“Life at Fort Astoria: John Jacob Astor’s Pacific Fur Company Post on the Columbia River.”

Jay H. Buckley
PROCEEDINGS
of the 2012 Fur Trade Symposium

September 5-8, 2012
Pinedale, Wyoming

Jim Hardee, Editor

Published by the Sublette County Historical Society and
the Museum of the Mountain Man, Pinedale, Wyoming
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MUSEUM OF THE MOUNTAIN MAN
SUBLETTE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Cover image: Robert Stuart
MISSOURI HISTORY MUSEUM, ST. LOUIS

ISBN-10: 0976811383

The Proceedings of the 2012 Fur Trade Symposium is published by
the Sublette County Historical Society/Museum of the Mountain Man,
a non-profit organization in Pinedale, Wyoming.
Copies are available by contacting the Museum.

SCHS/MMM
P.O. Box 909
700 E. Hennick Lane
Pinedale, Wyoming 82941
307-367-4101
www.MuseumoftheMountainMan.com

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Design by Sommers Studio, Pinedale, Wyoming
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The 200th Anniversary of the Astorians: A Timeline

1792 (May 11) – Captain Gray at 46° 15’ N sails his merchant ship Columbia into the mouth of a large river he later names after the ship. Having been informed of the potentially valuable harbor by Gray, Captain George Vancouver, RN, sends Lt. Broughton into the river for a detailed survey in October the same year.

1793 (Jul 22) – Alexander Mackenzie of the Northwest Company from Montreal becomes the first European to reach the western shore of North America by an overland route at Bella Coola, 52° 22’ 42” N and 127° 28’ 20” W

1802 (summer) – President Thomas Jefferson is inspired to match the overland continental challenge presented by reading Alexander Mackenzie’s book Voyages from Montreal.

1803 (Feb 22) – Jefferson gets Congressional approval for funding the Corps of Discovery to be led by Captains Lewis and Clark to cross overland via the Missouri River to the mouth of the Columbia River

1806 (Sep 23) – Lewis and Clark return to St. Louis

1808 – John Jacob Astor begins planning for a fur trade venture in the Pacific Northwest.

1810 (Spring) – Pacific Fur Company formed by John Jacob Astor with Canadian partners Alexander McKay, Donald McKenzie, Duncan McDougall, David Stuart, and American partners Wilson Price Hunt, Ramsay Crooks, Robert McClellan, and Joseph Miller

1810 (late May/early June) – Instructions are dispatched by NWC from Montreal to David Thompson in time for him to pick them up July 22 at Rainy Lake. Thompson is ordered to return west to the Columbia River to meet John Jacob Astor’s fur traders expected to arrive there from New York by sea and by land.

1810 (Sep 6) – Astor’s ship Tonquin sets sail from New York captained by Jonathan Thorn with three senior partners Alexander McKay, David Stuart and Duncan McDougall.

1810 (Oct 21) – Westbound Astorians led by Wilson Price Hunt leave St. Louis with senior partners Donald McKenzie, Ramsay Crooks, Robert McClellan and Joseph Miller.

1810 (Nov 16) – Westbound Astorians set up winter camp near mouth of Nodaway River.

1811 (Jan 18) – After crossing the newly discovered Athabasca Pass, Thompson sets up a winter camp at Boat Encampment near the mouth of the Canoe River where it meets the Columbia at 52° 09’ N.

1811 (Mar 22) Tonquin reaches mouth of Columbia River.

1811 (Apr 12) – Construction of Fort Astoria begins under direction of Duncan McDougall.

1811 (Apr 16) – Thompson party breaks camp and heads south by canoe via the Columbia River to the NWC post at Spokane.

1811 (Apr 21) – Westbound Astorians leave winter quarters. The party includes 60 men, one woman (Marie Dorion) and two Dorion children.
1811 (May 24) – Westbound Astorians hire Edward Robinson, John Hoback, and Jacob Reznor as guides near mouth of the Nisbrara River.

1811 (Jun) – Tonquin destroyed in fight with Indians on Vancouver Island. The crew, including partner Alexander McKay, is killed.

1811 (Jul 9) – Going downstream toward the Pacific Ocean, Thompson passes the forks of the Columbia and Snake rivers and leaves a signpost there with a notice claiming the surrounding territory for the NWC.

1811 (Jul 15 to 22) – Thompson meets the Pacific Fur Company partners at Fort Astoria. Thompson party returns by boat up the Columbia River to the Athabasca Pass and eastward.

1811 (Jul 18) – Westbound Astorians leave the Missouri River and head west along the Grand River with horses acquired from the Arikara Indians.

