

Archeological Excavations at Fort Walla Walla

*Thomas R. Garth*¹

WHEN IT WAS realized that the water backing up behind McNary Dam would inundate the site of historic Fort Walla Walla, near the confluence of the Columbia and Walla Walla rivers, the urgency of carrying on archeological excavation work here beforehand became evident. The purpose of this work was to recover historical objects belonging to the fort and to ascertain the location and nature of the buildings.

The National Park Service excavated at the site of Fort Walla Walla during May and June, 1949, and continued for six weeks in 1950. These excavations were part of the Columbia River Basin Survey program and were carried out in cooperation with the U.S. Corps of Engineers and the Washington State Historical Society.² Before the project was begun, it was necessary to make a thorough study of the history of the site. It was soon realized that instead of having one Fort Walla Walla to excavate, we were likely to find two and possibly three, built successively during the turbulent years from 1818 to 1856.

THE HISTORY OF FORT NEZ PERCÉ (FORT WALLA WALLA)

Fort Nez Percé was established by the North West Company in 1818, only a few years after that company had taken over the chain of forts owned by John Jacob Astor. There were no supply posts of importance at that time between Fort George (Astoria, Oregon) and Spokane House (near modern Spokane, Washington), and traders wishing to operate in the area between were at a considerable disadvantage in being so far from a base of supplies. They felt the ideal place for a central supply post would be on the Columbia near the mouth of the Walla Walla River. However, the Cayuse and Nez Percé Indians in the area were much more warlike than the average Columbia River tribe. In fact this area was considered by some to be

¹ I wish to express my appreciation to the many people who have by their interest and assistance furthered the work at old Fort Walla Walla. I am especially indebted to the Daughters of the Washington Pioneers for their interest and financial assistance, and to Professor Donald Clark of the Forestry Department at the University of Washington for identification of wood specimens and for information on maps and cannon of the period. Mr. Willard Whitman and Mr. Jack Hogben worked several weeks on the project without pay, enabling us to accomplish more than our funds would otherwise have permitted.

² Dr. Aubrey Neasham, Regional Historian, and Mr. Louis Caywood, Archeologist—both of the National Park Service—gave the writer much valuable assistance. Mr. Caywood participated in the excavation during June of 1949.

ARTIFACTS

The artifacts found are suggestive of the many phases of life at the fort and of events and a mode of living now long past. Even the smallest item such as a bead or a pin can sometimes contribute important facts to the historical picture.

ARTIFACTS RELATING TO THE TRADE. In a fur-trading post we would expect to find many things pertaining to trading operations. Beads, an important trade item, were numerous, especially in what was probably the trading store (building F). Most were the small seed-beads, 3 mm. or less in diameter, used by the Indians to decorate moccasins and buckskin clothing. Some were exceedingly small—under 1.5 mm. in diameter—and must have been strung on fine hairs. More than 90 per cent were blue or white, and the remainder were green, red, or black. This preference by the Indians for blue and white trade beads goes back to the time of Lewis and Clark or earlier. Blue beads were the most valuable and were called "chief beads"; white beads were preferred by women.⁴⁵ Cylindrical beads from 8 mm. to 4.5 mm. in length and diameter were moderately common at the fort. Their rounded surface was faceted, and the common color was blue with occasional whites and greens occurring. Of rare occurrence were smooth round blue beads and greenish-blue beads similar to some found at Spokane House dating 1812-25, except that their color is a deeper, more glassy blue than those from Spokane House. One conical bead of pale blue porcelain, 19 mm. long by 11 mm. wide, was found in the storehouse. Several pottery trade pipes were also found.

The standard medium of exchange in the trading era was powder and shot. Although we found no caches of powder, there was a moderate abundance of shot. Small lead bird shot and buckshot were very numerous in the trading store (F) and moderately plentiful elsewhere; large musket or rifle balls of 60, 50, and 40 calibre were also widely scattered. There seemed to be an association between the beads, buckshot, and small copper percussion caps for cap-and-ball guns. All were common in the powder magazine (G), and rooms E and F. Other associated items include brass pins, both of the ball-headed and flat-headed variety. These vary from 3 to 4 cm. in length and may have been used in the trade, as well as playing a part in the domestic life of the traders.

Two brass thimbles, much like thimbles of today, were also found in building E-F. Although trapping expeditions commonly outfitted at the fort, we found nothing recognizable as a trap. In cellar E we recovered the charred pages of what may have been an account book. Some of the figures in the book are still legible in spite of the charring. It was highly important that a trading post keep accurate accounts,

⁴⁵ E. Coues, *History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (New York, 1893), II, 615 and 638.