

Fort Simcoe, 1856-59 By Olaf T. Hagen, Associate Research Technician,  
Region IV, National Park Service, San Francisco, July 15, 1939

Fort Simcoe was established in the fall of 1856 "not for the immediate protection of the whites, but to keep the Indians in awe" and to learn their feelings and intentions and "to check these when they became inimical." When Major General Wool's conciliatory policy, bitterly opposed by many civilian officials and residents of the Washington Territory had been discredited as a result of the ~~XXXXX~~ renewal of hostilities by the Indians in 1858, Fort Simcoe was abandoned by the military in the following spring. Conceived to police the Indians as it had been, it was a logical place for an Indian agency and was transferred to the Indian Service for that purpose. Until 1922, when the Yakima agency was removed to Toppenish, Fort Simcoe was the headquarters for the Agency which had attracted national attention under the able direction of "Fahter" James H. Wilbur. Contrary to the arguments of those who believed the race doomed to extermination because of natural or other causes the Indians of the Yakima Reservation were "not fading away before the breath of the white man". Instead a small increase in population was reported from year to year. The "splendid" results of agent Wilbur's labor "fully demonstrated the truth of that general doubted and scooped problem among western people, the capability of the Indian for permanent civilization and Christianization." During Wilbur's administration visitors to the reservation saw not only "finely cultivated farms, well-built houses, barns and other outbuildings, fences, ditches, etc." but also schools and churches.

Most of the buildings existing at Fort Simcoe today were erected during its most important days as an Indian agency. At least six buildings still standing, however, ~~WERE~~ can be traced to the earlier and more romantic period when Fort Simcoe was a military post. Their well preserved condition and attractive appearance is a credit to their builders.

The establishment of a military post in the Simcoe Valley was a direct result of the Yakima War of 1855-56. The occupation of the country by the troops was believed necessary to prevent a recurrence of indiscretions by the whites or Indian depredations that might lead to a renewal of the war. It is interesting to note that the post was not merely to keep the Indians in awe, but was also to aid in the exclusion of white settlers from the region. Taking advantage of the natural barrier formed by the Cascade Mountains and guarding the Naches Pass with troops from Fort Simcoe, General Wool believed that the labors of the Army on that ~~front~~ frontier might be reduced. Thus, economy, as well as the belief that the country was unfit for cultivation and settlement by the whites and was required by the Indians prompted the pursuance of a policy which helped make General Wool's name an anathema to many of the settlers and officials of the Washington Territory.

The decision to establish a permanent military post in the Yakima country is vaguely suggested by General Wooll's instructions of Jan. 29, 1858. Col. George Wright who was placed in command of the operations of the regular troops against the Indians east of the Cascade Mountains, was directed to establish his headquarters at Fort Dalles where all the troops under his command were to be concentrated. As soon as the season permitted, "that is, as soon as grass can be obtained," expeditions were ordered to be made to the Selah Fishery on the Yakima River and to the Walla Walla country, reported one hundred and forty-two miles respectively from Fort Dalles.

Wool's stress on the prior and permanent occupation of the Walla Walla country may be partially explained by complaints he received about the attack on and the pillaging of peaceful Indians by the Oregon Volunteers whom Father E. Cherouse reported were "without discipline, without order and similar to madmen." The superintendent of Indian Affairs for Oregon also reported occupation of that region essential to keep the peaceful tribes from joining the war. Regardless of Wool's intentions, events in the Yakima country

nearer to Fort Dalles placed this region in the forefront. On March 26, 1856 only two days after Wright's command had crossed the Columbia River near Fort Dalles, occurred the massacre of the settlements at the Cascades by the Klickitat and Yakima Indians. Returning to the seat of the trouble, Wright had been preceded by Lt. P. H. Sheridan from Fort Vancouver. Wright's expedition into the Indian country proper, however, was delayed until communications had been secured and confidence restored.

Wright was convinced that the Yakima country must be permanently occupied by the military.