1811 (Sep 18 to 24) – After crossing Union Pass, Westbound Astorians camped in the Green River Valley hunting buffalo.

1811 (Oct) – Astor’s second supply ship, the Beaver, leaves New York.


1811 (Oct 19) Leaving their horses behind, the westbound Astorians float down the Snake River in cottonwood canoes.

1811 (Oct 28) Westbound Astorians stopped by rapids near present day Caldron Linn, Idaho, where they cache goods and break up into five groups.

1812 (Jan 18) – Westbound Astorians Donald McKenzie and Robert McClellan reach Fort Astoria.

1812 (Feb 15) – Westbound Astorian Wilson Price Hunt reaches Fort Astoria.

1812 (May) – Supply ship Beaver reaches Fort Astoria.

1812 (May 11) – Westbound Astorians Ramsay Crooks and John Day reach Fort Astoria.

1812 (Jun) – Wilson Price Hunt leaves Fort Astoria on the Beaver headed for Russian settlements.

1812 (Jun 18) – Congress declares war on England, starting the War of 1812.


1812 (Aug 20) – Eastbound Astorians find Hoback, Robinson, Reznor and Miller near present day Grandview, Idaho.


1812 (Sep 19) – Eastbound Astorian horses stolen by Crow Indians near present-day Alpine, Wyoming.

1812 (Oct 16) – Eastbound Astorians find abandoned Indian village near present-day Pinedale, Wyoming.

1812 (Oct 21) – Eastbound Astorians cross South Pass.

1812 (Dec 31) – Eastbound Astorians set up winter camp near present-day Torrington, Wyoming.

1813 (Mar 6) – Astor’s third supply ship, the Lark, sets sail from New York.

1813 (May 6) – Eastbound Astorians arrive in St. Louis.

1813 (Jun 23) – Robert Stuart arrives in New York to bring Astor news from Fort Astoria.

1813 (Aug 13) – The Lark is wrecked in heavy seas near Maui, Hawaii.
1813 (Oct 16) – Duncan McDougall sells Fort Astoria and all assets of the Pacific Fur Company to George McTavish and the NWC.

1813 (Dec 12) – British ship Racoon arrives at Fort Astoria. Captain Black takes possession of Fort Astoria and renames it Fort George.

1814 (Dec 24) – Treaty of Ghent ends the War of 1812 and includes a clause that all captured lands return to their previous owners.

1816 (Oct) – Hunt arrives in New York on the ship Pedlar.

1818 (Oct 6) – Fort Astoria is returned to the U.S. in a ceremony on site with representatives of the U.S. and Britain present. NWC fur trade operations continue under the name Fort George.

1821 (Jul 1) – The NWC is merged with the HBC under the Hudson’s Bay Company name.

1824 (Nov 8) – John McLoughlin and Governor George Simpson of the HBC arrive at Fort George. Simpson decides to close the old Astoria site and relocate the HBC’s Oregon trading headquarters to a site 100 miles inland where it would be agriculturally self-sufficient. Fort Vancouver, the name of Astoria’s replacement, opens March 19, 1825.

1846 (Jun 18) – U.S./British Boundary Treaty along 49° latitude places the lower Columbia River in U.S. territory.
Life at Fort Astoria: John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company Post on the Columbia River

by Jay H. Buckley, Ph.D.

For employees of John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company, life at Fort Astoria was dangerous, difficult, and deadly. Nothing about the establishment or operation of the post proved to be easy. The post was hard to get to by land or sea, formidable to construct, and difficult to provision. Its entire history represented a series of unfortunate events from start to finish. Fort Astoria’s elusive promise of success never materialized due to leadership struggles, inclement weather, indifferent native neighbors, aggressive competition from rival companies, and the uncertainties of war. In the end, Fort Astoria proved a disappointment to its namesake but ultimately ended up being a boon to the eventual extension of the American republic. To understand the significance of Fort Astoria, one must consider the competition from rival countries and companies, formation of Astor’s Pacific Fur Company, difficulties in constructing the post, struggles of daily operations, complicated native relations, and the fort’s sale and takeover during the War of 1812.1

After Britain and the United States signed the 1783 Treaty of Paris formally ending the Revolutionary War, America received all territory as far west as the Mississippi River. As the year 1784 dawned, while thirteen states hugging the Atlantic were working on forming a “more perfect union,” enterprising fur traders cast their eyes to the Pacific. The year proved to be an important one for the fur trade of the North American continent. Spain, Russia, Great Britain and the United States staked claim to the Pacific Coast and took measures to get their fur traders to the region. Russian fur traders pushed east from Siberia, and Gregory Shelikhov founded a permanent settlement on Kodiak Island in Alaska. Later, Alexander Baronov established his headquarters at Sitka and eventually built an outpost north of San Francisco named Fort Ross.2

