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SPOKANE HOUSE

Spokane, as the commercial center of a considerable area of the Inland Empire of Washington and northern Idaho, is the logical successor of what was known in fur-trading days (more than one hundred years ago) as Spokane House, which then was a trade-center for eastern Washington, northern Idaho and western Montana.

Spokane House had its beginning in the extension of the fur-trade. Barter for furs was the first item of commerce in many parts of North America. Detroit and St. Louis, Winnipeg and Edmonton were founded on that barter. The Hudson's Bay Company, chartered in 1670 is the oldest commercial organization in America today. Between 1780 and 1820 its most active rival was the North West Company, owned and controlled in Montreal and London, with field-headquarters at Fort William on Lake Superior. This North West Company built a famous trading post on the headquarters of the North Saskatchewan in Canada, and in 1807 sent traders thence across the continental divide to the Columbia River near its source. Soon these traders pushed southward into the valleys of the Kootenai, Pend 'Oreille and Flathead Rivers and next into the Spokane valley. So in July, 1810, to the Indians of the Spokane country came the opportunity to purchase at home tobacco, calico, beads, powder and ball and the like, brought from Fort William 2000 miles away. This happened during the year preceding the building of famous Astoria at the mouth of the Columbia. Then began commercial Spokane of today.

Spokane House stood on the level flat between the Spokane and the Little Spokane, near their junction. This, the most historic spot in the Spokane valley, is reached by an easy and beautiful drive over Northwest Boulevard and along the bank of the Spokane, a little distance beyond Nine-Mile Bridge. Here, according to tradition, the Spokane and other Indians used to gather in great numbers to catch and dry salmon-trout and, of course, to gossip and gamble. Hence it was a proper place for a trading-post, and here the first white men ever in the Spokane valley foregathered.

The men who had a part in building Spokane House were unique in personality and achievement. Chief in authority was David Thompson, a *bourgeois* (partner) in the North West Company, whose name is now acclaimed as one of the greatest land-geographers the British race has ever produced. He discovered the source of the Columbia and had charge of the first business ever transacted by white men in this Inland Empire. In the spring of 1810, when starting on his annual trip to Fort William, he ordered a supply of trading-goods to be brought to this site, and building commenced. The men who received the instructions were Jacques Raphael Finlay and Finnan MacDonald, who had been assisting him in trade with the Flathead (Saleesh) and the Pend 'Oreille (Kully-spel) Indians. Finlay was familiarly known as Jaco of Joco rather than by his more artistic name and carried a considerable amount of Indian blood in his veins. MacDonald was born and bred in Scotland, a man of remarkable courage and physical strength, and both had native wives. These two men were first here, and building had begun when Thompson himself arrived, set his instruments and established the latitude and longitude of the site scientifically and accurately. Thus (1810-1811) began Spokane House.

Thompson had now done his work of exploration and surveying and establishing contact with the natives and the winter of 1812 brought another partner of the North West Company to Spokane House as chief executive. His very name, John George McTavish, suggests vigor and shrewdness. To him had been assigned the difficult task of elbowing out or buying out the new contestants for the field just establishing themselves at Astoria. Their old rivals, the Hudson's Bay Company, remained east of the Rockies but John Jacob Astor's new Pacific Fur Company had come into the country by way of the mouth of the Columbia. That contest belongs to another story. It was planned at Spokane House, and MacTavish was successful, but not until a rival trading-post flying the American flag had been built about an eighth of a mile away on this historic flat and maintained for a year and a half. (It was the custom in the fur-trade to build trading-posts alongside each other.) The goods bartered at that trading-post called Fort Spokane had been shipped by John Jacob Astor from New York in the ship *Beaver* to Astoria and represented American capital. The importance of this event lies in its influencing British statesmen toward placing their extreme claims for the boundary-line between the United States and Canada at the line of the Kootenai and Columbia Rivers. Partly be-

cause of Spokane House and Fort Spokane the Spokane country was never in danger of becoming a part of Canada.

After MacTavish there appeared at Spokane House a galaxy of men prominent in the history of the establishment and of the Columbia River; McMillan, Ross, Kittson, Ross Cox, Birney, Peter Skene Ogden, John Work (and others) and always the ubiquitous Finnan MacDonald. More prominent than any was Donald MacKenzie, Astorian and Northwester, who managed the business in the interior field for many years.

MacKenzie is not yet properly recognized in our history. He is described as physically a large man weighing more than 250 pounds but very active, a sure shot with the rifle, and remarkably able to deal with the natives. It was he who first recognized and developed the rich trade for furs in the Snake country i.e. southern Idaho.

One of these has left a brief account of the establishment and its location as follows: "Spokane House was a retired spot; no hostile natives were there to disquiet a great man. There the *Bourgeois* who presided over the company's affairs resided, and that made Spokane House the center of attraction. There all the wintering parties, with the exception of the northern district, met. There they were all fited out; it was the great starting-point; although six weeks' travel out of the direct line of some and more or less inconvenient to all. But that was nothing; these trifles never troubled the great man.

