

QUARTERLY OF THE OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

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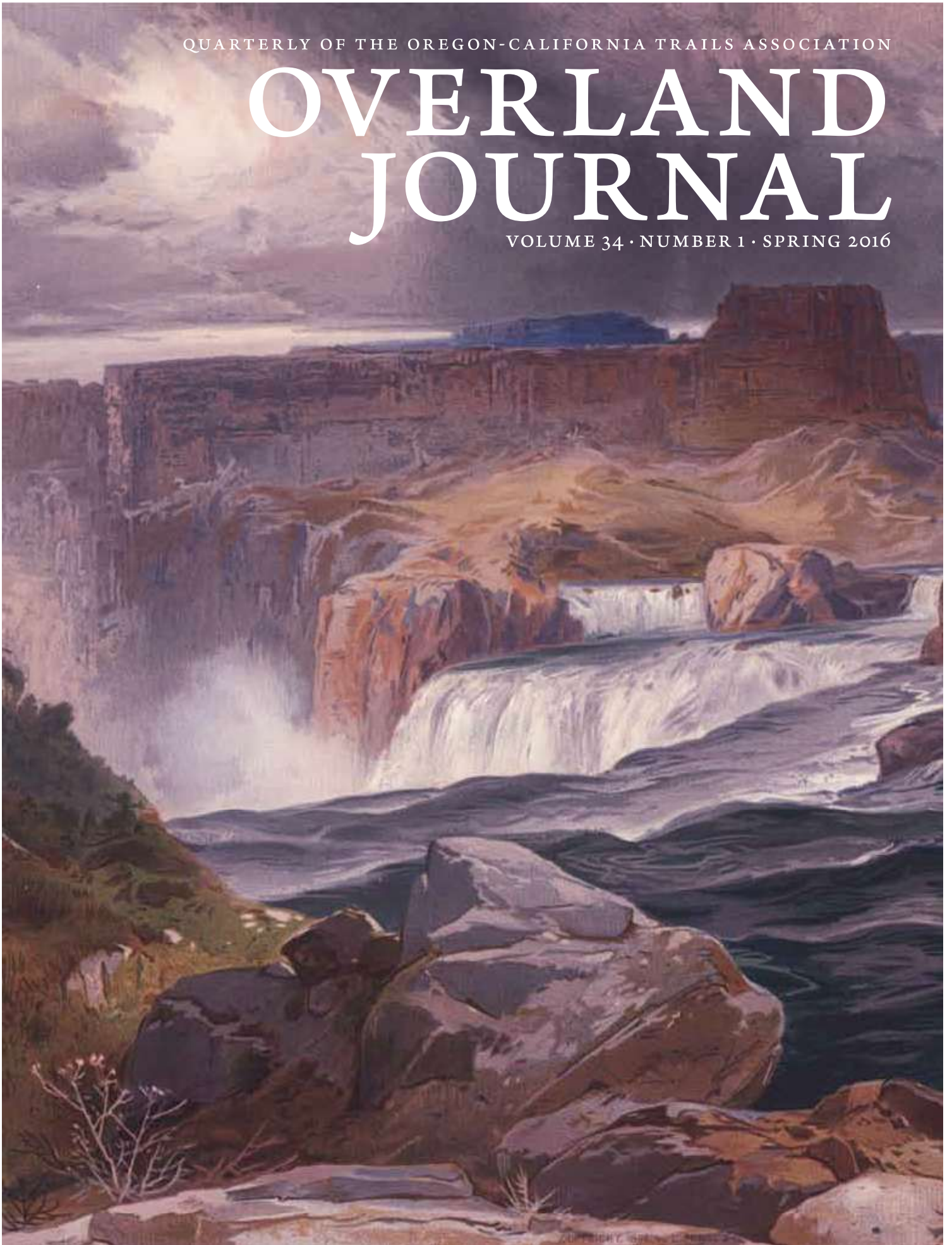


On arriving at Snake river
they commenced at once
to build a fort.

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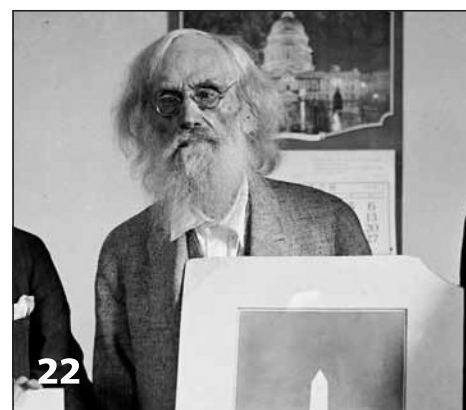
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Thomas Moran (1837–1926), *Great Falls of Snake River, Idaho Territory, 1876* (detail), chromolithograph on paper, 8³/₈ × 12¹/₂ in. L. Prang & Co, and Thomas Moran.

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BY JERRY EICHHORST

Building Fort Hall

A STORY TOLD BY MANY PEOPLE

IDAHO'S FORT HALL REGION SITS ON THE SOUTHEAST SIDE OF THE SNAKE RIVER A FEW MILES UPSTREAM FROM THE MOUTH OF THE PORTNEUF RIVER. THE AREA IS A FERTILE BOTTOMLANDS FILLED WITH LUSH GRASSES AND NUMEROUS STREAMS.

The great Bonneville Flood, which swept through the region thousands of years ago, changed the river's landscape as the massive volume of rushing water carved a deep canyon for much of the Snake River below the Portneuf River. Fossils of ancient mammoths found along the river near American Falls show the valley has long been a home to wildlife. Buffalo herds were once common. Trout, deer, elk, and other game were plentiful. It is a rich land with mild temperatures. Indians lived and hunted in the area for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Primarily inhabited by Shoshones, the area was visited by the Blackfoot tribe, often resulting in conflicts and battles. The westward migration of the white men changed the area forever, also frequently through conflicts as well.

