

“Here we are, one family alone, a waymark, as it were, or center post, about which multitudes will or must gather this winter. And these we must feed and warm to the extent of our powers.”

—Narcissa Whitman, 1844

Tragedy at Waiilatpu

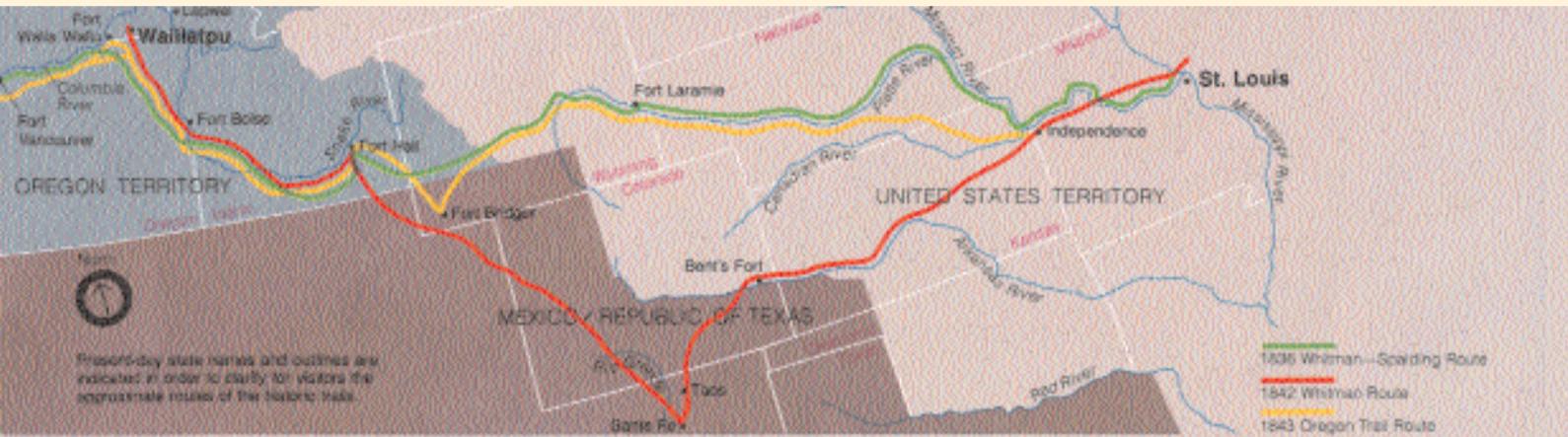
After 11 years of working with the Indians, the mission effort ended in violence. There were several causes behind the Indian unrest. Deep cultural differences between the white and Indian ways of life had caused tension and misunderstanding. Increasing numbers of emigrants, and stories of settlers taking Indian land elsewhere, convinced the Cayuse that their way of life was in danger. A measles epidemic, brought in 1847 by the emigrants, spread rapidly among the Cayuse, who had no resistance to the disease, and within a short

time half the tribe died. When Whitman's medicine helped white children but not theirs, many Cayuse believed they were being poisoned to make way for the emigrants.

Then, on November 29, 1847, a band of Cayuse attacked the mission and killed Marcus Whitman, his wife, the Sager boys, and nine others. A few survivors escaped, but 50, mostly women and children, were taken captive. Two young girls—Louise Sager and Helen Mar Meek—and a small boy died from the

measles. The others were ransomed a month later by Peter Skene Ogden of the Hudson's Bay Company. The killings ended Protestant missions in the Oregon country and led to war against the Cayuse by settlers from the Willamette and lower Columbia Valleys.

In 1848 Joseph Meek, carrying news of the tragedy and petitions from the settlers to Congress, reached Washington, D.C. Congress created the Oregon Territory in August of that year, the first formal territorial government west of the Rockies.