"At Spokane House too there were handsome buildings: there was a ball-room even; and no females in the land so fair to look upon as the nymphs of Spokane; no damsels could dance so gracefully as they; none were so attractive. But Spokane House was not celebrated for fine women only; there were fine horses also. The race-ground was admired, and the pleasures of the chase often yielded to the pleasures of the race. Altogether, Spokane House was a delightful place, and time had confirmed its celebrity."

The system in vogue was as follows: Merchandise was brought annually from London by ship into the mouth of the Columbia, usually arriving in June or July. There it was transferred to large canoes or *batteaux* for carriage up-river, against current and over portages, about six hundred miles, to the mouth of Spokane River, and thence on pack-animals to Spokane House. The wintering traders and free hunters then made up their assortments and departed to the Kootenai, Flathead and Snake-river districts, to be gone all winter and return with furs they had gathered in trade and by trap-

ping the streams. Accounts were then balanced and the furs sent
to the mouth of the Columbia for transport to the China market by
the returning ship. (After the Hudson's Bay Company took over
the business the furs were shipped to London instead of to China.)

The picture painted by Alexander Ross (quoted above) must
not be taken too literally. He was really emphasizing the inaccessi-
bility and inconvenience of the location of Spokane House, which
had been the view of Donald MacKenzie. In 1821 the rival com-
panies in Canada, after disastrous competition, came together in
what we should now call a merger under the name of the older com-
pany, and in 1824 Spokane House was inspected by two dis-
tinguished men, Governor (afterward Sir) George Simpson and
Chief Factor Dr. John McLoughlin of the Hudson's Bay Company,
whose names are both written large in the history of the Pacific
Northwest. They immediately decided that the location was im-
practicable, being sixty miles off the line of travel and transporta-
tion then by water up and down the Columbia. So in the spring of
1825 Governor Simpson personally selected a site for a new trading-
post just above Kettle Falls on the Columbia to be known as Fort
Colville. Building was begun there, and in the spring of 1826 all
property and merchandise had been moved to the new establishment.
Thus ended Spokane House.

As a designation, Spokane House signified the usual comple-
ment of buildings necessary for a frontier trading-post. These
were surrounded by a stockade with bastions at one or two corners,
construction being of logs. At trading-posts among the roving tribes
of the prairies east of the Rocky Mountains these stockades were
very strongly built and guarded, but among the more quiet and
peaceful Indians of the Flathead, Kootenai and Spokane countries
they served more as a warning and to prevent petty thieving than
to protect against hostile attack. The North West Company used
the name House in distinction from that of Fort, more common
to the establishments of the Hudson's Bay Company.

No sketch or picture of Spokane House is known to exist, but
the general plan and dimensions of such trading-posts are known.
Entrance was by gates at front and rear, the front gate evidently
having been toward the rushing current of the Spokane close by.
All that remained to mark the exact site to the present generation
were the cellar-holes of some of the buildings, but as late as 1835
one of the bastions excited the interest of Samuel Parker, who
camped here while on his way to Fort Colville and made note of

it in his journal. Jaco Finlay and his numerous family evidently were allowed to use the place as a home after its abandonment. David Douglas, the famous English bontanist, visited him in the spring and summer of 1826 and found the family subsisting upon a vegetable diet of camass and moss cakes, cooked *a la Indiene*. A burying-ground not far away among the trees is mentioned by Douglas. According to tradition Finlay died in 1828 and presumably was buried there.

The trails from all directions converged at this spot. Governor Stevens, when first arriving in the Territory of Washington in 1853, used one of these in traveling from Antoine Plante's to Camp Washington on the Colville-Walla Walla road, where he conferred with Lieutenant George B. McClellan. The trail leading to the ford below the falls at Spokane did not follow the road as it now runs via Northwest Boulevard, but went across "Five-Mile Prairie," and according to tradition the race course mentioned by Ross was on that prairie.

Life at Spokane House was secluded and monotonous. As it was headquarters, all the bookkeeping was done here with care and accuracy and goods and furs passing in and out listed by competent clerks, to whom the English E. & O.E. doubtless was well known. But there also were rest and recreation and conviviality. Forest and stream abounded in game and fish, the garden furnished vegetables in season and for winter, and the packs from Fort William and Fort George (Astoria) brought the officers flour, sugar, tea and some of that which cheers as well as exhilarates. There were books to read, and the express twice a year brought letters from friends and relatives elsewhere. The traders returning from the field told tales of hardship, adventure and life-escapes. The hunters and servants were volatile and happy, and the officers were men of intelligence and good family-connections at home. There were no white women at the post. Limitations of this brief narrative permit only mention of these activities and personnel.

History and romance linger around this quiet and sheltered spot where the commerce and culture of Spokane had beginnings more than one hundred years ago; the most historic spot in the Spokane valley.

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