

# The FORT COLUMBIA MUSEUM

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Fort Columbia  
Historical State Park

Chinook  
Pacific County  
Washington

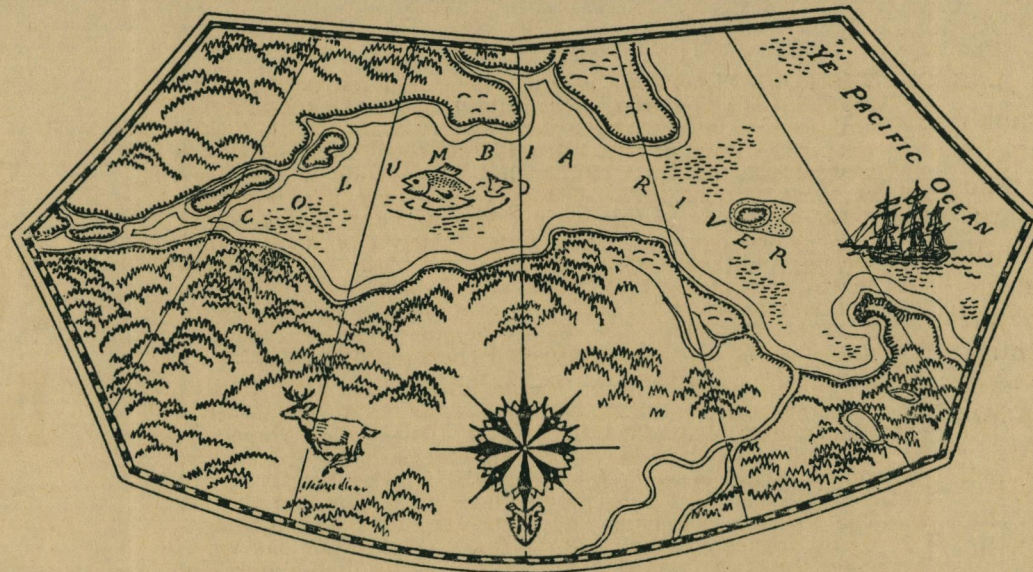


**F**ORT COLUMBIA, one of three fortifications erected to guard the mouth of the Columbia river in a time when wars were fought only on the ground and the sea, was declared obsolete after World War II. Shortly afterward a large portion of this military reservation was transferred to the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission as an historic monument. This was desirable because the fort, besides being of historic interest as a military establishment, stands on ground closely associated with many events and men of great historic importance to the Pacific Northwest. To interpret this history, extending back to the days of the explorers, a museum was carefully planned and developed as a center of interest for Fort Columbia.

#### AN HISTORIC SITE

The Columbia river served as a doorway to the early Pacific Northwest. The maritime explorers, Gray and Vancouver, came first, and then by land came Lewis and Clark. Worthy of note is the fact that Lewis and Clark reached the Pacific Ocean following the north side of the Columbia River and chose to camp close to the Fort Columbia site. There, then, was completed a mission which by instruction of Thomas Jefferson had as its object "to explore the Missouri River and such principal streams of it, as by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean, may offer the most direct and practical water communication across the continent for the purpose of commerce." The achievement of the men of this expedition later became the basis of the United States claim to this area.

David Thompson and another member of the North West Company, Alexander Henry, visited the area. Later, David Douglas, the botanist, came here. Many important historical events took place either here or within view of Chinook Point and Scarborough Hill, now within Fort Columbia Historical State Park. The area is



equally important as the home of the Chinook Indians, who at one time occupied a region eastward along the Columbia River to The Dalles, along the lower Willamette River in Oregon, and on the Pacific coast from Tillamook Head to Shoalwater Bay. Their great Chief Comcomly has attracted the attention of historians not only because of his importance as an Indian leader but also because of his ready acceptance of the new developments by the White men in the area. Across the river was the American fur trading post, Fort Astoria, established in 1811 by John Jacob Astor. During the War of 1812 this post was taken over by the North West Company and the name changed to Fort George.

#### HISTORY OF FORT COLUMBIA

With the advent of United States control in the Pacific Northwest it was soon recognized that the defense of the mouth of the Columbia River was vital to the defense of the region. Territory gained by the U. S. as a result of the Mexican War and the Oregon Treaty of 1846 made it necessary that these new areas be defended. Engineers sent to the Pacific Coast to determine suitable sites for fortifications recommended that lands on Cape Disappointment and Point Adams at the mouth of the Columbia be set aside for military purposes. It was, however, some time before the actual construction of defensive works was begun. In 1862 Congress appropriated \$100,000 for permanent defensive

works at the mouth of the Columbia River and Lieutenant Colonel Rene' Edward DeRussey and First Lieutenant George Henry Elliott made an examination of the area. They selected Cape Disappointment, Point Ellen (near Point Adams), and Chinook Point as most suitable for permanent fortifications. The purchasing of property for these installations became a real problem and it wasn't until 1864 that land on Chinook Point was gained for a military reservation. Actual construction of the defenses on Chinook Point was not begun until 1896 when the development program over a period of eight years saw the erection of the fortifications which, with the exception of certain improvements, have remained as they were first constructed. The armaments included two eight-inch rifles with disappearing carriages mounted in 1896 and known as "Battery Ord." In the same year another eight-inch rifle was erected a short distance to the southeast of this battery. The first detachment of troops was sent July 15, 1896, from Fort Stevens in Oregon to staff the new fortifications. They consisted of eleven men of Company M, 3rd Artillery from the Oregon post.

