

Frenchtown Historical Foundation Research Guide

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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.

The Origins of Western Frenchtowns

Location, location, location. The map of Pacific Northwest Frenchtowns corresponds to the map of 19th-century fur-trade forts, whose locations in turn were based on Indigenous trade routes going back many thousands of years. International fur trade companies such as the Hudson's Bay Company, the North West Company, or the Pacific Fur Company hired both French Canadians *voyageurs* and Indigenous peoples as laborers, guides, trappers, and interpreters. The *voyageur* men paired with and sometimes married Indigenous women. The fur-trading companies depended upon trade with the tribes, and many fur trade marriages served to consolidate political and economical alliances. Expeditions were a family affair, in which

French-Canadian men would bring their Native wives along to perform domestic tasks and supervise slaves, as well as guide, trap, or hunt.

A fur trade employee signed on for a specific amount of time, similar to a soldier. Many *voyageur* employees decided to stay in the west with their new families when they finished their contracts. They settled near fur-trade posts, which in turn were often located near their wives' tribes.¹ The resulting Frenchtown communities linked tribal kinship webs to the encroaching European expansion. Any given household likely spoke several Indigenous languages as well as French, and perhaps English. In these small communities, the ethnic, cultural and religious mixing from migration and intermarriage affected every aspect of life.

A Continental Network

For much of the 19th-century, transportation technology was ruled by the natural features of the landscape. Horses, introduced by the Spanish in the 1730s, shaped the lives of the Nez Perce and Cayuse peoples, who owned great herds by the 1800s.² Immigrants and pioneers walked or rode horses or wagons. Gold rush miners came around the Horn in ships; goods and people continued to travel the rivers all through the 19th century. The first transcontinental railroad line was completed in 1869 and connected to San Francisco via Nebraska, Wyoming, and Nevada. The northern transcontinental route to Seattle was completed in 1883; the Walla Walla and Columbia River Railroad was completed in 1877.

By the time a French-canadian *voyageur*, or “traveller” in French, reached Walla Walla, he had already travelled at least three thousand miles on foot, horseback, and by canoe. Catholic Church records and census records tell us that the French Canadian *métis* families in the west continued to range widely across what is now the western United States, long after the end of the fur trade contracts, as economic need and opportunity kept the population moving. French Prairie settlers from the Willamette Valley in Oregon famously went on a cattle-buying expedition to Mexico Territory (California);³ others left their families behind in pursuit of gold in 1849. Population movements mapped to family and cultural ties as well, as relationships and kin networks from the fur trade era linked Frenchtown communities like French Prairie and Walla Walla through the end of the 19th century.⁴

Theme B: Practices

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

¹ Jean Barman, *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 157.

² Robert Boyd, ed., *Indians, Fire and the Land in the Pacific Northwest* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1999), 226.

³ Melinda Marie Jetté, *At the Hearth of the Crossed Races: A French-Indian Community in Nineteenth-Century Oregon, 1812-1859* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2015), 89.

⁴ Barman, *French Canadians*, 123.

Native American Land Use

The Columbia Plateau has been occupied for nearly ten thousand years, long before the arrival of immigrants and pioneers. Tribes like the Cayuse and Walla Walla were partially nomadic, settling in permanent villages for the winter but moving from camp to camp during the summer months. Some tribes, including the Kalapuya people in today's western Oregon, migrated seasonally to take advantage of the different resources available in different areas.⁵ Native land stewardship on the Plateau included controlled burning to clear land for food plants or else to hunt deer and elk using "fire drives."⁶ Although competition and conflict existed between tribes, they shared the belief that the land could be used but not owned.⁷

French-Canadian Land Use

French-Canadian land-use practices were markedly different from those of the tribes. They brought the "long lot" system (*le rang*) from Canada, (and France before that).⁸ In this system, each farmer claimed a long, thin strip of land abutting a river. This system maximized the number of farms with access to the river, keeping neighbors close and providing everyone with access to the waterway, which doubled as the principal road. Although the Homestead Act divided land ownership by square blocks, a satellite view of the Frenchtown area still shows traces of the long lot system in practice.

Claiming the Land: Settlers, Squatters, & Jumpers

The western Frenchtowns predated the establishment of the Oregon Territory in 1848 and the Homestead Act of 1861. French-Canadian men would have negotiated directly with the tribes to use the land, often with their Indigenous in-laws, or else sought permission from the HBC if setting up their farms near a post.⁹ In the Walla Walla Valley, the Cayuse and Walla Walla peoples allowed both the French-Canadian families and the Whitmans to settle next to their winter village. The flood of American settlers during the 1840s and 1850s strained established practices of shared land use, as new immigrants attempted to claim land without regard for previous occupation or agreements.¹⁰

The Donation Land Act of 1850 allowed male white and "half-breed" American citizens (or soon-to-be citizens) to claim up to 320 acres. A settler's wife could claim another 320 acres. Under the Act, nearly 7500 land claims were patented and 2.6 million acres claimed in Oregon

⁵ David Lewis, "Native American Agricultural Labor," *The Oregon Encyclopedia*, last modified April 7, 2016, https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/native_american_agricultural_labor_in_the_willamette_valley/#.WWaghzO-L-Y.

