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FORT HALL

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Established in 1834 as an outpost of the Snake country fur trade, Fort Hall occupied a strategic position in a key area of northern Shoshoni and Bannock Indian activity. The fort survived for slightly more than two decades, serving as a major supply station on the Oregon Trail after 1840 when westbound emigrants began to follow fur trade routes to the West Coast. After the original fort was abandoned, several subsequent posts, mostly with the same name, functioned in the area. An Indian reservation headquarters, named for the old fort, still exists a few miles east of the original site of Fort Hall.

Prior to construction of Fort Hall, the Snake country fur trade had depended largely upon efforts of organized parties of trappers who ranged widely over the beaver streams each hunting season. This system, introduced by Donald MacKenzie, who became active in the Fort Hall area in 1818, prevailed throughout the important years of the Snake country and the Rocky Mountain fur trade. Each summer, various bands of trappers met at a rendezvous to dispose of their furs and get equipped for the next season. Nathaniel J. Wyeth, the founder of Fort Hall, had come west to enter the fur trade in 1832. Noting that the profits of the fur trade accrued to those who supplied the trappers at rendezvous, rather than to the fur hunters themselves, Wyeth contracted to supply the 1834 rendezvous. Setting out from St. Louis, April 28, with an expedition of 70 men and 250 horses, he brought out a stock of goods large enough to take care of the Rocky Mountain fur trade for a year. In addition, he planned to develop Columbia River salmon fishing, with prospective markets in the Hawaiian Islands and in Boston, his home base. Supported by a Boston concern (the Columbia River Fishing and Trading Company) capitalized to develop his fur and fishery enterprises, Wyeth expected to develop the resources of the Pacific Northwest on a large scale. A base of operations on the lower Columbia, near Fort Vancouver of the Hudson's Bay Company, might eventually have supplied the Rocky Mountain fur trade as well as his Columbia River salmon fisheries.

On the way to the 1834 rendezvous, held at Ham's Fork of Green River, Wyeth got into real trouble. Milton Sublette, with whom he had contracted to supply the mountain men, had to turn back to St. Louis, eventually to get a leg amputated. Wyeth's inexperienced men could not travel as fast as the regular

suppliers could: before he reached his destination, the company that had previously handled the rendezvous trade passed him on the way to Ham's Fork and took over all the business again in utter disregard of Wyeth's contract. Because the Oregon country extended beyond the boundaries of the United States, civil law did not exist for mountain men on Ham's Fork. Wyeth doubted he could have done anything about the breach of contract in such a place anyway. (British subjects in the Oregon country were governed by the laws of Ontario, but no similar provision had been made for United States citizens west of the continental divide.) Anyway Wyeth had a lot of fur trade goods to dispose of before he continued on to the Columbia to get his salmon fisheries in operation. His solution was to head west to Snake River, where he founded Fort Hall to get rid of his surplus supplies. This unexpected change in plan also provided a base for operations for his fur hunters in the Snake country.

Wyeth reached the Snake on July 14 and chose a site for his fort about a hundred and fifty yards from the river, at a point several miles north of the Portneuf. His men went to work right away, erecting two houses and some horse corrals enclosed in a stockade 15 feet high and 80 feet square. Complete with bastions for defense, his fort had a good (if possibly dangerous) location in the center of the major Indian wintering grounds of the upper Snake valley. When the fort was near enough completed for Wyeth to continue west, August 6, a dozen men, fourteen horses and mules, and three cows remained behind to occupy the only American outpost then existing in the Oregon country. Two of Wyeth's trapping parties ranged out of Fort Hall, while Wyeth and the remainder of his men proceeded on to the lower Columbia to develop his projected fisheries.