Battery Crenshaw, with its three-inch rapid fire guns and Battery Murphy, containing two six-inch, disappearing-type guns were built within the next few years. Until 1903 there was only a small detachment of men stationed at Fort Columbia. July 1, 1903, the post was first garrisoned with the 33rd Company, Coast Artillery under the command of Captain Brooke Paine. Generally, until the time of the first World War there were approximately one hundred enlisted men and four officers maintained at Fort Columbia. During the first World War although there was some modernization of the Columbia defenses, Fort Columbia lost her eight-inch guns which were removed for overseas service. After the war the post was considerably reduced with only a caretaker detachment maintained.

With unsettled conditions preceding the second World War the construction of barracks and rehabilitation of the old buildings brought about the reactivation of Fort Columbia. The declaration of war caused expanded developments at Fort Columbia with the acquisition of more land and improvements made in the mine control equipment. A modernization program involving the construction of two six-inch, long-range, rapid-fire rifles mounted on barbette carriages was begun in 1942 but was never completed.

The history of the Fort was uneventful for never a shot was fired "in anger" during the time of its activity. On March 28, 1947, the three forts of the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia were listed as surplus by the War Department. March 31, 1948, Fort Columbia, stripped of its armament, became subject to the jurisdiction of the War Assets Administration. From here, on application of the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission on August 26, 1948, a major portion of the Fort Columbia reservation was transferred May 12, 1950, to this Commission for a historical monument. A ceremony of dedication was held June 17, 1951, and the old military post became the Fort Columbia Historical State Park.

Interpreting this story in picture, object and type matter is the purpose of the museum. The major barracks building of the Fort was chosen as the building most suitable for this development. The modernization of the building and new construction in the rear have adequately provided for the physical requirements of the museum. Rooms in this building are now devoted to telling the local and regional history.

#### *Of interest in the Museum - - -*

THE MURAL in the local history room was painted by Ernest Norling, Seattle artist. Mr. Norling has interpreted three important developments associated with the Fort Columbia site. The central panel shows the ship of Robert Gray crossing the bar of the Columbia—the first ship to enter this great river. The perspective is such that it would appear that the observer is located on the highest point in this area. In the panel on the left can be seen Lewis and Clark and other members of this exploring expedition. On the right is a view of some of the original inhabitants—the Chinook Indians. Also can be seen Captain James Scarborough who settled in 1843 on the open slope of Chinook Point and Comcomly, chief of the Chinook Indians. It is in this way that the three themes of discovery, exploration and settlement are pictorially interpreted.

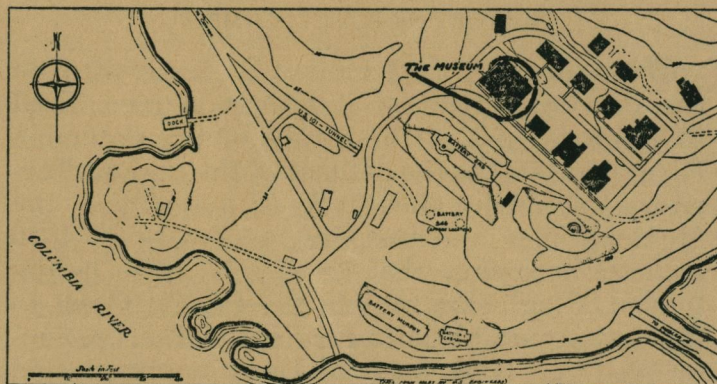
THE FOUR FLAGS on the wall in the regional history room represent Spain, Russia, Great Britain and the United States—nations associated with the early history of the Pacific Northwest. The flags of Great Britain and the United States are recognizable for little change has been made in the flags of these nations. The British Union Jack has remained today as it was in this early period but the United States flag, of course, has since added thirty-five stars representing additional states to enter the Union. The flag presented here is the first "Stars and Stripes" adopted by act of Congress, June 14, 1777, and was our flag until January 3, 1794. This flag is a replica of one probably flown by Robert Gray when he discovered the Columbia River.

The colors of Spain and Russia are the merchant flags of these nations toward the last part of the eighteenth century. The Spanish merchant flag consists of five stripes, three yellow and two red, yellow at the top and bottom. The central yellow stripe is wider than the others. The flag bears no coat-of-arms but the colors are those of Aragon and Castile. The Russian merchant flag of white, blue, and red horizontal stripes of equal width is reminiscent of the day when Peter the Great was learning ship building in Holland. The Dutch flag is a tri-color of red, white and blue. Peter, in making his, turned these colors upside down. Informed that he was flying the Dutch flag as a signal of distress, he revised his flag putting the white at the top and the red at the bottom with the blue in between.

For this museum, there is much history in the local story and within the region that has been left untold. Never is an interpretive museum complete. There are many ways of telling the historical story and the availability of new materials will require the redesign and development of additional exhibits. For the present, its development is significant in the contribution which it can make to an understanding of this area and the vast region which now includes the state of Washington.

**The Museum is open to the public seven days a week, with a curator on duty to answer questions and explain outstanding features.**

**Hours: 11 a.m. - 5 p.m.**



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