In 1784, the world learned more about the Pacific Northwest region with the publication of British navigator Captain James Cook’s journals recounting Cook’s three voyages to the Pacific before his untimely death five years earlier in Hawaii. Cook’s scientific and cartographic knowledge influenced a generation of seafarers who followed in his wake. That same year, Peter Pond drew his celebrated map containing the rivers and lakes west of the Great Lakes and Hudson Bay. Montreal-based traders Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher, Simon McTavish and other investors formed the Northwest Company to start a rivalry with the Hudson’s Bay Company. Finally, Bostonian merchants, now freed from the Navigation Acts and the monopoly of the British East Indian Company, exploited their hard-won liberty, and merchant ships like the Empress of China crossed the oceans and arrived in Canton, and opened up Sino-American maritime trade before it returned to New York harbor.3

A ship from London docked in New York harbor in 1784 and carried a young German immigrant with $25 in his pocket – a man who would transform the American fur trade into a global, corporate enterprise. John Jacob Astor opened up shop in New York City and started trading cheap tin flutes for furs with Indians along the Hudson River. Astor married Sarah Todd on September 19, 1785, whom he credited with possessing keen business sense and helped him import furs from Montreal and distribute them throughout Europe. By the early 1800s Astor expanded his operations, trading American furs and Hawaiian sandalwood in Canton for Chinese teas, spices, silks, and porcelain. He bought and trafficked furs from Montreal, shipping them to his customers in London and Europe. He also used his connections in New York, Montreal, and London to amass a sizeable fortune, investing most of it in Manhattan real estate.4

During this time, the search for a Northwest Passage through the North American continent
was proving elusive. Yet, several developments convinced Astor that now was the time to establish his presence on the Pacific Coast. George Vancouver and William Broughton had explored and charted the Pacific Northwest in the 1790s. American sea captain Robert Gray sailed his ship the *Columbia* up the river bearing that name in 1792. The publication of Alexander Mackenzie's *Voyages from Montreal to the Pacific* in 1801 clearly demonstrated the Nor'westers were busily exploring fur-rich lands beyond the royal monopoly held by the Hudson's Bay Company. American explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark arrived at the Pacific Ocean by land and erected Fort Clatsop on the Columbia River during the winter of 1805-06. When they returned to the East, they reported on the advantages of its location for sea otter and beaver trade along the Columbia and its tributaries.

Meanwhile, Astor received a charter from New York to establish his American Fur Company on April 6, 1808, “for the purpose of carrying on an extensive trade with the native Indian inhabitants of America.” President Thomas Jefferson informed Meriwether Lewis that a

> powerful company is at length forming for taking up the Indian commerce on a large scale. They will employ a capital the first year of 300,000 D. and raise it afterwards to a million ... It will be under the direction of a most excellent man, a Mr. Astor merchant of N. York, long engaged in the business & perfectly master of it. He has some hope of seeing you at St. Louis, in which case I recommend him to your particular attention. Nothing but the exclusive possession of the Indian commerce can secure us their peace.

Congressional passage of the Embargo and Non-Intercourse acts meant that the Northwest Company had to collaborate with Astor's AFC in New York in order to sail their ships and furs under an American flag to avoid the embargo and to circumvent the monopoly held by the British East Indian Company. Astor used his mentoring from Alexander Henry and other Montreal connections to his advantage, recruiting Northwest Company employees to work for him. This tactic earned both the cooperation and displeasure of William McGillivray, chief partner of the NWC.

Astor made the Nor'westers more upset when he organized two subsidiaries – the Pacific Fur Company and the Southwest Fur Company – that enabled him to spread his fur trading enterprise into the Columbia River and Great Lakes areas. Astor wrote New York politician DeWitt Clinton, laying out his plans “on the subject of a company for carrying on the fur trade in the United States even more extensive than it is done by the companies in Canada.”

Wrapping his enterprise within the flag of national interest, Astor wisely (and legally) divested his high-risk Pacific Fur Company from his lucrative AFC operations in the Great Lakes and Mississippi Valley. Astor owned half of the stock of PFC, incorporated in New York City on June 23, 1810, and provided all of the capital for working operations. Partners controlled the other half of the shares and kept in reserve to cover the company’s bond. Moreover, Astor hoped the American depot on the Columbia would begin “a colony that would form the germ of a wide civilization” and would “carry the American population across the Rocky Mountains and spread it along the shores of the Pacific.”

