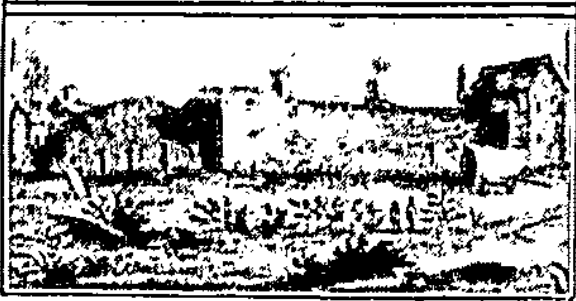


The Fort Hall Centennial



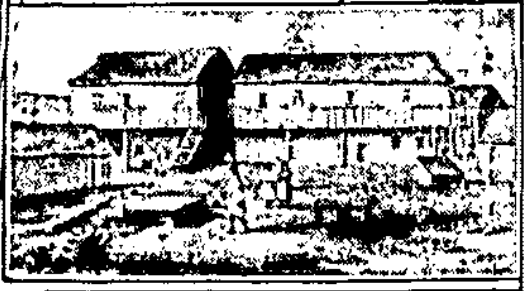
Exterior of Fort Hall, 1849



Dr. John McLoughlin



Nathaniel J. Wyeth



Interior of Fort Hall, 1849

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

AUGUST 5, 1834. In a lush, upland meadow, in what is now the state of Idaho, stands a little stockaded fort, its walls of freshly-peeled cottonwood logs gleaming white in the early morning sunshine. Inside the fort a motley crowd of men is gathered around a tall flagstaff. Hunters and trappers, whose greasy, smoke-begrimed buckskins tell of a hundred campaigns in the great West, rub elbows with men whose garb bespeak the East. In the murmur of talk the nasal twang of the Down East Yankee rises sharply above the gruffer tones of the frontiersmen.

Apart from the others stand two young fellows destined for future fame as men of science. One is Thomas Nuttall (or Nuthall), a botanist fresh from Harvard college, and the other is J. K. Townsend of Philadelphia, physician and ornithologist. As they talk to a third man, scarcely older than themselves, their deferential manner toward him stamps him as the leader of this varied company. And he is, for this is "Capt." Nathaniel J. Wyeth, founder of the "Columbia River Fishing and Trading Company," a young Boston business man, but already a veteran of westward travel.

Now Wyeth steps forward to the foot of the flagstaff. In his hand he holds a folded flag. He attaches it to the halyard and as it rises to the peak the roaring of muskets and the popping of pistols mingle with the whirling crack of long rifles. As the banner ripples out in the sunshine in the red, white and blue glory of the Stars and Stripes a mighty shout goes up from the assembled company.

Thus was another wilderness outpost established and, although this shouting throng may not realize it now, the curtain has been rung up on another act in the epic drama which is to be called "The Winning of the West."

Two months later Wyeth is to write to an uncle back East, saying: "I have built a fort on the Snake River, which I have named Fort Hall from the oldest gentleman in the concern, Mr. Henry Hall. We manufactured a magnificent flag from some unbleached sheeting, a little red flannel and a few blue patches, saluted it with damaged powder and wet it in villainous alcohol; and after all, I assure you, it makes a very respectable appearance amid the dry and desolate regions of central America. Its bastions stand a terror to the skulking Indian and a beacon of safety to the fugitive hunter. It is manned by 12 men and has constantly loaded in the bastions 100 guns and rifles. These bastions command both the inside and outside of the fort. After building this fort I sent messengers to the neighboring nations to induce them to come to trade."