⁶ Boyd, *Indians, Fire, and the Land*, 2-3.

⁷ Champ Clark Vaughan, *A History of the United States General Land Office in Oregon* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, 2014), 27.

⁸ Jetté, *At the Hearth*, 52.

⁹ Jetté, *At the Hearth*, 42.

¹⁰ James R. Gibson, *Farming the Frontier: The Agricultural Opening of the Oregon Country, 1786-1846* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985), 185.

Territory. Provisions allowed French Canadian settlers to claim land they already occupied (often for twenty years or more) by collecting witness statements, but claim-jumping was common. Many pioneers squatted on indigenous land, or “jumped” the claims of *métis* families, proclaiming *métis* land forfeit along with Indian rights. By the time this practice was ruled illegal in 1854, nearly all mixed-race claims in Marion County Oregon had been jumped, some successfully.¹¹

The armed conflict that followed the death of the Whitmans should have ended with the Walla Walla Treaty Council in June of 1855, when representatives for the Nez Perce, Cayuse, Walla Walla, Yakama, and Palouse signed a treaty ceding 6.4 million acres of land to the United States government. However, Washington territorial governor Isaac Stevens and Oregon Territory peace commissioner Joel Palmer did not wait for ratification of the treaty by Congress (in 1859) or keep their promise of a peaceful transition. They announced the region open for settlement just two weeks later, and settler squatters descended upon the Walla Walla Valley in droves. In December of 1855, the vigilante Oregon Mounted Volunteers fought to evict or eliminate the Cayuse and Walla Walla peoples in a four-day battle up and down the Walla Walla River and across the present-day Frenchtown Historic Site. Cayuse leader Peo Peo Mox Mox was taken hostage at the outset and killed and mutilated while in captivity. In 1861, after settlers threatened to hang two young Cayuse men if the tribes did not leave the valley, United States soldiers forcibly evicted the remaining Indigenous people. Although the Homestead Act of 1862 also included a provision that allowed Frenchtown residents to formalize their land claims, their relatives and neighbors were all moved to Umatilla.

Allotting the Reservations

The establishment and allotment of reservation land was another form of the occupation and exploitation of Native lands in the West. Frequently, reservations were established on land “unlikely to appeal to settlers,” leaving the better land for agricultural development by white settlers.¹² In cases where reservation land later proved valuable (for example, with the discovery of gold or oil), settlers and county governments redrew boundary lines in their favor, as when a stream serving as the original upper boundary of the Umatilla agency was diverted by a settler in order to claim timber from reservation lands.¹³

Reservations were also part of assimilationist policies of the U.S. government. Government officials followed in the footsteps of Protestant missionaries, reiterating the goal of “civilizing” the Indians, claiming that it was their “obligation to [Indians] as fellow-men” to help the tribes to be “elevated in the scale of humanity.”¹⁴ Allotments were discussed as “the first vital and fundamental step towards the permanent civilization, Christianization, and true

¹¹ Barman, *French Canadians*, 237-38.

¹² Robert E. Ficken, “After The Treaties: Administering Pacific Northwest Indian Reservations,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 106, No. 3 (Fall, 2005), 450; Robert Bunting, “The Environment and Settler Society in Western Oregon,” *Pacific Historical Review* 6, no. 3 (1995): 425.

¹³ Ficken, “After The Treaties,” 452.

¹⁴ Secretary of the Interior Jacob Dolson Cox in 1869, quoted in Ficken, “After The Treaties,” 447.

elevation of the Indian.”¹⁵ By forcing Indians to replace traditional lifeways with the fence and the plow, it was thought that they would within a generation be “merged and swallowed up in the mighty and irresistible tide of Caucasian blood,” and that they would “earn their living as other folks,... or be exterminated.”¹⁶ Reservation schools, which forcibly removed Indian children from the “savage” influences of their homes in order to inculcate them with the “civilized habits” of white, Anglo-Saxon culture, were explicitly intended to accelerate this process.¹⁷

Within and beyond the reservations, the environmental impact of settler agricultural practices frequently changed or destroyed the ecosystems upon which the tribes depended for food. Native plant and animal populations declined and wildlife habitats were destroyed.¹⁸ The values and practices of white settlers, which emphasized private property and treated natural resources as inexhaustible, directly contradicted tribal spiritual practices and lifeways.