Through the course of fifty years, there were several locations known as "Fort Hall." The original trading post was built in 1834. In August 1849, a small military post called Cantonment Loring was established three miles north of the trading post as a home for two companies of mounted U.S. riflemen. Less than a year later it was abandoned when the military moved west to The Dalles, along the Columbia River. A small

trading post was built a few miles south of the original trading post as new road traffic skirted the original site in the 1860s. In 1867, the Fort Hall Indian Reservation Agency headquarters were established here. Finally, in 1870, several miles to the east on Lincoln Creek, military Fort Hall was built. By 1883, it too was abandoned. Each of these establishments encompassed significant regional history. This article will focus on the original Fort Hall trading post built by Nathaniel Wyeth. A map of the Fort Hall area appears on page 9.

THE NATHANIEL WYETH EXPEDITION

With a previous trip west two years before and a contract in hand with the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Company to sell his goods to the company's trappers at their annual summer rendezvous, Nathaniel Jarvis Wyeth, a Boston ice merchant, convinced wealthy eastern investors of his ability to make much money acquiring furs from the Rocky Mountains and salmon from the Columbia River. Wyeth planned to purchase furs at the trappers' annual summer rendezvous, then take

them to the Columbia River where he would purchase salmon, and ship both back to New England. On April 28, 1834, Wyeth started west with a group of between fifty and seventy men, 250 horses, and \$3,000 in merchandise, headed for the Ham's Fork summer rendezvous in today's southwestern Wyoming. In his party were John Kirk Townsend, a physician and ornithologist; Thomas Nuttall, a botanist; Milton Sublette and his party of twenty trappers; and a small group of Methodist missionaries consisting of minister Jason Lee, his ordained nephew Daniel Lee, laymen Cyrus Shepard and Philip L. Edwards, hired hand Courtney M. Walker, and their herd of cattle. Milton Sublette would soon return to St. Louis because of medical problems with his leg, which eventually caused his death in 1837.

Unfortunately for Wyeth, his timing became his undoing. The group arrived at the Ham's Fork rendezvous a few days after his competitor and Milton's brother, William Sublette, arrived. William convinced the Rocky Mountain Fur Company trappers to ignore the contract with Wyeth, and trade with him instead. Sublette paid a \$500 forfeiture fee to Wyeth and even bought some goods from Wyeth.

Wyeth wrote numerous letters along the trip, which often provide personal information about the trip. The following letter describes his feelings after the failure at the rendezvous:

Hams Fork July 1st 1834

Mr. [M.] G. Sublette

Dear Sir

I arrived at Rendesvous at the mouth of Sandy on the 17th June. Fitzpatric refused to receive the goods. he paid however, the forfeit and the cash advance I made to you this however is no satisfaction to me. I do not accuse you or him of any intention of injuring me in this manner when you made the contract but I think he has been bribed to sacrifice my interests by better offers from your brother. Now Milton, business is closed between us, but you will find that you have only bound yourself over to receive your supplies at such price as may be inflicted and that all that you will ever make in the country will go to pay for your goods, you will be kept as you have been a mere slave to catch Beaver for others.

I sincerely wish you well and believe had you been here these things would not have been done. I hope that your leg is better and that you will yet be able to go whole footed in all respects.

I am Yr Obt. Servt. NJ. Wyeth

One of the laymen with Jason Lee, Philip Edwards, wrote a letter from the Ham's Fork rendezvous in which he said of Wyeth, "much credit is due to captain Wyeth, for the manner in which he has led us forward. This gentleman unites in his character, qualifications not always to be found, untiring prudence and circumspection, with unhesitating bravery and perseverance."

BUILDING A FORT

With a nearly full load of goods and no buyers, Wyeth deployed his backup plan to build a new trading post farther west, then continue his journey to the Columbia River. Wyeth sent word to numerous Indian tribes to the west to bring their furs and hides to the area of the Snake River near the Portneuf River. He loaded up his party and headed west to meet them at the fort he would build, hunting buffalo along the way. He planned to leave his trade goods and some of his men at his intended fort, then continue his journey to the Columbia River. Thomas McKay of the Hudson's Bay Company joined Wyeth on July 9 as they were camped along Bear River near Soda Springs. McKay's trappers would also join the party later, at the fort.

The Wyeth party reached the Snake River on July 13. After scouting and hunting for a day, on July 14 Wyeth selected a suitable site for his trading post. The location he chose was at the northern edge of a very large meadow, six miles upstream from the mouth of the Portneuf River.

Wyeth immediately set to work building a trading post. He named it "Fort Hall" after Henry Hall, the senior partner of the company that was backing him. Cottonwood trees were used to build a wooden enclosure 80 feet square and 15 feet high, with two small bastions at opposite corners providing unrestricted views in case of attack. Others of his party headed east to the headwaters of the Portneuf River to hunt buffalo, returning on Saturday, July 26, fully loaded with dried meat. With the fort's construction well underway and food supplies restocked, the group celebrated their good fortune that evening.

The following day, Sunday, July 27, Jason Lee conducted a church service in a grove of cottonwood trees near the river, the first Protestant sermon conducted west of the Rocky Mountains. Following the service, the celebration continued with horse racing, in which an accident killed one of McKay's

trappers, a Frenchman named Kanseau. He was buried the next day with Catholic services conducted by McKay's Canadians, a Methodist service led by Jason Lee, and an Indian service, as Kanseau's family was Indian.

The trappers began to move out the following week. Jason Lee and his missionary party, whose destination was Fort Vancouver in Oregon, joined them. Along the way, McKay stopped near the mouth of the Boise River at the Snake River and built a trading post for the Hudson's Bay Company called Snake Fort. Jason Lee and his party continued on to the Columbia River.