August 5, 1934. The modern city of Pocatello, Idaho, is in gala array. Crowds surge through its streets. Flags are flying. Bands are blaring. There are parades, floats, pageants, speeches. For today is the beginning of the four-day celebration of the event which took place just a hundred years ago—the founding of the post that was "decreed by fate to be a centrifugal point of trade, commerce and recuperation." Such is the characterization of this post by Jennie Broughton Brown, whose splendid "Fort Hall on the Oregon Trail" was published two years ago by the Caxton Printers, Ltd., of Caldwell, Idaho. In the years that followed Fort Hall was a beacon of safety not only to "the fugitive hunter" but to many a weary emigrant over the Oregon Trail which ran beneath its walls; it was a port of call for nearly every wayfarer—trapper, trader, missionary, explorer, guide and army officer—whose name looms large in the early history of the West; it was to have a stirring part in the later stagecoach and freighting days; and it was a center of activity in more than one Indian war when the red man was making his last desperate stand against the white man.

The founder of Fort Hall was Nathaniel J. Wyeth. Born in Cambridge, Mass., January 29, 1802, of distinguished ancestry (his mother was a relative of John Hancock), Wyeth was intended for Harvard college of which both his father and oldest brother were graduates. But he was impatient to begin a business career and declined to go to college.

By the time he was thirty years old he had made a modest success in his home community, managing a farm and engaging in the ice trade which brought in an annual income of some \$1,200. Then, influenced by the writings of Hall J. Kelley, founder of the "Oregon Colonization Society," Wyeth determined to organize a trading company to exploit the rich natural resources of the Columbia river region in the Pacific Northwest. His plan was to lead an overland expedition to the Oregon country and establish trading posts which were to be supplied by ships that were to sail around Cape Horn to the head of navigation on the Columbia and from there to bring back the furs and salmon collected at the posts.

On March 11, 1832, the expedition set out. But, although they were lucky at Independence, Mo., to fall in with Milton Sublette of the Rocky Mountain Fur company, who was leading a party of trappers and traders into the mountains, misfortune dogged the footsteps of the eastern "tenderfeet." First some of Wyeth's men grew faint-hearted and turned back. Then they were attacked by the fierce Blackfoot Indians and lost three men killed and eight badly wounded



The Invitation to the President

Eventually Wyeth and the remnants of his party reached the Columbia in a destitute condition. But they were kindly received by Dr. John McLoughlin, chief factor of the Columbia river district for the Hudson's Bay company at Fort Vancouver, and there began a lasting friendship between McLoughlin and Wyeth, even though the Yankee adventurer was a potential business rival of the H. B. C. factor.

At Vancouver came the crowning blow to Wyeth's misfortunes. He learned that the ship which was bringing his supplies around Cape Horn had been shipwrecked and all of his goods lost. Nothing remained for him to do but to release his men from their contract and return home to recoup his lost fortunes. Some of his men remained in the Oregon country and these "remnants of Wyeth's first expedition became part of the nucleus around which later Oregon immigrants clustered." So from the historical point of view the expedition was not an utter loss.

Accompanied by two men, Wyeth set out for the East in the spring of 1833 and by November 3 of that year he was home again after an absence of 18 months, having "made the first continuous land journey on record from Boston to the mouth of the Columbia." It is a tribute to both the integrity of the man and the force of his personality that despite his failure he was able to interest his friends in a second expedition. Within 12 days after his return to Massachusetts he had organized the "Columbia River Fishing and Trading Company," had secured money from New York and Boston business men and chartered another ship for the journey around Cape Horn.

On his return trip east he had again come into contact with representatives of the Rocky Mountain Fur company, this time in the persons of Milton Sublette and Thomas Fitzpatrick, and had obtained from them the contract for supplying the merchandise to be used in their trading operations. So he purchased about 13,000 pounds of goods to fill this contract, part of it in eastern markets and, shipping it down the Ohio, secured the remainder in St. Louis. Again he prepared to start from Independence. There he was joined by the two young scientists, Nuttall and Townsend, who were also Oregon-bound.

