

Willamette Mission (Wallace House)

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By John B. Scott

An 1832 map drawn by early Oregon entrepreneur, Nathaniel J. Wyeth, depicts the location of the first Euroamerican building near today's Salem.¹ Known as the Wallace House, this fur trading post was constructed in late 1812 under the leadership of William Wallace, J. C. Halsey, and fourteen additional men in the employ of John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company.² The best evidence available puts the location of the house just a bit to the north of what is today's Water Street in north Salem. Historian Burt Brown Barker found cooking stones near this location in 1941, which corresponded to the location depicted on Wyeth's map and which had probably been used by these early day trappers.³ The only non-native structures which predate the Wallace House in all of Oregon were Lewis and Clark's Fort Clatsop and the Pacific Fur Company's base of operations at Fort Astor.⁴

Wallace House shifted from the control of the Pacific Fur Company to the Northwest Company during the War of 1812. In 1813 the Northwest Company constructed a second, and more enduring, fur entrepot just north of French Prairie. The men in charge of this second project were John Reed and Alfred Seton.⁵ The building(s) were located about two miles upstream from the present day Champoeg State Park.⁶ The purpose of these posts was two-fold. First, the Willamette Valley was rich in furs, and the traders wanted to tap this resource using the knowledge of the local Kalapuya Indian bands and needing a central location for the gathering of furs. Second, Fort Astor's workers, about a hundred plus miles away, were heavily dependent on deer and elk for sustenance, and overhunting near the fort had decimated their larder. The Wallace House served as a good location to hunt for deer and elk and then ship both furs and meat down river to the mouth of the Columbia.⁷ In 1821 the Northwest Company and the Hudson's Bay Company merged into one giant enterprise. HBC apparently used the old fur trading posts and other entrepots in the Willamette Valley, such as the McKay House.⁸ The two earlier trading locations fell into disuse and gradually rotted away in the Oregon rain.

By the time Thomas Dove Keizer (the founder of the city of Keizer) settled his Donation Land Claim in 1844, it is unlikely anything remained of the first outpost; it was just the broken down husk of a long deserted building.⁹ However, the name Wallace remained in use in the local environs. The July 5, 1843, meeting of Oregon's first provisional government at Champoeg saw the adoption of some organic bylaws. At that meeting the provisional government called for a "Barrockade" to be made "at or near Wallice Plains."¹⁰ The Methodist missionaries also make mention of Wallace Prairie. The fact that the name of William Wallace, a Canadian who spent less than three years in the fur trade here in Oregon, remained in use is attributable to the French-Canadians who settled French Prairie in the late 1820s and early 1830s. Joseph Gervais, Etienne Lucier, Louis Labonte, and other former employees of the aforementioned fur companies, had been in Oregon from the earliest days of the fur trade and kept some of the early place names in use.¹¹ The land near the trading post constructed under the direction of Reed and Seton was homesteaded about 1830 by the French-Canadians Joseph Despard and Pierre Billeque. The subterranean foundations of this old building were disposed of in 1875 by the farmer then holding that property, one J. G. Eberhard.¹²

Wallace House is not to be confused with Wallace-Marine Park on the west side of the Willamette. Although the north end of the park is almost directly across the river from the site of the old fur trading

house, these two entities are named for different men. Wallace-Marine Park and Wallace Road are named for the Robert Stuart Wallace family who moved from Chicago to Salem in the 1880s. Among other successful ventures, the family had a 330 acre pear orchard, and Robert's son, Paul, donated twenty-four acres of river front to the city which have become today's park.¹³

Endnotes

¹ J. Nielson Barry. "Site of Wallace House, 1812-1814" "Oregon Historical Society Quarterly", vol 42 (March-December 1941) 204.

² Fred S. Perrine. "Early Days on the Willamette" "Oregon Historical Society Quarterly. "vol. 25 (March-December 1924) 304.

³ Barry, 207.

⁴ There were the beginnings of a fortress constructed by the Winship brothers along the south side of the Columbia River in 1810. However, these American entrepreneurs were not welcome by the local Chinook Indians and the brothers abandoned their efforts to establish an outpost in Oregon after a few short weeks.

⁵ Perrine, 310.

⁶ John A Hussey, "Champoeg State Park, Oregon: A Summary Report Of Its History And A Proposed Plan For Its Development." Vol 1 (San Francisco: National Park Interior Department, 1962), 50 ff

⁷ Perrine, 304.

⁸ Hussey, 62

⁹ Lewis Judson, "Reflections on the Jason Lee Mission and the Opening of Civilization in the Oregon Country." (Salem: Wynkoop-Blair Printing Service, 1971) 28.

¹⁰ David C Duniway and Neil R Riggs, ed. "The Oregon Archives,

1841-1843" *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly* vol LX (March 1959
-December 1959), 265

¹¹ For an interesting look at the names and land holdings of some
of these early French-Canadian settlers look at the "1878 Historical
Atlas of Marion & Linn Counties, Oregon" by Edgar Williams & Co. On
page 28 the Champoege region is depicted giving the names of land
holders on French Prairie as of 1878. Also illustrated on the map are
numbers which correspond to Donation Claim land holders who are listed
on page 43. This list gives the reader the names of those who filed
for a land patent following the passage of the Oregon Donation Land
Law of 1850. This book can be purchased at the research library of the
Marion County Historical Society-Willamette Heritage Center.

¹² Perrine, 311

¹³ Salem Online History.

[http://iwa.cityofsalem.net/salemhistory/people/robert_stuart_wallace.h](http://iwa.cityofsalem.net/salemhistory/people/robert_stuart_wallace.htm)

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