Nez Perce Indian

Rabbit-Skin-Leggings (above), a Nez Perce chief was a member of an 1831 Indian delegation to St. Louis. The chiefs sought information about the white man's sources of power and requested the Bible for Native Americans in the Oregon country. George Catlin painted this chief in 1832.

Smithsonian Institution



Covered Wagons on the Oregon Trail

The 2,000 mile long wagon path from Independence, Missouri, to the mouth of the Columbia River that became known as the Oregon Trail in the 1840s had been explored by fur traders earlier in the century. But it was rarely used before “Oregon fever” began sweeping the country in 1842, the year the first large caravan made the long trek. The next year in the “Great Migration,”

waves of covered wagons like the one pictured above crossed the plains and the western mountain ranges via South Pass and the Blue Mountains all the way to the Columbia. The arduous journey took a heavy toll of lives. By the 1850s wagon travel had left the road so deeply rutted that it remained visible long after the Oregon Trail had become a matter of history.

National Park Service



Memorial Monument

Built in 1897 on the 50th anniversary of the Whitmans' deaths, this monument stands on the hill Narcissa used to climb to watch for her husband's return from his trips of mercy. The monument, which is 27 feet high, overlooks the Walla Walla Valley. To the east are the Blue Mountains, over which the emigrant wagons once rolled on the most difficult part of their journey.

National Park Service



Missionaries

William Henry Gray, (left) and the Rev. Henry Harmon Spalding traveled to the Oregon country with the Whitmans in 1836 as missionaries sponsored by the American Board of Foreign Missions. Gray who



was a carpenter and mechanic helped to build the station at Waiilatpu. Spalding and his wife Eliza opened the Lapwai station among the Nez Perce in 1836.

National Park Service

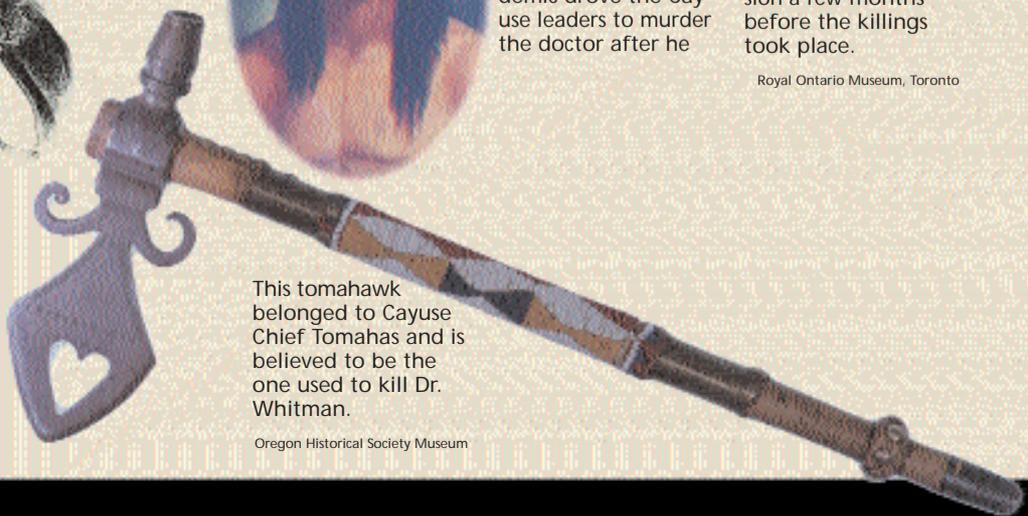


Cayuse Indian

Tomahas, a Cayuse chief, killed Dr. Whitman during the Indian uprising at the mission in November 1847. A measles epidemic drove the Cayuse leaders to murder the doctor after he

was unable to help them. Paul Kane painted this portrait of the chief from a sketch he made during a visit to the mission a few months before the killings took place.

Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto



This tomahawk belonged to Cayuse Chief Tomahas and is believed to be the one used to kill Dr. Whitman.

Oregon Historical Society Museum