But a more important contingent of his party was a group of five men, whose presence is accounted for by Mrs. Brown as follows: "When Wyeth had returned to Boston the preceding year, he was accompanied by two Indian lads, one about eighteen years of age, a kind of servant of all work, and a half-breed boy of thirteen, the son of a Hudson's bay trader and a Flathead beauty. Their presence in the East, and also the visit of a party of Indians to St. Louis in search of 'a Book, the Guide to Heaven,' had aroused great zeal in missionary circles. Partly as a result of these visits, a small party of Methodist missionaries was in Wyeth's company for safe conduct on their way to the Oregon Indians. Their leader was Jason Lee, described by Townsend as a 'tall, powerful man, capable of handling men in a wild country.' With him was his nephew, Daniel Lee, and three lay brethren, P. L. Edwards, Cyrus Shephard and C. M. Walker, all of whom proved to be good travelers and excellent companions on a long tedious trip."

The journey across the plains was comparatively uneventful. His destination was a place on the Snake river in the country claimed by the Shoshoni or Snake Indians. En route there his party was joined by Thomas McKay, a Hudson's Bay man, who was hunting in that region with a band of Canadians and Indians and who traveled along with him until he reached the site which he picked out for his fort.

It was a natural meadow of rich bottom land, enclosed by a sharp bend of the Snake river on



Jason Lee

two sides and by a slough forming a protection on the third. Arriving there on July 14, Wyeth lost no time in getting to work on the fort. According to Townsend, part of the men began felling trees, collecting drift logs and making corrals for their horses while the rest were sent out to hunt for meat. Osborne Russell, a youngster from Maine who accompanied the party as a trapper, records in his journal that "On the 18th we commenced the actual construction of the fort, which was a stockade eighty feet square, built of cotton wood 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."

When the hunters returned on Saturday, July 20, they found the stockade virtually completed and the men working on the houses inside. The next day Wyeth invited Jason Lee, the leader of the missionaries, to preach to the men and at two o'clock that afternoon the whole party assembled in the shade of a cottonwood grove to listen to the first sermon ever delivered within the boundaries of the state of Idaho.

On July 30 McKay decided to leave for Fort Vancouver and Lee and his followers, in order to reach their new fields of missionary labors the sooner, joined them.

After the completion of the fort on August 4 and the flag-raising ceremony the next day, Wyeth and his men commenced packing on August 9 to push on to the Columbia, leaving Fort Hall in charge of a Mr. Evans who kept with him "11 men, 14 horses and mules and three cows." Thus began the history of this famous fort.

As for the later fortunes of the leader and others who had played a part in its building: Wyeth continued on to Walla Walla where there was a happy reunion with his friend, Jason Lee. He reached Vancouver on September 14 and was again courteously received by Doctor McLoughlin. On the lower end of Wajantoo Island, later called Sauve Island, he built another post which he called Fort William. But during the next two or three years, although he worked tirelessly, the competition of the Hudson's Bay company under the management of his friend, Doctor McLoughlin, was too strong for him to overcome.

So his enterprise for which he had had such high hopes ended in failure. In 1837 Fort Hall was left in charge of C. M. Walker with instructions to "lease it to some trusty person for 15 years." Then Wyeth returned to his home town of Cambridge to attempt to retrieve his lost fortunes by going into the ice business again.

In 1844 Jason Lee also went back to his home town, Stanstead, in eastern Canada, and there he died the next year. But his fame, as the pioneer missionary of Oregon and the founder of a school which later became Willamette university was already secure. In 1837 Doctor McLoughlin died, poverty-stricken and broken-hearted, a "Man Without a Country." For the Hudson's Bay company had removed him from his position because he had not exerted himself to discourage American settlement in the Oregon country and his efforts to become an American citizen were thwarted by Americans who remembered only that he had once been an employee of a British company and who forgot how he had befriended their fellow-countrymen when they were in dire need.

In contrast to this sad ending to the man who was once the "Emperor of the West," it is pleasant to record that when death had come to Nathaniel J. Wyeth the previous year it had found him once more a prosperous man of affairs, even though a century was to pass before his name would be widely honored in connection with the celebration of the fort which he founded—Fort Hall on the Oregon Trail.