they could out of the effort before the British arrived to seize the fort. When the warship arrived, the fort was already flying British colors, raised by the Canadian trappers, and was renamed Fort George. There is no record of Wallace House being used after that time, and the structure gradually rotted away.

The 1851 Gibbs-Starling map denotes Wallace Prairie in present-day south Keizer, suggesting that it was a commonly used name for the prairie north of Salem. The City of Keizer commemorates the trading post with Wallace House Park on what is assumed to be its location on present-day Rivercrest Drive North.

Sources

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