Wool's plan as announced on January 29, 1856, contemplated the use of the Selah Fishery as a base of operations in the Yakima country. An immediate post of one company between Fort Dalles and the Selah Fishery might be necessary "to prevent the Yakimas from taking fish on the tributaries of the Yakima and the Columbia." The vicinity of Atahm~~am~~ Mission, about 70 miles from The Dalles, was suggested as possible important "as the intermediate post between The Dalles and the Fishery." It does not appear, however, that Wool, at first contemplated the permanent occupation of the Yakima country, at least the selection of a site was not stressed as was the case in the Walla Walla region where post had previously been suggested by Wool and others. After the attack on the Cascades led to the prior emphasis that was placed on the Yakima country, Wright wrote that "a strong post must be established in the heart of that country. It will not do to march through an Indian country simply. We should make them understand that we are going to make a permanent settlement with them break up their fisheries, and harass them constantly, in order that they shall have no time for laying in a supply of food. By this course I think they may be brought to terms, perhaps not until next winter. It is only a question of time. It must be accomplished in the end."

It was April 28 before Wright resumed his march into Yakima country. After the long delay Governor Curry of Oregon, to whom Wright had complained of the embarrassing attacks on friendly Indians by the Oregon volunteers,

whose withdrawal from the country was requested, considered it "a matter of congratulation that the United States troops have at length made a forward movement, and I trust nothing will occur to render nugatory your proposed campaign into Yakima Country."

Wright proceeded to the Naches River where he was faced with large number of Indians, but due to the high stage of the river he did not cross his troops in pursuit of the Indians. Instead he began negotiating with them. He was confident that he would "soon make peace --- with or without fighting. He did not despair of ultimately reducing these Indians to sue for peace. I believe they really desire it and must find out what outside influence is operating them from coming in." Finally crossing the Naches he left a part of his command under Col. E.J. Steptoe at the encampment where Fort Naches, sometimes known as the "basket fort" had been established. Although the Indians failed to come in for conferences at the points and dates agreed upon, Wright continued his negotiations and on July 18, declared that "the war in this country is closed . . . we have penetrated the most remote hiding places of the enemy and forced him to ask for mercy. Deserted by their chiefs, and persistently pursued by our troops, the Indians had no other course left to them, to surrender, I have about 500 men, women and children at this place; with a much larger number of horses and cattle --- these Indians, of their own accord brought in, and delivered up, all the horses and mules in their possession, belonging to the government. about 20 in number. . . they are fully impressed with the folly of their continuing the war...so long as the troops simply moved through their country and retired, it had but little effect; the Indians were generally the gainers by it." A steady advance over their whole country and "the understanding that the country is to be permanently occupied," had had a different effect, according to Wright.

After "having examined this country pretty thoroughly" Wright was "somewhat at a loss ~~to~~ as to fix upon a position for a permanent military post. The whole country should be given to the Indians; they require it." The most

eligible position he had found by July 18, was "a short distance beyond the Toponish" where there is good timber for building, grass and water in abundance ---this point is on the south boundary of the Simcoe Valley and at the point of the intersection of the trails from Fort Dalles and the Kamash ~~prairie~~ prairies..the habitation of the Klickitats...The point above referred to has the advantage also of commanding both routes to the Columbia and holding in check the Klickitats who would not be likely to commit any hostile acts with a military force in their rear. The season is rapidly wearing away, and

In February, 1858, a son was born to Mrs. Barnett, (Marianna) and he was named Arthur Nelson. She wrote:

~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ And now I must tell you of my little boy, of whom birth I trust you may have already heard.

"This little fellow is now 10 weeks old and a nice fat happy and healthy child. He has dark blue eyes and a fair clear complexion bearing no resemblance to any one that I can see. We call him Arthur Nelson, as the Major would not consent to have him named for him and I did not fancy Nelson alone.

The first few weeks after the little fellow's birth, I was extremely weak but in every other respect very well and I am now as well as ever and in much better general health than you have ever known me. The long sea voyage from New York to San Francisco has entirely cured the Neuralgia from which I suffered, and I expect to live to be a fat and healthy old lady.

Mrs. Barnett to Mrs. Charles Evans, Lockport, N. . April 29, 1858 in Hagen report (Olaf T. Hagen, Fort Simcoe, 1856-59-report of the National Park Service Region IV, San Francisco, July 15, 1939, p. 11.