

Frenchtown Historical Foundation Research Guide

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Introduction

What is the Frenchtown Historical Foundation Research Guide?

Like an interpretive plan, a research guide defines principles for research and interpretive development for an area of historical interest. It is most commonly developed for internal use by an organization that interacts with visitors, such as a national park.

The need for such reflection is clear. History is not merely the record of past events. It is also the narrative of those events. Perspectives on many issues—race, gender, the environment—have changed since the early 20th century. These changes in how we have told our history are also part of that history, as much as the events themselves. They furthermore serve to caution us about the ways that interpreting the past can perpetuate as well as document injustice or silence.

Improving the quality and accessibility of education about local and regional history is the primary goal of the Frenchtown Historical Foundation Research Guide. Our understanding of our past defines our present experience, and shapes our future relationships. Historical signage educates children, residents and visitors to the valley. Historical interpretation can also connect local topics with larger themes, events, and scholars beyond our valley.

Geographically, this Research Guide focuses on the Walla Walla valley in southeastern Washington state. Temporally, it focuses on the 19th century.

Although developed by the Frenchtown Historical Foundation, this guide seeks to provide a structure that will be of use to historical stakeholders across the entire valley, with the goal of reducing redundancy and increasing accuracy and coordination in historical interpretation.

The guide is provided as a resource and a service. It is not a binding contract, but rather a point of departure for collaboration and further research by both individuals and organizations.

Interpreting Frenchtown: Overview

The layered history of the Frenchtown area in the 19th century corresponds to the layers of history of the Walla Walla Valley as a whole. These layers are not only chronological but also ethnic, linguistic, religious, national, social, economic, technological, and interpretive. Each represents a different, sometimes conflicting, perspective on the history and significance of the region. A layered approach allows for research on specific topics while preserving the overall complexity of Frenchtown history.

Here are some of the stories that intersect with the history of Frenchtown: the ten thousand years of indigenous occupation of the Columbia Plateau, the Lewis and Clark trail, the role of the fur trade, the Whitman Mission, the Oregon Trail, the Battle of 1855 and the 1855 Treaty, the inland gold rush, the sovereign change from territories to states, the allotment of reservation lands, and the agricultural development of Eastern Washington.

Interpreting Frenchtown: Summary of Themes

Theme A: Place

Existing indigenous trade routes determined the locations of fur-trade posts such as Fort Walla Walla. French-Canadian employees of the fur-trade companies settled near the posts with their indigenous wives, creating communities which subsequently served as stops on the Oregon Trail. These early Frenchtowns depended personally and economically on a regional network of resources based on their location and family connections.

Theme B: Practices

Successive land use practices in the Frenchtown area echo larger patterns of land occupation and exploitation enacted throughout the west.

Theme C: Peoples

Early western Frenchtowns were mobile, mixed race, and multilingual. These communities were increasingly isolated by the flood of Protestant settlers, who rejected both their Catholic faith and their intermarriage with Indigenous peoples. When the reservations were allotted at the end of the 19th century, many métis Frenchtown residents relocated, pressured to leave, drawn to the reservations by family ties, or both. Others stayed but were assimilated into white Anglo-Saxon culture.

Forms of Interpretation

Historical interpretation can take many forms. The Frenchtown Historic Site, and the board members of the Frenchtown Historical Foundation, have approached the educational mission of the Foundation from many different angles. These include but may not be limited to:

- Signage and brochures
- Electronic publication of resources and research
- Historical reenactment
- Community events
- Presentations to school and community groups

Best practices in historical signage.

Interpretation is necessarily selective. Selective is reductive. How can we avoid oversimplification when our presentation format (historical signage) limits us to as few as 300 words per topic?

- Although the space constraints of historical signage do not allow for footnotes, panels should always be paired with up-to-date online versions that include source citations.
- Avoid anachronisms, which mix up time periods and contexts. Images should be relevant to the text, and their sources cited in the online version.
- 25pt font at 1.3 line spacing provides comfortably legible text for a standing person.
- Consider point of view. Interpretation walks a fine line between fact and perspective. What pieces of evidence do we possess? What were some of the different perspectives on events at the time they took place? If there are perspectives in conflict around an event, how can we put those points of view in dialogue with each other in our interpretative materials?
- Be wary of morally charged language. For example, for many years violence by white settlers was always described as “courageous” or “regrettable,” whereas violence by Native Americans was described as “brutal” or “savage.”
- The history of our region has traditionally been based on written records, which in turn were largely composed by and for white men. Other voices—Native Americans, women, people who did not speak English—are only sparsely preserved in the historical record, and require additional effort to be heard. It is our responsibility to make that effort.