

Whitman Mission

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE • WASHINGTON

Waiilatpu, "the Place of the People of the Rye Grass," is the site of a mission founded among the Cayuse Indians in 1836 by Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. As emigrants moved into the Pacific Northwest in increasing numbers in the 1840s, the mission also became an important station on the Oregon Trail. Inevitably, deep cultural conflicts marked the missionary effort, culminating in Indian violence that ended the mission 11 years after the coming of the Whitmans.

The story of Waiilatpu mission is one of devotion and courage. In the face of obstacles set for them by the wilderness and a proud, uncivilized people, the Whitmans brought Christianity to the Indians, taught them the beginnings of agriculture and letters, and made Waiilatpu a haven for overland travelers. In an age careless of the rights of the aborigines, the Whitmans were among the noblest of the western pioneers.

CALL FROM THE WEST

Stirred by accounts of explorers and traders, missionaries turned their gaze toward the Oregon country in the early 19th century. Twice in the 1820s the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions considered Oregon as a possible missionary field, but the remoteness of the country discouraged them. The actual beginnings of mission work in Oregon resulted from the journey of some Northwest Indians out of curiosity.

In 1833 an article in the Christian Advocate and Journal, a New York Methodist publication, described the visit of Indians with flattened heads to St. Louis seeking teachers and the white man's "Book of Heaven"—the Bible. Though it was for the most part fancy, the story roused the churches to the plight of the heathen in the Northwest.

Among those to respond to this seemingly clear call was the American Board, a society supported by several Protestant churches. In 1835 the Board sent Rev. Samuel Parker and Dr. Marcus Whitman to the Oregon country to select mission sites.

At the fur traders' Green River rendezvous that year the two men talked to some Flathead and Nez Perce Indians and were convinced that the field was promising. To save time, Parker continued on to explore Oregon for sites, and Whitman returned east to recruit workers. Arrangements were made to have Rev. Henry Spalding and his wife, Eliza, William Gray, and Narcissa Prentiss, whom Whitman married on February 18, 1836, assist with the work.

The outward journey of the 1836 caravan was a notable one in the story of the Oregon Trail: Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spalding were the

first American women to cross the continent overland, and the missionaries' wagon, reduced to a cart, was the first vehicle to travel as far west as Fort Boise. The trek was to inspire many families to follow.

Escorted by traders of the American Fur Company and the Hudson's Bay Company, the missionaries reached the Columbia River on September 1, 1836. After a brief visit at Fort Vancouver, the Hudson's Bay Company's Columbia Department headquarters, the men returned up the Columbia to establish their missions. The women remained at the fort as guests of Chief Factor John McLoughlin.

Already other mission societies were active in Oregon at this time. In 1834 Methodists under Jason Lee began missionary work in the Willamette Valley. Fathers Blanchet and Demers from Canada established Catholic missions along the lower Columbia in 1838. And farther east in the Rocky Mountains, Jesuits under Father DeSmet founded several missions.

WAIILATPU

Whitman established his mission among the Cayuse at Waiilatpu, and Spalding began his work at Lapwai among the Nez Perce, 110 miles farther east, near Lewiston, Idaho.

A first task in starting educational work was to learn the Indians' languages. The missionaries soon devised an alphabet and began to print books in Nez Perce and Spokane on a press brought to Lapwai in 1839. These books were the first published in the Pacific Northwest.

For part of each year the Indians went away to the buffalo country, the camas meadows, and the salmon fisheries. Whitman soon realized that the mission could not fulfill its purpose if the Indians remained nomadic. He therefore encouraged them to begin farming, but with limited success.

The mission expanded gradually. Other missionaries arrived, and new stations were established. At Waiilatpu, the large adobe house, a grist mill, a sawmill, and a blacksmith shop were built. William Gray built a house for himself that later served as a dwelling for travelers.