Meanwhile, Nathaniel Wyeth and the men with him finished his fort. On August 5 they raised a patchwork-stitched American flag, making this the first raising of the American flag on a flagpole in the future state of Idaho. With the ministers having gone west, the day became a wild celebration. The next day, Wyeth and most of his men started west on their journey to the Columbia, leaving twelve men behind at Fort Hall. They hunted, trapped, traded furs with the Indians, and built several small log houses within the fort in preparation for winter. In geographic terms, when it was completed in 1834, Fort Hall was the second building located along the Oregon Trail west of Independence, Missouri. The first was Fort William (its name was later change to Fort Laramie) in southeastern Wyoming. It had been built a few months earlier than Fort Hall, to shelter men and store the supplies William Sublette left there on his way to the Ham's Fork rendezvous.

Two years after completing his trading post, Wyeth agreed to sell it to the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). The Fort Hall sale was completed in 1837. Wyeth sustained a financial loss of \$20,000 for his endeavor. The HBC replaced the wooden walls with whitewashed adobe walls, which could be seen from many miles away.

DIARY ACCOUNTS

The Wyeth expedition to Fort Hall was very well documented. Wyeth recorded his letters and a diary. Phillip Edwards wrote a general letter from the Ham's Fork rendezvous that was first printed in eastern newspapers in October 1834. Jason Lee, John Kirk Townsend, Cyrus Shepard, and Osborne Russell wrote journals of the adventure as well. In 1844 Daniel Lee published *Ten Years in Oregon*, providing a history of Oregon along with his reminiscences of the expedition. The stories of

Isaac Rose were published in 1884, although their reliability is doubted by many historians. HBC's employee Henry Hall compiled a letterbook, which, along with the Columbia River Fishing and Trading Company records—including letters, instructions, accounts, and ledgers—are held by the Oregon Historical Society.

The portion of Wyeth's journal that includes the building of Fort Hall follows:

12th. [July] Made W. 3 miles and came upon a small creek which was said to be Portneuf it may possibly be the same water as that we camped on last night but running S. by E crossed this and a high range of hills [Mount Putnam] and struck a stream which is said to be Ross creek this runs about W. after 9 miles more camped saw but few Buffaloe today.

13th. No Buffaloe saw elk on Snake River which we struck after 6 miles W. by N. in some small slew saw a great quantity of fine trout about 2 lbs. weight

14th. Went down the river about 3 miles and found a location for a fort and succeeded and killed a Buffaloe near the spot

15. Commenced building the fort and sent out 12 men to hunt to be gone 12 days and continued at work on the fort a few days and fell short of provisions and was obliged to knock off in order to obtain food sent out some men for Buffaloe they returned in two days with plenty. The 12 returned the 28th [26th] day at night. On the 26th [27th] a Frenchman named Kanseau was killed horse racing and the 27th [28th] was buried near the fort he belonged to Mr. McKays camp and his comrades erected a decent tomb for him service for him was performed by the Canadians in the Catholic form by Mr. Lee in the Protestant form and by the Indians in their form as he had Indian family. he at least was well buried.

30 Mr. McKay left us and Mr [Jason] Lee and Capt. Stewart with him

6th. [Aug.] Having done as much as was requisite for safety to the Fort and drank a bale of liquor and named it Fort Hall in honor of the oldest partner of our concern we left it and with it Mr. Evans in charge of 11 men and 14 horses and mules and three cows we went down the river S.W. 4 miles and found a ford crossed and made N.W. 7 miles to the head of a spring and camped in all 29 strong. Fort Hall is in Latt. 43deg 14' Long. 113deg 35'

Jason Lee's original diary account of his visit at Fort Hall is as follows:



Aerial map of Fort Hall region. GOOGLE EARTH,
ADAPTED BY THE AUTHOR.

July 14.—Forded some bad creeks and camped on Snake River, as it was called here, but on the maps Lewis River, and is one of the main branches of the Columbia.

July 15.—Arrived at the place Captain W. had chosen to build his fort.

July 16.—Twelve men went out to procure and dry meat for the journey to Wallahwallah, there being no prospect of finding buffalo below [down the Snake].

July 26.—The men returned laden with meat.

Sunday, July 27.—By request of Mr. M'Kay, whose party had now arrived, we repaired to the grove for public worship, which was the first we had on the journey. Mr. M'Kay's company, consisting of Indians, half breeds, and Canadians, attended, and many of Capt. W's. company. All behaved with the utmost decorum. Being unwell I did not preach, but gave a short exhortation. After service two of Mr. M'Kay's Canadians went out for a horse race, and while they were at full speed another, attempting to run in with them, came in contact with one of the former, who was thrown from his horse and so injured that he knew nothing after and expired before morning.

July 28.—Read the funeral service to all of both companies, who appeared very solemn. O that they would remember this, that they would think on their latter end. Two Indians from Capt. M'Kay's company came to our tent, and told us they wished to give us two horses. Suspecting that they intended to pursue the same course that the traders say they generally do, viz., give a horse and then require more than its value in goods, I told them if they gave us horses we had little to give them in return. They replied that they wanted nothing in return. Fearing they would be displeased, if we refused, and being in want of horses, I told them that I would gladly accept their favor, and accordingly they brought us two fine white horses. Captain M'Kay had told them that we were missionaries, and it was on this account that they presented the horses. In return I gave them a small present with which they seemed well pleased. Thus we were provided for just in time of need, for two of our horses were nearly worn out, and were able to do nothing after, and we were obliged to leave them in the prairie. The name of Capt. W's. fort is Fort Hall, its latitude 43° 14' north. The place is not pleasant, the sand being frequently driven about by the wind in as large quantities as snow in the east.

July 30.—Left Fort Hall with [Capt. Stewart and] Captain M’K., Captain W., not being yet ready, and we being under the necessity of pushing on with such rapidity that we should not be able to take our cows, we judged it best to leave his company.

