

McLoughlin House

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Fort Vancouver
National Historic Site
Oregon and Washington



John McLoughlin retired to the home he built at the falls of the Willamette River after directing the fur trade at Fort Vancouver for its first and most influential 20 years. He had come to the Northwest to turn the bounty of the land into profit for the Hudson's Bay Company and to promote British interests.

McLoughlin's domain reached from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean and from Russian-held Alaska to Mexican California's northern border—a land area equal to about one-fifth of today's contiguous United States. By the time his career ended, he was famous for his efforts, intentional or not, in securing most of that territory for Americans.



ALBERT BIERSTADT, EMIGRANTS CROSSING THE PLAINS
THE NATIONAL COWBOY HALL OF FAME, OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLA.

Born into a Quebec farming family in 1784, McLoughlin was 19 when he signed on as a physician for the North West Company, a British fur company. He soon worked his way up to company partner. After the merger in 1821 with the Hudson's Bay Company, also a British fur company, McLoughlin was sent to the Oregon Country to preside over the vast lands on which the organization pinned its hopes for expansion. As the chief factor (superintendent of trade), McLoughlin oversaw construction of the new headquarters at Fort Vancouver, promoted agriculture, opened new trapping routes, and took in an impressive profit. In doing business with the Indians, key players in the fur trade, he kept peace and won respect.

As successful as it was, the Hudson's Bay Company operated without a clear title to the land. The Oregon Country was caught in a tug of war between Britain and the United States. An 1818 treaty settled the dispute temporarily by establishing joint occupation. Thereafter both sides maneuvered to be in a position of strength when the treaty was to be renegotiated. McLoughlin foresaw that Britain's dominance of the region, based as it was on control of the fur trade, was doomed in the long run. The fur supply was dwindling, as was demand. In 1842 emigrant wagon trains began arriving in the Oregon Country. The presence of thousands of American settlers would inevitably tip the balance of power. Defying Company orders to discourage American settlement, McLoughlin

extended credit for food, seeds, and farm tools to the newcomers, then steered them southward into the Willamette Valley. Many emigrants regarded him as a paternalistic figure who would never turn away those in need; others thought him a tyrant. But one transplanted Pennsylvanian expressed gratitude: "He is always on the lookout for an opportunity to bestow his charity, and bestows with no sparing hand."

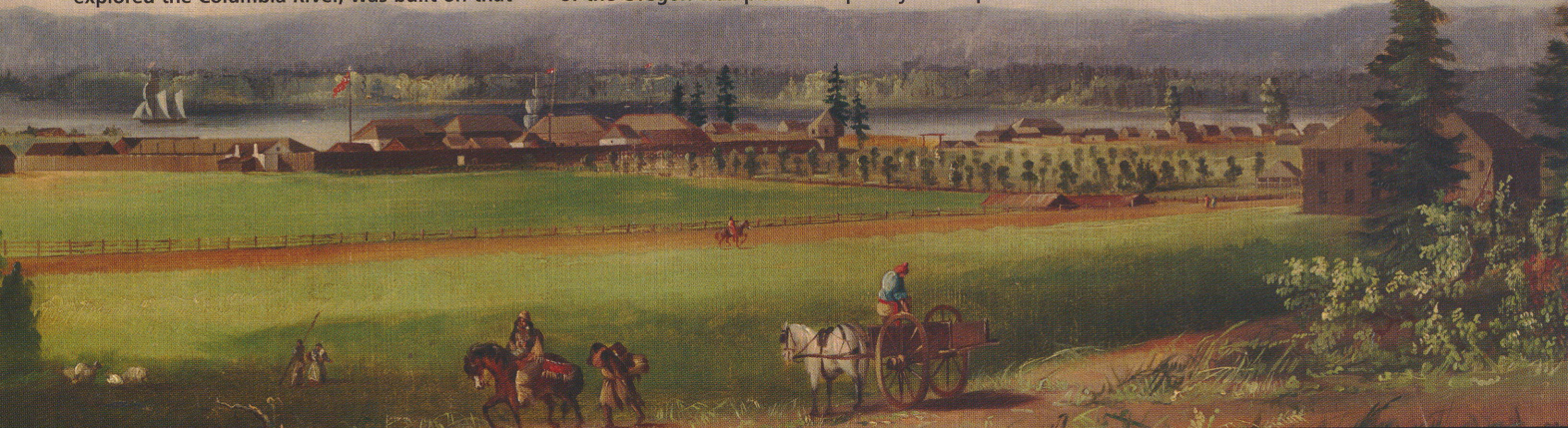
Though kindhearted by many accounts, McLoughlin had practical reasons for his generosity. Ill treatment of weary, poor new arrivals would reflect badly on the Company. Moreover, if the Oregon Country were divided along the course of the Columbia, as the English hoped, the land to the south would cede to the United States no matter what. While the Hudson's Bay Company asserted its claim to the territory, reported one British observer, "it appears that their chief officer on the spot was doing all in his power to facilitate the operations of those whose whole object was to annihilate that claim altogether." Gov. George Simpson, the top Hudson's Bay official in North America and an old rival of McLoughlin's, battled continually with the chief factor. In 1845 McLoughlin was forced to resign. The following year the Oregon Country was divided along the 49th parallel. The Company continued to trap and trade south of the boundary for 14 years, but British notions of acquiring the land permanently were squelched.