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 Frenchtown residents relocated, pressured to leave, drawn by family ties, or both. Others stayed but were assimilated into white Anglo-Saxon culture.

Missionary Culture Wars

The first missionaries to arrive in the Pacific Northwest were Methodist (Jason Lee in 1834) and Presbyterian (the Whitmans in 1836). By that time, the earliest Frenchtown settlers had been living in the Walla Walla Valley for a decade. However, the first Catholic missionaries didn't arrive in Oregon Territory until 1838, responding to written pleas from the French Prairie Catholics in the Willamette Valley. It would take even longer for Catholic priests to arrive in Frenchtown (A.M.A. Blanchet in 1847).

Catholic and Protestant missionaries competed in the west. Their antagonism was mutual and founded in prejudice and ideological conflict. Father Blanchet's letters document the anti-Catholic sentiments of the Whitmans: “[Marcus Whitman] showed much displeasure at my arrival to these reaches. He spoke of religion, repeated the normal accusations against Catholics, reproached them for the alleged persecutions that the Protestants had endured at their hands... [and said] that he was going to oppose me with all his power; that he didn't like Catholics; and for this reason, would come to our aid with food only if we were starving.” He

¹⁵ General Robert Milroy in 1871, quoted in Ficken, “After The Treaties,” 454.

¹⁶ “Indian Question Solved: Government is Taking Steps to Wipe Out Tribal Relations of Red Man,” *The Evening Statesman*, October 24, 1907.

¹⁷ Ficken, “After the Treaties,” 448.

¹⁸ Bunting, Robert, “The Environment and Settler Society in Western Oregon,” *Pacific Historical Review* 6, no. 3 (1995): 425.

further accused Whitman of attempting to turn Indians and incoming settlers against the Catholic missionaries;¹⁹ the Protestant press in turn accused Catholic priests of inciting the Cayuse to kill the Whitmans.

Both Catholic and Protestant missionaries shared the goal of converting Indigenous peoples, but with distinctly different approaches. Protestant missionaries sought complete cultural assimilation before conversion. In order to be eligible for baptism, Indians were expected to learn English and adopt every aspect of American culture, from clothing to land use to gender relations. Protestant conversion was nearly synonymous with Americanization, as missionaries attempted to transform Indians into blank slates upon which to etch their beliefs.

Catholic missionaries also viewed conversion as the only way to bring “redemption and civilization”²⁰ to the “poor children of nature,”²¹ but their approach was more adaptive. While they openly disapproved of Native practices like polygamy, Catholic missionaries did not require converts to first reject every aspect of their original culture. Instead, they studied Indian languages and incorporated Indian rhetoric and tribal practices into their sermons and liturgies. In part because of this attitude, Catholic missionaries were somewhat more successful in their spiritual imperialism than their Protestant neighbors; the resulting cultural mixing can be seen clearly in Frenchtown, and on the altar at St. Andrew’s to this day.

The missionaries’ ability to serve their communities was affected by the rigidity of their conversion practices. Catholic missionaries held a conciliatory attitude towards *mariage a la façon du pays* (“country” marriages between French-Canadians and Indians, done in the absence of church authority) and did not require conversion prior to solemnizing these unions. Protestant missionaries on the other hand both rejected the practice of intermarriage and attacked the custom of *mariage a la façon du pays*, usually requiring conversion before marriage.²²

The Catholic Ladder

Blanchet first developed the Catholic Ladder in the spring of 1839 as a three-dimensional teaching tool for Christian evangelization. The prototype was the “Sahale stick” (“stick from heaven” in Chinook Jargon), a free-standing stick with a system of marks for each significant point of Christian history, including Blanchet’s arrival in the west. Protestantism was represented as a withered branch.

The two-dimensional image at the right was developed during a mission to French Prairie in the Willamette Valley in the summer of 1839. Blanchet initially called it a history ladder,

¹⁹ A.M.A. Blanchet to Francois Norbert Blanchet, Archbishop of Oregon City, 12 December 1847, in *Selected Letters of Blanchet*, ed. Brown and Killen, 17-8.

²⁰ A.M.A. Blanchet to James Buchanan, Secretary of State, 31 March 1848 in *Selected Letters of A.M.A. Blanchet: Bishop of Walla Walla and Nesqually (1846-1879)*, ed. Roberta Stringham Brown and Patricia O’Connell Killen (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).

²¹ A.M.A. Blanchet to Members of the Councils of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, Lyons and Paris, March 1848, in *Selected Letters of A.M.A. Blanchet*, ed. Brown and Killen, 33.

²² Sylvia Van Kirk, “*Many Tender Ties:*” *Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer Publishing Ltd., 1980), 154 and 157.