Cyrus Shepard’s diary is filled with praises to God and doubts about his ability to be a successful missionary. His daily prayers were often very rewarding to him. Shepard frequently provided great detail about events that occurred. Most of his Fort Hall account follows:

Saturday 12th July 1834—Still journey safe in the care of One disposing Power—some snow on the surrounding mountains—passed many excellent springs of pure water and encamped on Ross’ creek a small chrystal stream abounding with fine trout of which W. Lee caught a large mess—Afflicted with severe headache.

...

Monday 14th July 1834—Continued our journey and in a few hours arrived at Lewis river a branch of the Columbia and encamped for the day—Am yet feeble in body—walked out about a mile from camp and found myself so weak as to be scarcely able to return — — —

Tuesday 15th July 1834—Removed about five miles down the river to where Capt. W. is going to build a fort—are to tarry here several days. Lat. 43° 14' North.

Wednesday 16th July Twelve of the men left camp this day to hunt buffalo and cure the meat for our future journey as we soon leave the buffalo country entirely—They are directed to stay Twelve or fourteen days if they should not succeed in obtaining a sufficient quantity for our future use—one of our company (Mr. Walker) is one of the party—O my God

preserve them I pray Thee and return them in due season that we may again rejoice together in the land of the living—Engaged in finishing my halters — — —

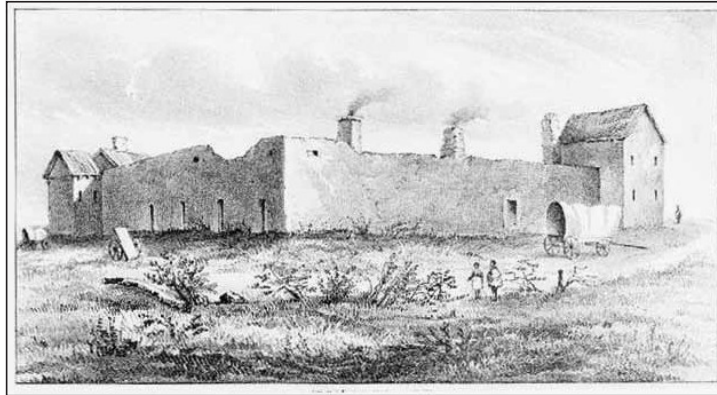
Thursday 17th July 1834—At work on my halters but being yet weak am able to do but little at once. Br. J. Lee has been out with a small party hunting for the immediate use of the camp, he has returned unwell having been wet & has caught a violent cold.

Friday 18th July—Br. Lee was in much pain and distress of body through the night attended with high fever—Applied hot water to his feet, etc., after which he gained a very little relief but could not obtain sleep—is unable to sit up today and has much pain in back, head & limbs—Finished my halters and find I am daily gaining strength for which I desire to be truly thankful—Enjoyed secret prayer unusually well this day.

Saturday 19th July 1834—Rather more unwell but able to attend to the labour devolving upon me—Br. Lee recovering slowly—had an invitation to dine with Mr. McCay [McKay] a gentleman in the employ of the Hudson’s Bay Company, his camp is a little above ours. Brs. J. & W.

Lee took dinner with him—Although an entire stranger to us till within a few days yet he appears quite friendly to us and our enterprise & promises us any assistance in his power hereafter and present assistance of any articles in his possession that we may be in need of—Several men left camp this day to hunt game for the immediate wants of the camp—the former stock being nearly exhausted.

Sabbath 20th July 1834—Capt. W. does not work his men this day, the first instance of the kind since landing at Independence—Spent the day in calm retirement in our tent having none to molest or make us afraid—Have not passed so



FORT HALL, 1849

Sketch from the *Official Report of the Howard Stansbury Expedition* (1849). The trading post (and fort) was established by Nathaniel Wyeth in 1834 along the Snake River. Wyeth located the fort in an area near the river where he knew wintering buffalo would attract Indians, and thus, trade. COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR.

quiet a Sabbath for months past. . . . Weather extremely hot in the middle of the day—one of the men that went out yesterday returned this evening with the flesh of a large grisley bear—Thus the Bountiful Giver of all good things provides for us in every extremity — — —

Monday 21st July 1834—Afflicted with headache—Our food this day consisted of bear meat and excellent fish caught from the river. . . .

Tuesday 22nd July 1834—Engaged in various domestic duties. . . . Br. Lee much more unwell — —

Wednesday 23 July 1834—. . . Mr. McCay has presented us a number of pounds of flour say fourteen or fifteen, an article so extremely necessary in sickness and this present came too in the time of greatest need as the little which we have been saving to use in case any of us should be sick is now nearly or quite exhausted, having been used to thicken porridge for the sick which at some times was the only sustenance we could take—The flour presented is from wheat grown at Vancouver on the Columbia river in the Oregon Territory. Thus we are permitted to eat of the fruit of the land even before arriving at the place of our destination. . . . Water boils here at a temperature of two hundred four degrees—have very warm days and cool nights—Thermometer over ninety degrees at noon some days and down to freezing point in the night — . . .

Friday 25th July 1834—Last night while alone on guard (The horses being shut up in a yard prepared for the purpose, my soul caught new fire by a glimpse of the Divine Glory and exulted largely in the God of my Salvation. . . . A number of the Snake indians called the diggers came to camp this day. They were meanly clad but otherwise appeared as intelligent as most other indians—. . .

Sabbath 27th July 1834—Sweet day of rest. . . . Retired about half a mile from camp to a willow grove, offered up prayer and praise to the Father of mercies, had a meeting and profitable season. . . .

After tarrying here a space returned to camp and passed the remainder of the forenoon in tranquility—mostly engaged in reading—P.M., Dined with Mr. McCay after which J. Lee by his request held a meeting in the grove near his camp and addressed the people from 1st Cor., 10th Ch., 31st V — — Felt my soul drawn forth in prayer before the meeting that good might be done in the name of Jesus—At the time appointed about Thirty indians and as many white

& French came together to hear the word of the Lord—Br. L. opened the meeting by reading the Fiftieth Psalm & afterward the hymn beginning with “This Lord of Sabbath let us praise, etc” which was sung to the tune of exhortation, prayer & address, followed by J. Lee—Br. L’s remarks were few but solemn and appropriate. The congregation gave the most profound and respectful attention, my soul was edified, comforted and quickened. . . .