Astor placed twenty-seven-year-old St. Louis merchant Wilson Price Hunt of New Jersey as overall field leader to create the appearance of an American venture. The other three partners were Scotsmen from Montreal: Duncan McDougall, David Stuart, and Alexander McKay. Scotsmen Donald McKenzie, John Clarke, Robert Stuart and others also held shares and agreed to work as field managers. The majority of the clerks and *engagés* were British subjects from the Northwest Company. The PFC’s creation initiated a race between Astor and the NWC to see who could be the first ones to reach the Columbia and claim the fur resources of the region.

Astor launched this grand vision to establish a Columbia River headquarters for his Pacific Fur Company in the vicinity of Fort Clatsop to capitalize on the fur trade. An annual supply ship could leave New York City with ginseng root and manufactured goods, travel to Hawaii to recruit labor and purchase provisions, then
resupply Astoria with foodstuffs and Indian trade goods. The same vessel could continue its trade directly with other coastal outposts such as the Russian-American Company, return to Hawaii for provisions and sandalwood, then transport the year's furs to Guangzhou (Canton), China. There, those products could be exchanged for silk, spices, porcelain, and other luxuries to take back to New York or London. Heavy or bulky goods could be transported via ship while company dispatches, employees, and some furs might travel overland.15

Although this sounded rather simple, it did not play out the way Astor hoped. In order to build Fort Astoria, Astor financed a two-pronged expedition, one by land and one via the sea. Astor paid $37,860 for the Tonquin, a ninety-four-foot, 290-ton brig captained by Lieutenant Jonathan Thorn for his sea-bound voyage. The vessel embarked from New York harbor on September 10, 1810, with a crew, thirty-three PFC employees, and enough trade good and supplies to construct and provision Fort Astoria and to commence trading along the Northwest Coast. After stops at the Falkland and Hawaiian islands, the Tonquin arrived at the mouth of the Columbia on March 22, 1811. Thorn, an impatient and hot-tempered autocrat, treated his passengers with contempt and threats throughout their voyage. They, in turn, detested the man.16

Entering the Columbian estuary proved to be a nightmare. The combination of tides, winds, and currents was compounded by the shifting sand bars. Two boats and eight men drowned in the first two attempts to find a safe passageway past Peacock Bar, which blocked the channel's entrance. A third attempt also failed. Finally, their fourth attempt succeeded and the Tonquin safely anchored off the aptly named Cape Disappointment. Thorn did not win any new friends when he told the company representatives they had three days before he unloaded the cargo and set sail. Had he known what lay in store for him, he may have been more patient to remain at Astoria. Pacific Fur Company clerk Gabriel Franche, who left the best chronicle of the Tonquin's voyage, opined "We had left New York, for the most part strangers to one another, but arrived at the river Columbia we were all friends, and regarded each other almost as brothers."17

Founding and daily life at Astoria

The PFC partners explored the area and out of proximity and necessity chose a spot on the south side of the river about a dozen miles inland to build the post. The men constructing Astoria faced a number of obstacles. The steep, heavily timbered land offered little arable land for growing foodstuffs. Its location meant it faced the never-ending storms sweeping in off the Pacific Ocean. The area averaged around eighty inches of rainfall, which further delayed construction progress. The men desperately needed wood and logs to construct the fort. And, while trees were plentiful, trunks fifty feet in diameter were simply too big to cut down with hatchets and axes of inexperienced men whose tools proved wholly inadequate.18

Alexander Ross described the founding of Astoria that first week:

On the fourth day after our landing, we planted some potatoes and sowed a few garden seeds, and on the 16th of May we laid the foundations of our first building; but in order to procure suitable timber for the purpose, we had to go back some distance – the wood on the site being so large and unmanageable; and for want of cattle to haul it, we had to carry it on our shoulders, or drag it along the ground – a task of no ordinary difficulty. For this purpose, eight men were harnessed, and they conveyed in six days all the timber required for a building or store of sixty feet long by twenty-six broad. On the 18th, as soon as the foundation was completed, the establishment was named Astoria, in honour of Astor, the projector of the enterprise.19

Franchère noted,

Having built a warehouse (62 feet by 20) to put under cover the articles we were to receive from the ship ... The dwelling house was raised, parallel to the warehouse; we cut a great quantity of pickets in the forest, forming a square, with palisades in front and rear, of about 90 feet by 120; the warehouse, built on the edge of a ravine, formed one flank, the dwelling house and shops the other; with a little bastion at each angle
north and south, on which were mounted four small cannon.20