Somehow nothing in the plans of the Columbia River Fishing and Trading Company really worked out, although they were well conceived. The ship sent out from Boston to transport fish to Hawaii and New England ran into a storm off South America, suffering severe damage from lightning. The Columbia salmon fisheries proved to be a failure, although a small shipment went out. Wyeth wanted to contract with the Hudson's Bay Company to act as agent for supplying the Rocky Mountain fur trade: his plan was to transfer the trade base from St. Louis to Fort Vancouver on the lower Columbia, from which goods could be brought to rendezvous less expensively. John McLoughlin, who managed operations for the Hudson's Bay Company, was inclined to go along with Wyeth, whose plan would have delivered the northern Rocky Mountain fur trade to the Hudson's Bay Company. Company policy did not allow for such joint ventures, however, and instructions from London finally forbade McLoughlin to get mixed up in any such promising, though unusual, enterprise. Thomas McKay already had established Fort Boise late in 1834 as a rival to Fort Hall in the interest of the Hudson's Bay Company, and McLoughlin was compelled to make Fort Boise into a company post

and to compete vigorously with Fort Hall.

As Wyeth was aware, his only chance to succeed with Fort Hall depended upon supply from the lower Columbia: when he could not work that out independently, and could not manage to trade in cooperation with the Hudson's Bay Company, which already was operating from a base on the lower Columbia, he had no alternative but to clear out. In May 1836, he decided to sell Fort Hall to the Hudson's Bay Company and left negotiations of the transaction to a deputy. Another year or more went by while the deal was being worked out. Most of the traps, equipment, and horses were sold to mountain men during the 1837 rendezvous, since the Hudson's Bay Company could bring supplies to the Snake country from Fort Vancouver with less expense than Wyeth had brought them in from St. Louis. Wyeth's plan to obtain control of the Rocky Mountain fur trade by supplying Fort Hall from Fort Vancouver worked out just as he anticipated it would. But by then, Fort Hall belonged to the Hudson's Bay Company.

Assuming charge of the post, June 16, 1838, Hudson's Bay Company officials found a better source for furs. Rather than to depend upon parties of mountain men, they decided to employ the local Indians if they could persuade them to engage in fur hunting. James Douglas, visiting the new British fort, reported March 11, 1838, that the Shoshoni and Bannock "bravely maintained their independence, and now occupy a respectable position" among the Indians of the Northwest. Though they were "an exceedingly erractick people we have hopes of introducing among them more subtle habits of life and leading them to devote more of their time to Fur hunting; an object worthy of our attention, as we are likely to derive from their exertions, more certain and extensive benefit, than we have reason to anticipate from the lawless and turbulent free white Trappers, now employed as beaver hunters. . . ." Not depending entirely upon the Indians, the firm still sent out expeditions of company servants and free trappers to work the surrounding country. With the decline of the annual summer rendezvous of mountain men supplied from St. Louis, Fort Hall also served as a base for those who continued to trap the upper Snake country. T. J. Farnham noted in 1839 that "the American trappers even are fast leaving the service of their countrymen, for the larger profits and better treatment of British employment." Goods could be purchased at Fort Hall for half the price charged at American posts supplied from St. Louis; furs could be sold there for more than they would bring elsewhere. White trappers, who had access to other markets, got more for their furs than the Indians received, and paid less for their supplies.

Attempts to make Fort Hall more self-sufficient--commenced in Wyeth's time with efforts at raising onions, peas, corn, and turnips--continued under the British company. A plow was brought in 1839, but dry weather ruined the projected wheat crop. Cattle, traded after 1842 from emigrants on the Oregon Trail,

thrived around Fort Hall, though. Moreover, the fur trade itself prospered at Fort Hall after it had declined in the Rockies generally; during the winter of 1842-1843, Fort Hall and Fort Boise were responsible for 2,500 beaver, which helped that season "to make up for losses elsewhere." In 1845-1846, the Snake country fur trade (1,600 beaver) still was valued at L3,000. Much of the Fort Hall trade depended upon emigrant traffic by 1842, however.