Monday 28th July 1834—The unfortunate Frenchman mentioned as having been seriously injured yesterday lingered till two o’clock this morning, when his spirit returned to God who gave it—ever thing was done that could be by Mr. Mc and others—This day his remains were committed to their mother earth by his companions—being Catholics they placed a black cross on his heart, made of cloth sewed upon his shroud—he was buried without a coffin wrapped in a buffalo skin over his shroud—By request Br. Lee read scriptures and made a prayer at McCays camp and read the funeral service at his grave after which dust was committed to dust to await the morning of resurrection. . . .

Capt. W. and his men attended the service and general solemnity seemed to rest upon the assembly—May all improve this Solemn and awakening Providence to their present and everlasting good—The comrades of the deceased have erected an emplacement around his grave and placed a wooden cross over it, he has left an indian wife and three children—Two indians came to our tent and manifested a desire to give each a horse to the mission —

Tuesday 27th July 1834—Went fishing with J. & D. Lee about two miles down the river—were not very successful but became quite weary and were glad to make our way back to the camp—Expect to leave here tomorrow in company with Mr. McCay, Capt. W. being obliged to tarry longer at the Fort. . . .

Wednesday 30th July 1834 Breakfasted early, collected our animals and prepared for the journey—The two indians came and presented their horses, etc.—commenced our journey about 10 o’clock A.M. and proceeded Seven or eight miles and encamped on the Portneffe—Br. L. sick again with sever headache & pain in back and limbs which followed him severly most of the night but was somewhat mitigated in the morning. . . .

JOHN KIRK TOWNSEND WAS TRAINED AS A PHYSICIAN and pharmacist, and his keen interest in natural history and bird collecting is apparent. Townsend went with the hunting party to collect meat for the remainder of the journey. His journal, with its extensive descriptions of the journey, along with wildlife and birds, is much different from the typical emigrant journal:

This afternoon [July 23] I observed a large flock of wild geese passing over; and upon watching them, perceived that they alighted about a mile and a half from us, where I knew there

I heard a sort of angry growl or grunt directly before me and instantly after, saw a grizzly bear of the largest kind erect himself upon his hind feet within a dozen yards of me, his savage eyes glaring with horrible malignity, his mouth wide open, and his tremendous paws raised as though ready to descend upon me. For a moment, I thought my hour had come, and that I was fated to die an inglorious death away from my friends and my kindred

was a lake. Concluding that a little change of diet might be agreeable, I sallied forth with my gun across the plain in quest of the birds. I soon arrived at a thick copse of willow and currant bushes, which skirted the water, and was about entering, when I heard a sort of angry growl or grunt directly before me and instantly after, saw a grizzly bear of the largest kind erect himself upon his hind feet within a dozen yards of me, his savage eyes glaring with horrible malignity, his mouth wide open, and his tremendous paws raised as though ready to descend upon me. For a moment, I thought my hour had come, and that I was fated to die an inglorious death away from my friends and my kindred; but after waiting a moment in agonizing suspense, and the bear showing no inclination to advance, my lagging courage returned, and cocking both barrels of my gun, and presenting it as steadily as my nerves would allow, full at the shaggy breast of the creature, I retreated slowly backwards. Bruin evidently had

no notion of braving gunpowder, but I did not know whether, like a dog, if the enemy retreated he would not yet give me a chase; so when I had placed about a hundred yards between us, I wheeled about and flew, rather than ran, across the plain towards the camp. Several times during this run for life, (as I considered it,) did I fancy that I heard the bear at my heels; and not daring to look over my shoulder to ascertain the fact, I only increased my speed, until the camp was nearly gained, when, from sheer exhaustion I relaxed my efforts, fell flat upon the ground, and looked behind me. The whole space between me and the copse was untenanted, and I was forced to acknowledge, with a feeling strongly allied to shame, that my fears alone had represented the bear in chase of me.

When I arrived in camp, and told my break-neck adventure to the men, our young companion, Mr. Ashworth, expressed a wish to go and kill the bear, and requested the loan of my double-barrelled gun for this purpose. This I at first peremptorily refused, and the men, several of whom were experienced hunters, joined me in urging him not to attempt the rash adventure. At length, however, finding him determined on going, and that rather than remain, he would trust to his own single gun, I was finally induced to offer him mine, with a request, (which I had hoped would check his daring spirit,) that he would leave the weapon in a situation where I could readily find it; for after he had made one shot, he would never use a gun again.

He seemed to heed our caution and advice but little, and, with a dogged and determined air, took the way across the plain to the bushes, which we could see in the distance. I watched him for some time, until I saw him enter them, and then, with a sigh that one so young and talented should be lost from amongst us, and a regret that we did not forcibly prevent his going, I sat myself down, distressed and melancholy. We all listened anxiously to hear the report of the gun; but no sound reaching our ears, we began to hope that he had failed in finding the animal, and in about fifteen minutes, to my inexpressible relief, we saw him emerge from the copse, and bend his steps slowly towards us. When he came in, he seemed disappointed, and somewhat angry. He said he had searched the bushes in every direction, and although he had found numerous footprints, no bear was to be seen. It is probable that when I commenced my retreat in one direction, bruin made off in the other, and that although he was willing to dispute the ground with me, and prevent my passing his

lair, he was equally willing to back out of an engagement in which his fears suggested that he might come off the loser. . . .