Fort Vancouver

The Hudson's Bay Company wanted furs and land, and the Columbia watershed offered both. John McLoughlin's first task as administrator of the Company's Oregon Country holdings was to build a headquarters for conducting its business of marketing the region's natural wealth. Fort Vancouver, named for the British captain who explored the Columbia River, was built on that

river near the mouth of the Willamette. Living quarters, factory, storage depot, seaport: Fort Vancouver was the hub of the Northwest Coast fur trade in its early-1800s heyday. It was the administrative headquarters and supply depot for more than 20 posts in the Columbia Department. By 1845 Fort Vancouver's location near the end of the Oregon Trail placed it squarely in the path

of American westward expansion, and its role in shaping Oregon's destiny had changed. Emigrants stopped here on their way to claiming Willamette Valley farmland. At this British outpost Chief Factor McLoughlin gave supplies and encouragement to the people who later came to possess much of the Oregon Country.



McLoughlin House



McLoughlin House

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Dining Room

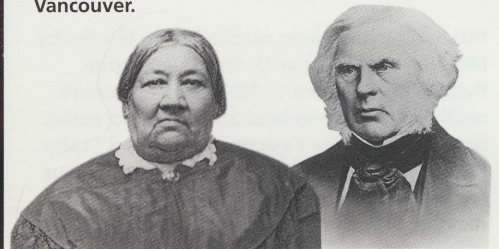
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Bedroom

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John McLoughlin (*below right*) built his home below the falls of the Willamette and lived here with his wife Marguerite (*below*) and other family members until he died in 1857. Many of the present furnishings were here in McLoughlin's time: the dining room table and chairs, Staffordshire china, 1826 Royal Horticultural Society medal, and a Bible used during services at Fort Vancouver.



BOTH OREGON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In 1829 Chief Factor McLoughlin and Governor Simpson claimed land along the Willamette River 25 miles south of Fort Vancouver. This was part of the Hudson's Bay Company strategy to diversify as fur supplies dwindled. McLoughlin envisioned a company town as the center for subsidiary industries. The falls were ideal for powering mills and the river convenient for shipping manufactured goods and agricultural products. McLoughlin retired from the Company before he could fully implement his plans. He placed the land in his own name in 1845 by paying the Company \$20,000 for the claim and built his family home on a piece of this property.

Simple in design, with two stories and a root cellar, the house was elegant for the Willamette Valley, where most emigrant families lived in crude log cabins. It was built completely of finished lumber—local timber and prefabricated trim shipped from a Boston factory. The first floor consisted of a large parlor, dining room, reception room, and McLoughlin's office. Upstairs were three bedrooms, as well as a sitting room and a hallway that often doubled as a guest room. The kitchens were separate buildings out back.

The McLoughlin home was known locally as "the house of many beds," a reference to the hospitality the family extended to just about anyone passing through Oregon City. The steady stream of house guests included relatives, friends, busi-

ness associates, new emigrants, a traveling artist, and many retired Hudson's Bay Company employees to whom McLoughlin felt a special responsibility. McLoughlin's wife Marguerite, of Cree-Swiss descent, opened her home to the needy and was thought of as "one of the kindest women in the world." Other permanent residents were daughter Eloisa and her family, and the Indian servants who had been in McLoughlin's employ at Fort Vancouver.

Known throughout the valley as "the Doctor" because of the vocation that had started him out in the fur trade, McLoughlin built a new career promoting economic prosperity for the territory he had helped establish. In part to smooth over a controversy arising from an American claim to his property at the falls, McLoughlin took U.S. citizenship in 1851. That year he served as mayor of Oregon City. To help emigrants become established McLoughlin loaned money for small commercial ventures. His own businesses included two sawmills, a grist mill, granary, general store, and shipping concern. He also donated land for schools and churches.

John McLoughlin died in 1857. His house now occupies some of the sites he set aside for public use when he helped to plat the town in the 1840s. The home is restored to honor the life and accomplishments of a man well deserving of the title "Father of Oregon."

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Planning Your Visit

John McLoughlin lived in this house from 1846, when he left Fort Vancouver, until he died in 1857. After Marguerite McLoughlin died in 1860 the home would change hands many times. In 1909 the McLoughlin Memorial Association saved it from demolition and moved it from near the falls to the bluff. Today the house is restored to its appearance when McLoughlin lived here. Furnishings are period pieces that belonged to the McLoughlin family, Hudson's Bay Company, or local residents.

Visiting the House and Related Sites

For days and hours of visitation, contact Fort Vancouver National Historic Site. McLoughlin House is not fully accessible to persons with disabilities. No public restrooms. The house stands in McLoughlin Park at 713 Center Street, between 7th and 8th streets.

This neighborhood is a local historic district, part of McLoughlin's original plat. At 719 Center Street is the home of Dr. Forbes Barclay, a McLoughlin associate.

McLoughlin's step-granddaughter lived in Ermatinger House, 619 6th Street. The first territorial legislature met in the late 1840s at Rose Farm, 536 Holmes Lane.

Oregon history is on exhibit at the Museum of the Oregon Territory, 211 Tumwater Drive, and at End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, 1726 Washington Street.

McLoughlin House is on the Oregon National Historic Trail. Visit the website at www.nps.gov/oreg.

More Information

Fort Vancouver National Historic Site
612 East Reserve Street
Vancouver, WA
98661-3811
360-696-7655, ext. 10
www.nps.gov/mcho or
www.nps.gov/fova

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