Wagon trains could reach Fort Hall from the Missouri valley with no particular difficulty. Taking wagons farther west proved to be more of a problem. Henry Harmon Spalding and Marcus Whitman had brought a wagon past Fort Hall in 1846, but it reached Fort Boise only as a cart. There they had to abandon it altogether. Hudson's Bay traders had managed to haul Spalding's wagon over the Blue Mountains to Fort Walla Walla in 1840. But they had such a hard time that they concluded that the pack trail from Fort Hall to the Columbia simply wasn't practical for wagons. Small emigrant pack trains made their way from the Mississippi Valley via Fort Hall to the Columbia in 1839-1840 and in 1841. Then in 1842, a larger group of 137 emigrants showed up with wagons. On the suggestion of Richard Grant, Hudson's Bay Company chief trader in charge of Fort Hall, they left the wagons at his post, and packed the rest of the way. Grant was able to sell them flour for the rest of their journey at half the price they had to pay at Fort Laramie; he traded for the abandoned wagons as an accommodation to the travelers. The emigrant supply trade increased enormously the next year with close to a thousand people coming through. By that time, Grant's problem, in face of desperate demand, was to keep back enough provisions to get Fort Hall through the winter. Unable to continue westward from Fort Hall without wagons, the emigrants accepted Marcus Whitman's advice to force their way through. They succeeded in getting their wagons clear to the Columbia. Each year after that brought another wave of emigrants on their way to Willamette Valley. In 1846, partly in response to continued emigrant traffic, the Snake country became part of the United States. Pending a settlement of Hudson's Bay Company claims for posts in that part of Oregon assigned to the United States, though, Fort Hall continued to function as a British post.

Practically a complete shift from fur trade to emigrant trade followed not long after the boundary settlement. Extensive Mormon migration in 1847 to Salt Lake gave Fort Hall an unexpected new market for several years, until the Mormon settlements became self-sufficient. A dip in emigrant wagons from 901 in 1847 to only 318 in 1848 came just before the end of the fur trade. Then the California gold rush improved the situation abruptly. Even though much of the 1849 traffic was diverted southward over Hudspeth's Cutoff, Richard Grant estimated that 10,000 wagons rolled past Fort Hall that summer. At the same time, a force of mounted riflemen established a

short-term United States military post--Cantonment Loring--only about six miles from Fort Hall in August. None of this activity encouraged the fur traders.

Declining beaver prices, combined with emigrant traffic on the Oregon and California trails, brought Fort Hall fur trade to a sudden halt in 1849. The beaver market in London had collapsed to the point that the Fort Hall rates (one Hudson's Bay Company blanket for four beaver) had become entirely too high, and the fur trade there turned out to be "more than unprofitable." Both the Indians and mountain men based at Fort Hall now could be supplied through trade with passing emigrants. Richard Grant reported February 22, 1850, that "the Indians have become Careless, and still more indolent than they ever were in hunting furs--some of the Old Ones no doubt might be enticed to hunt Beaver but that once valuable Animal having now [become] valueless, they are not encouraged. . ." The Indians, in fact, now had to hunt large animals for subsistence as well as for the emigrant trade. From 1849 on, Fort Hall had little function except as a supply post for wagon trains bound for Oregon. With Hudspeth's Cutoff (1849) diverting the California traffic, along with many of the Oregon wagons as well, to a route farther south, Fort Hall entered an abrupt decline.

Even though great Snake River floods damaged Fort Hall severely in 1853, and much of the emigrant traffic bypassed Fort Hall, the British company hoped to continue to supply travelers on the Oregon Trail. Wagons began to haul flour and trade goods from the Lower Columbia to Fort Hall in 1853, and pack trains were discontinued altogether on the supply route in 1854. Indian trouble along the Oregon Trail broke out near Fort Boise in 1854, however, and by 1856 the situation deteriorated so terribly that Fort Hall had to be withdrawn. A decade later, a general settlement of Hudson's Bay Company claims for the value of posts in the United States was arranged. British interests at Fort Hall thus came to an end just at the time that establishment of an Indian reservation led to the development of a new and different kind of Fort Hall. By that time, Fort Hall also had become a station for stage lines hauling passengers to the new gold fields. Travelers still came by, but they no longer had to find their way through the great uninhabited wilderness that had faced earlier emigrants on the Oregon and California trails.