On the morning of the 25th, we commenced baling up our meat in buffalo skins dried for the purpose. Each bale contains about a hundred pounds, of which a mule carries two; and when we had finished, our twelve longeared friends were loaded. Our limited term of absence is now nearly expired, and we are anxious to return to the fort in order to prepare for the journey to the lower country. . . .

At about 10 o'clock, we left our pleasant encampment, and bade adieu to the cold spring, the fat buffalo, and grizzly bears, and urging our mules into their fastest walk, we jolted along with our *provant* towards the fort. . . .

We travelled, this day, thirty miles, and the next afternoon, at 4 o'clock, arrived at the fort. On the route we met three hunters, whom Captain W. had sent to kill game for the camp. They informed us that all hands have been for several days on short allowance, and were very anxious for our return.

When we came in sight of the fort, we gave them a mountain salute, each man firing his gun in quick succession. They did not expect us until to-morrow, and the firing aroused them instantly. In a very few minutes, a score of men were armed and mounted, and dashing out to give battle to the advancing Indians, as they thought us. The general supposition was, that their little hunting party had been attacked by a band of roving Blackfeet, and they made themselves ready for the rescue in a space of time that did them great credit.

It was perhaps "*bad medicine*," (to use the mountain phrase,) to fire a salute at all, inasmuch as it excited some unnecessary alarm, but it had the good effect to remind them

that danger might be near when they least expected it, and afforded them an opportunity of showing the promptness and alacrity with which they could meet and brave it.

Our people were all delighted to see us arrive, and I could perceive many a longing and eager gaze cast upon the well filled bales, as our mules swung their little bodies through the camp. My companion, Mr. N., had become so exceedingly thin that I should scarcely have known him; and upon my expressing surprise at the great change in his appearance, he heaved a sigh of inanity, and remarked that I "would have been as thin as he if I had lived on old *Ephraim* for two weeks, and short allowance of that." I found, in truth, that the whole camp had been subsisting, during our absence, on little else than two or three grizzly bears which had been killed in the neighborhood; and with a complacent glance at my own rotund and *cow-fed* person, I wished my *poor* friend better luck for the future.

We found Mr. McKay's company encamped on the bank of the river within a few hundred yards of our tents. It consists of thirty men, thirteen of whom are Indians, Nez Perces, Chinooks and Kayouses with a few squaws. The remainder are French-Canadians, and half-breeds. Their lodges, of which there are several, are of a conical form, composed of ten long poles, the lower ends of which are pointed and driven into the ground; the upper blunt, and drawn together at the top by thongs. Around these poles, several dressed buffalo skins, sewed together, are stretched, a hole being left on one side for entrance.

These are the kind of lodges universally used by the mountain Indians while travelling: they are very comfortable and commodious, and a squaw accustomed to it, will erect and



Successful Boston businessman, inventor, and explorer Nathaniel Jarvis Wyeth (1802–1856) founded Fort Hall in 1834 as a trading post on the Snake River. He soon sold it, and from there went to Oregon, again set up a trading post. Unsuccessful once more, he returned to Boston, where he continued living a prosperous life. This portrait was made ca. 1832. WASHINGTON STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

NARRATIVE

OF A

JOURNEY ACROSS THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS,

TO

THE COLUMBIA RIVER,

AND

A VISIT TO THE SANDWICH ISLANDS, CHILI, &c.

WITH

A SCIENTIFIC APPENDIX.

BY JOHN K. TOWNSEND,

Member of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia.

PHILADELPHIA:

HENRY PERKINS, 134 CHESTNUT STREET.

BOSTON: PERKINS & MARVIN.

1839.

EH

prepare one for the reception of her husband, while he is removing the trapping from his horse. I have seen an expert Indian woman stretch a lodge in half the time that was required by four white men to perform the same operation with another in the neighborhood.

At the fort, affairs look prosperous: the stockade is finished; two bastions have been erected, and the work is singularly good, considering the scarcity of proper building tools. The house will now soon be habitable, and the structure can then be completed at leisure by men who will be left here in charge, while the party travels on to its destination, the Columbia. . . .

I think I never was more gratified by any exhibition in my life. The humble, subdued, and beseeching looks of the poor untutored beings who were calling upon their heavenly father to forgive their sins, and continue his mercies to them, and the evident and heart-felt sincerity which characterized the whole scene, was truly affecting, and very impressive.

The next day being the Sabbath, our good missionary, Mr. Jason Lee, was requested to hold a meeting, with which he obligingly complied. A convenient, shady spot was selected in the forest adjacent, and the greater part of our men, as well as the whole of Mr. McKay's company, including the Indians, attended. The usual forms of the Methodist service, (to which Mr. L. is attached,) were gone through, and were followed by a brief, but excellent and appropriate exhortation by that gentleman. The people were remarkably quiet and attentive, and the Indians sat upon the ground like statues. Although not one of them could understand a word that was said, they nevertheless maintained the most strict and decorous silence, kneeling when the preacher kneeled, and rising when he rose, evidently with a view of paying him and us a

suitable respect, however much their own notions as to the proper and most acceptable forms of worship, might have been opposed to ours.

A meeting for worship in the Rocky mountains is almost as unusual as the appearance of a herd of buffalo in the settlements. A sermon was perhaps never preached here before; but for myself, I really enjoyed the whole scene; it possessed the charm of novelty, to say nothing of the salutary effect which I sincerely hope it may produce.

Mr. Lee is a great favorite with the men, deservedly so, and there are probably few persons to whose preaching they would have listened with so much complaisance. I have often been amused and pleased by Mr. L.'s manner of reproving them for the coarseness and profanity of expression which is so universal amongst them. The reproof, although decided, clear, and strong, is always characterized by the mildness and affectionate manner peculiar to the man; and although the good effect of the advice may not be discernible, yet it is always treated with respect, and its utility acknowledged.