But progress in spiritual matters was slow. The Indians, less eager to learn than supposed, were indifferent to religious worship, books, and school. Reports of dissension and the lack of money caused the American Board in 1842 to order the Waiilatpu and Lapwai stations closed. The Spaldings were directed to return home and the Whitmans to go to the Tshimakain mission, established near present-day Spokane by the Reverends Elkanah Walker and Cushing Eells. Convinced the missions should remain open, Whitman volunteered to return east to plead their case before the Board.

FOR YOUR SAFETY

Whitman Mission is located in a serene and beautiful setting; however, certain dangers do exist. Please watch your children closely, especially near the millpond or on the hill. We want your visit to be a pleasant one.

ADMINISTRATION

Whitman Mission National Historic Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Route 2, Walla Walla, WA 99362, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

THE RIDE EAST

Whitman's return is one of the memorable overland journeys in American history. Accompanied by Asa Lovejoy, he left Waiilatpu on October 3, 1842. Pushing through blizzards and fording icy streams, they traveled by way of Fort Hall, Idaho; the Uintah Mountains of Utah; Taos, N. Mex.; and Bent's Old Fort, Colo., where the exhausted Lovejoy stopped to rest. Whitman reached St. Louis by March 9, 1843, and not long after, Washington, D.C., New York, and finally Boston. There the American Board, moved by his arguments, agreed to rescind its orders.

On his trip back to Oregon, Whitman joined the Great Migration of 1843 and gave valuable assistance to the wagon train as physician and guide. Perrin, his nephew, accompanied him. Upon reaching Waiilatpu, the emigrants replenished their supplies from Whitman's farm before continuing down the Columbia.