“l'échelle historique,” which then evolved to the “Catholic Ladder.” Blanchet’s work among the Native wives and *métis* children of the French-Canadian settlers in the valley relied heavily on this new ladder since most of the women and children were not fluent in French. The 1840 version contains words in French explaining the meaning of the symbols, which is absent in some later editions.

Soon, handmade copies of Father Blanchet’s Catholic Ladder were in circulation among Indian and French-Indian communities across the Northwest. It was popular with the Native wives of former French -Canadian fur trappers, and with Indians interested in understanding the traditions of their French-Canadian trading partners and kin. The Catholic Ladder was used in conjunction with formal Catholic catechism to evangelize the region’s Native peoples until 1881, when Oregon Catholic officials discontinued its use in favor of the formal catechism. (*See Melinda Jette.*)

The Protestant Ladder

The rivalry between Catholic and Protestant missionaries is evident in the illustrations of the “Protestant Ladder,” a teaching poster developed by Henry and Eliza Spalding in 1845 in part to counter the success of the Catholic ladder as a teaching tool. The Catholic path to hell is illustrated on the left, and the Protestant path to salvation on the right. Spalding’s Protestant ladder, despite its more elaborate visuals, was only in use for a short time.

Washani: Dreamer-Prophets of the Columbia Plateau

The Protestant and Catholic missionaries were not operating in a religious vacuum. The Dreamer religion, continuing a long tradition of prophet-leaders on the Columbia Plateau, emerged in force in the latter part of the 19th century, with a small hunchback man named Smohalla as its principal leader.

Smohalla’s mission was “to preach a rejection of white culture and a return to Indian social, economic, political, and religious traditions.”²³ His spiritual authority was based on two revelation experiences, in which he travelled to the spirit world and returned to life to teach the people. From the second of these experiences he brought back over 120 new songs and new rituals based on seven (drums, singers, days), from whence the other name for the Dreamers, the “Seven Drum Religion.”

The Dreamer religion was a cult of gratitude to the Creator organized around traditional food-ways. Although it was adamantly anti-white culture, it was non-violent in its practice and teachings. Curiously, it incorporated ritual elements also used in Christian teachings, and in this resembled the blended approach evident in some Catholic missions, despite its opposition to the French priests.

Washini beliefs can help us to understand the underlying translation problem of the 1855 Treaty. White leaders were negotiating property ownership of inanimate dirt. Tribal leaders were

²³ Clifford E. Trafzer and Margery Ann Beach, “Smohalla, the Washani, and Religion as a Factor in Northwestern Indian History,” *American Indian Quarterly* 9, no.3 (Summer 1985), 311.

attempting to communicate the sentience and agency of the land, and their uncertainty about man's authority to dispose of it.

Unlike the missionaries, the American government was not initially concerned about the conversion of Native Americans to Christianity. However, the power of the Dreamer religion to organize resistance to assimilation drew its attention, and motivated official backing of the Christianization of the tribes. "Pagan" ceremonies were officially outlawed in 1884; in 1892, open practice of Indian religion was cause for imprisonment.

Smohalla preached against white agricultural practices, comparing it to a physical violation of the mother. Land ownership and cultivation, central tools in the assimilation agenda of the government, were antithetical to Dreamer beliefs, and many refused to go to the reservations or participate in treaty negotiations. According to Smohalla, "Those who cut up the lands or sign papers for lands will be defrauded of their rights and will be punished by God's anger." At one point in the early 1870's, some 2,000 non-treaty Indians from multiple tribes lived off-reservation at Smohalla's village at Priest Rapids. Odeneal, Indian agent for the Umatilla reservation in 1872, wrote to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to say that "Their model of a man is an Indian; they aspire to be Indians and nothing else." From the white point of view at the time, there was no greater criticism.²⁴

Community Exodus

After the passage of the Dawes Act in 1887, many Frenchtown families left the area to claim allotments on the Umatilla Reservation, thus contributing to the erosion of the Frenchtown community. The Dawes Act carved the reservations into private properties that could then be allotted or claimed by Native or mixed-race individuals. Many Frenchtown wives and children were eligible, and saw the reservation as a way to both get land and escape rising religious and racial prejudice in the valley. The resulting exodus of Frenchtown residents for a time transplanted portions of the Frenchtown community to Umatilla, where they were joined by Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla *métis* families from other parts of the region. Meanwhile, *métis* families who stayed in Frenchtown would have been increasingly subject to the expanding and homogenizing influence of white Anglo-Saxon culture, as Walla Walla grew and Frenchtown disappeared.

²⁴ Cassandra Tate, "Smohalla (1815?-1895)," HistoryLink, <http://www.historylink.org/File/9481>, accessed September 11, 2018.