In the evening, a fatal accident happened to a Canadian belonging to Mr. McKay's party. He was running his horse, in company with another, when the animals were met in full career by a third rider, and horses and men were thrown with great force to the ground. The Canadian was taken up completely senseless, and brought to Mr. McKay's lodge, where we were all taking supper. I perceived at once that there was little chance of his life being saved. He had received an injury of the head which had evidently caused concussion of the brain. He was bled copiously, and various local remedies were applied, but without success; the poor man died early next morning.

He was about forty years of age, healthy, active, and shrewd, and very much valued by Mr. McKay as a leader in his absence, and as an interpreter among the Indians of the Columbia.

At noon the body was interred. It was wrapped in a piece of coarse linen, over which was sewed a buffalo robe. The spot selected, was about a hundred yards south of the fort, and the funeral was attended by the greater part of the men of both camps. Mr. Lee officiated in performing the ordinary church ceremony, after which a hymn for the repose of the soul of the departed, was sung by the Canadians present. The grave is surrounded by a neat palisade of willows, with a black cross erected at the head, on which is carved the name "Casseau."

On the 30th of July, Mr. McKay and his party left us for Fort Vancouver, Captain Stewart and our band of missionaries

OPPOSITE: Title page of John Kirk Townsend's journal, *Narrative of a Journey Across the Rocky Mountains, to the Columbia River, and a Visit to the Sandwich Islands, Chili, &c: With a Scientific Appendix*, published in Philadelphia in 1839. Townsend (1801-1851) was trained as a physician and ornithologist; he left his Quaker family in Pennsylvania to travel with botanist Thomas Nuttall on the Wyeth expedition to the Pacific. His highly readable account of that journey (1839, and many later editions), is acclaimed as true adventure writing. COURTESY BIODIVERSITY HERITAGE LIBRARY ([HTTP://WWW.BIODIVERSITYHERITAGE.ORG](http://www.biodiversityheritage.org)), PUBLIC DOMAIN.

accompanying them. The object of the latter in leaving us, is, that they may have an opportunity of travelling more slowly than we should do, on account, and for the benefit of the horned cattle which they are driving to the lower country. We feel quite sad in the prospect of parting from those with whom we have endured some toil and danger, and who have been to some of us as brothers, throughout our tedious journey; but, if no unforeseen accident occurs, we hope to meet them all again at Walla-Walla, the upper fort on the Columbia. As the party rode off, we fired three rounds, which were promptly answered, and three times three cheers wished the travellers success.

August 5th. At sunrise this morning, the “star-spangled banner” was raised on the flag-staff at the fort, and a salute fired by the men, who, according to orders, assembled around it. All in camp were then allowed the free and uncontrolled use of liquor, and, as usual, the consequence was a scene of rioting, noise, and fighting, during the whole day; some became so drunk that their senses fled them entirely, and they were therefore harmless; but by far the greater number were just sufficiently under the influence of the vile trash, to render them in their conduct disgusting and tiger-like. We had “gouging,” biting, fisticuffing, and “stamping” in the most “scientific” perfection; some even fired guns and pistols at each other, but these weapons were mostly harmless in the unsteady hands which employed them. Such scenes I hope never to witness again; they are absolutely sickening, and cause us to look upon our species with abhorrence and loathing. Night at last came, and cast her mantle over our besotted camp; the revel was over, and the men retired to their pallets peaceably, but not a few of them will bear palpable evidence of the debauch of the 5th of August.

The next morning we commenced packing, and at 11 o'clock bade adieu to “Fort Hall.” Our company now consists of but thirty men, several Indian women, and one hundred and sixteen horses. We crossed the main Snake or Shoshone river, at a point about three miles from the fort. It is here as wide as the Missouri at Independence, but, beyond comparison, clearer and more beautiful.

Immediately on crossing the river, we entered upon a wide, sandy plain, thickly covered with wormwood, and early in the afternoon, encamped at the head of a delightful spring, about ten miles from our starting place.

OSBORNE RUSSELL WAS ANOTHER OF THE MEMBERS of Wyeth’s expedition. He was designated to stay behind at Fort Hall and hunt to provide food for the fort. Inexperienced as a hunter, he was forced to learn. Russell’s account of the trip west and building of Fort Hall is sparse but sometimes provides details not found in other accounts. His account, considered one of the best journals of a mountain man in the field, continues recording his life as a trapper in the Fort Hall area for eight years:

The next day [July 12] we traveled in a westerly direction over a rough, mountainous country [Mount Putnam] about twenty-five miles, and the day following, after traveling about twenty miles in the same direction, we emerged from the mountains into the great valley of the Snake River. On the 16th we crossed the valley and reached the river in about twenty-five miles travel west. Here Mr. Wyeth concluded to stop, build a fort and deposit the remainder of his merchandise, leaving a few men to protect them, and trade with the Snake and Bannock Indians.