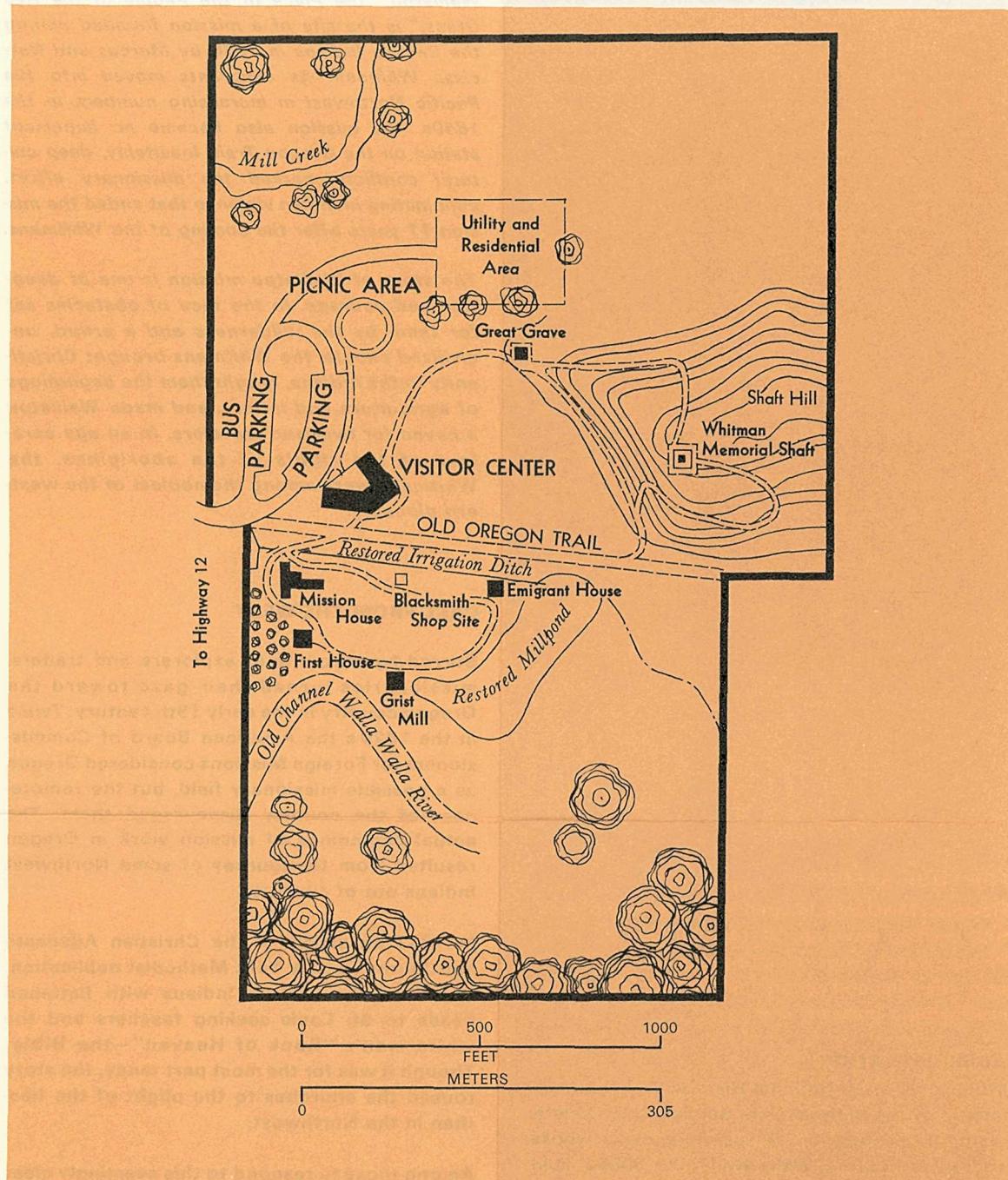
STATION ON THE OREGON TRAIL

When the Whitmans came overland in 1836, the Oregon Trail was still unnamed. They followed the trails of fur trappers and Indians. Then, in 1842, the first large group of emigrants to travel to the Oregon country over this route stopped at Waiilatpu for rest and supplies. From that time on the mission was an important station on the Oregon Trail. Although the main trail bypassed the mission after 1844, those who were sick and destitute turned their wagons toward the mission, and the Whitmans treated these exhausted people with great kindness. More than two-thirds of the persons staying at Waiilatpu in November 1847 were newly arrived emigrants.

THE MASSACRE

For 11 years the Whitmans had worked among the Cayuse. Although at times some Indians threatened the missionaries and destroyed mission property, not all the Cayuse showed an unfriendly attitude. Despite setbacks and occasional hostility, the Whitmans refused to abandon Waiilatpu. Their best efforts, however, failed to prevent an increase in jealousy, distrust, and unrest, which ended in an outbreak of violence in late November 1847.

Several causes led to the rising Indian resentment. Increasing numbers of emigrants and stories of settlers taking Indian land elsewhere, convinced the Cayuse that their way of life was in danger. Their fears grew as measles, brought in 1847 by white newcomers, spread rapidly among the Indians. The Cayuse had no resistance to the new disease, and within a short time half the tribe died. When Whitman's medicine helped white children but not theirs, many Cayuse believed that they were being poisoned to make way for the whites.



In a tragic and bloody attack, born of deep misunderstandings and grievances, a small group of suspicious Cayuse attacked the mission on November 29 and killed Marcus Whitman, his wife, and 11 others. The mission buildings were destroyed. A few survivors escaped, but 50, mostly women and children, were taken captive. Except for two young girls and a small boy who died, this group was ransomed a month later by Peter Skene Ogden of the Hudson's Bay Company. The massacre ended Protestant missionary work among the Oregon Indians. It also led to a war against the Cayuse, waged by settlers from the Willamette and Lower Columbia Valleys.

In 1848 Joseph Meek, carrying news of the tragedy and petitions from the settlers, reached Washington, D.C. The massacre spurred Con-

gress to create the Territory of Oregon in August of that year, thus forming the first formal territorial government west of the Rockies.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The site is 7 miles west of Walla Walla and 4 miles west of College Place. A short connecting road leads south from U.S. 12 to the park. The visitor center contains a museum with exhibits depicting the history of missionary activity in the Northwest. Self-guiding foot trails lead to the mission site, to the grave, and to the memorial shaft at the top of the hill. Near the visitor center is a picnic area with tables, but camping and fires are not permitted. Overnight accommodations and meals are available in nearby towns. The site is open daily throughout the year except for Thanksgiving Day, December 25, and January 1.