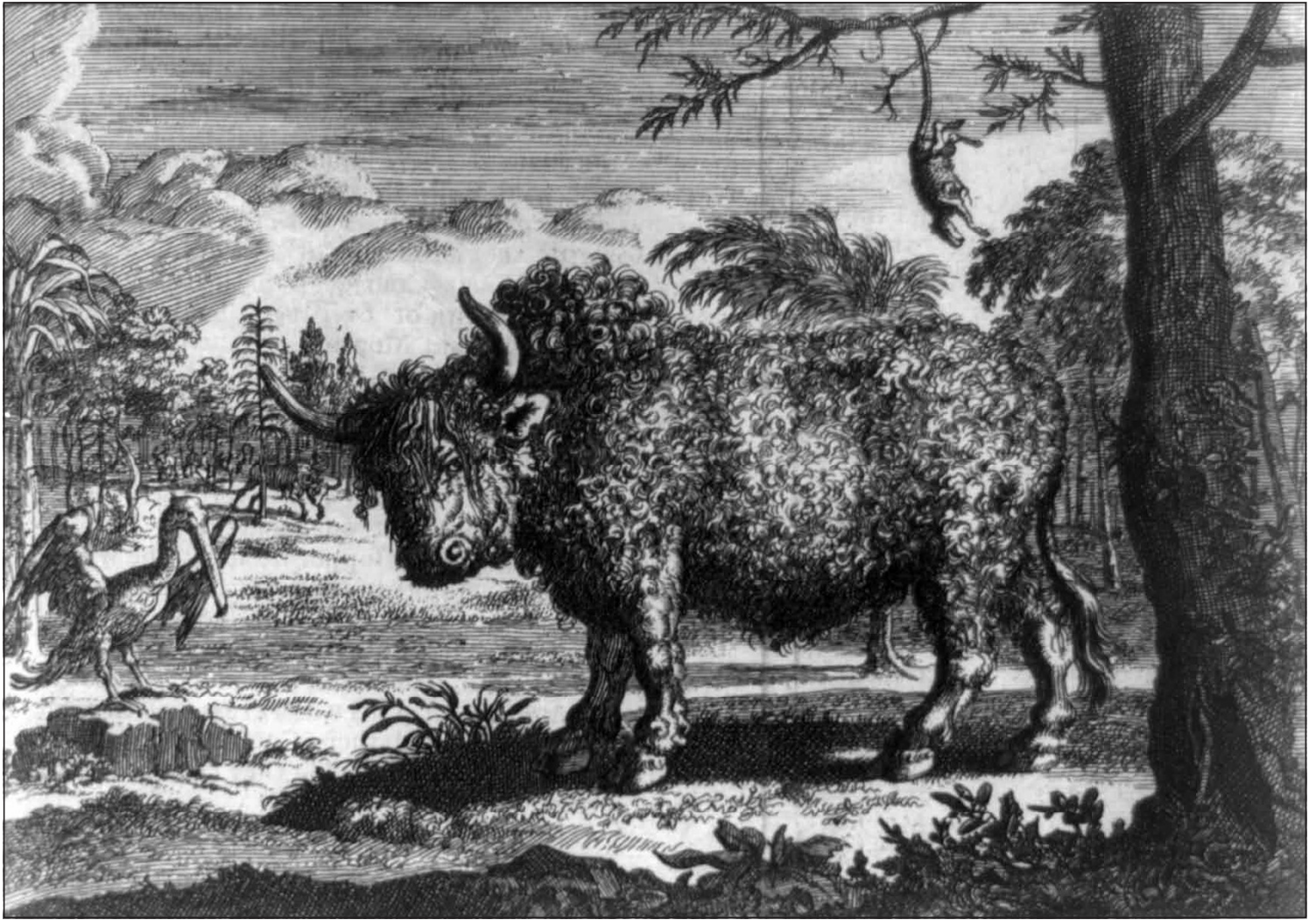
On the 18th [July] we commenced the fort, which was a stockade eighty feet square, built of cottonwood trees set on end, sunk two and one-half feet in the ground and standing about fifteen feet above, with two bastions eight feet square at the opposite angles. On the 4th of August the fort was completed and on the 5th the “Stars and Stripes” were unfurled to the breeze at sunrise in the center of a savage and uncivilized country, over an American trading post.

The next day Mr. Wyeth departed for the mouth of the Columbia River with all the party excepting twelve men (myself included) who were stationed at the fort. I now began to experience the difficulties attending a mountaineer, we being all raw hands, excepting the man who had charge of the fort, and a mulatto, the two latter having but very little experience in hunting game with the rifle, and although the country abounded with game, still it wanted experience to kill it.

Isaac Rose and his friend, Joe Lewis, joined Wyeth’s party in St. Louis to serve for fifteen months, for which they were to receive \$250 each. Both Rose and Lewis were also part of the group that stayed behind at Fort Hall to trap and hunt. Rose’s stories of his adventures during four years in the Rocky Mountains were published by James B. Marsh in 1884. A small portion is shared here:



Fort Hall Historic Marker, placed in 1962 by the National Park Service. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR.



Nathaniel Wyeth chose the Snake River valley for the site of his new fort because Indians were drawn there by the herds of buffalo that wintered in the region. This rare, late-eighteenth-century engraving of a North American buffalo was made during another expedition—this one led by the French-born René-Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle, exploring down the Mississippi River in the late 1600s. Drawn by Fr. Louis Hennepin, the buffalo image was published in France in 1698 and English in 1699, in *A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America*. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS DIGITAL ID CPH 3A10787. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

On arriving at Snake river they commenced at once to build a fort. This was a big undertaking, as they had no wagons to haul their timber. Logs were cut and dragged or carried to the spot needed where they were placed in an upright position, side by side, and about three feet in the ground.

In this manner a large space was enclosed, and while part of the men were engaged in the outer palisade, others were constructing a log house in the enclosure in which to store the goods. They gave it the name of Fort Hall. As soon as the fort was built and the goods securely housed, Wyeth thought it high time to commence business, and a party of men were at once sent off, under the command of Joseph Gale, to trap Beaver in the Blackfoot country. Among them was Rose and Joe Lewis.

HAVING BEEN OUT-FOXED BY WILLIAM SUBLETTE AT the Ham's Fork rendezvous of 1834, Nathaniel Wyeth moved west and built Fort Hall, a trading post on the Snake River. He chose a suitable site a few miles above the mouth of the Portneuf River and a small stockade was constructed. Wyeth left twelve men behind to maintain the fort, trap, and hunt. The remainder continued west with Wyeth to the mouth of Columbia River, where they would arrange the shipment of their furs to the East Coast.

The passages by expedition participants presented here provide rich and intriguing details of the creation of Fort Hall. Although the fort was built as a contingency to the failure of Wyeth's primary plan to supply trade goods at the Ham's Fork rendezvous, Fort Hall became an important trading post on the Oregon and California Trails in the years to come. Many an emigrant party stopped there before continuing on, either to Oregon or California. A stone monument marks the location today.

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