The fur trade was not an egalitarian enterprise. Rather, it proved to be both extremely class conscious and multi-ethnic in composition. Astoria's inhabitants represented a wide variety of races and classes. At the top of the corporate and social hierarchy were the American and Scots partners and factors. They were followed by a dozen clerks and junior clerks, many of them French-Canadian. The factors and clerks kept ledger books of the economic realities resulting from the trade of goods and pelts, always keeping an eye on the profits and losses tallied on the bottom line. Duncan McDougall considered himself the chief factor in charge at Astoria. Other clerks resented his domineering attitude, his demeaning talk, and the fact that he did no manual labor. Moreover, they lamented that he reserved delicacies for himself and did not share them with his clerks or his men. Leaders typically did not fraternize with the men, ate separately, had their own quarters, and kept their own counsel. Thus, a strict hierarchy divided the employees into distinct classes with specific duties.21

Next came the American craftsmen and tradesmen that included blacksmith Augustus Roussel, carpenter Johann Koaster, boatbuilder Job Aitken, and cooper George Bell. The bulk of the force was a mixture of French-Canadian voyageurs (boatmen), hivernant (winterer), chasseur (hunter), Métis (mixed descent), and Iroquois trappers and traders. A dozen native Hawaiian laborers or kanakas, including Naukane (a.k.a. John Coxe), assisted the blacksmiths and carpenters in constructing a trading store, blacksmith shop, trader storage facility, and clerks' house. By June, they had completed a fort enclosed by a bark-covered log stockade, with small cannon mounted along the perimeter for defense.22

The partially completed fort must have been a disappointing site to Nor'wester David Thompson when he arrived in mid July. This talented NWC trader, explorer, and cartographer who had just unraveled the mysteries of western Canadian geography and the upper course of the Columbia River, descended that river to its mouth in 1811 only to find the crude four log huts comprising the American fort.

One of the most well-traveled fur trade explorers, by foot, horseback, and canoe, Thompson was unclear as to the relationship between the NWC and AFC, which Astor's partners intentionally kept vague. Both parties remained
friends yet tried to mislead and undermine the other behind the scenes. Even though the Astorians beat the NWC to the punch, Thompson had established Spokane House and Kullyspell House further inland to capture the furs before they could reach the Astorians. Although Thompson did not beat the Astorians to the mouth of the Columbia, his favorable reports and 11,000 pounds of fur he returned with, gave the NWC sufficient reason to decide to compete with Astor.23

By early June, Thorn was chomping at the bit to leave, taking the Tonquin to proceed on to Sitka, Alaska, to help fulfill Astor's agreement with Alexander Baronov to supply the Russian post and to market their furs in Asia on commission. Thorn decided to stop at Nootka to trade and got himself into trouble when he mistreated a leader from the Tla-o-qui-aht nation by rubbing some fur in his face. Thorn's demeanor and bad judgment finally led to his demise off the coast of Vancouver Island near Clayoquot Sound.

What transpired there was later told by an Indian named Josechalal. The natives initially feigned that all had been forgiven, trading furs for knives. A few days later on June 15, 1811, they turned those knives on the ship's crew in retaliation for Thorn's insolent behavior, killing him, Alexander McKay, and several dozen others. Four survivors tried to flee in a longboat, but Indians captured and tortured them to death. The next day, more than 100 Indians clambered aboard to plunder the vessel but the one remaining crew member still on board, the injured clerk James Lewis, ignited the powder magazine and scuttled the ship, killing himself and all the Indians on board. The loss of the Tonquin left Astoria and its inhabitants vulnerable, under-supplied, isolated, and marooned.24

Meanwhile, the Astorians had no time to waste in expanding their sphere of influence, because they learned from the Indians that the NWC had established Spokane House on the Spokane River. To counter that threat, company leaders dispatched David Stuart, Alexander Ross and six men upriver into the interior in late July to explore the countryside and to recommend suitable sites for trading posts. That fall of 1811, after forty-two days on the river, they arrived at the confluence of the Okanogan and Columbia rivers where Stuart oversaw the construction of Fort Okanogan. The site proved to be a good one, located on the east bank of the river above its confluence with the Columbia. The fort, situated on the border between the forested mountains and the Columbian Plain and along a well-worn Indian trail that connected Oregon country with the Fraser River system in Canada, served as the principal interior post of the Pacific Fur Company. During the first winter Ross traded his small store of trade goods totaling less than $200 to Indians in exchange for pelts worth $10,000.25

The following year they constructed Fort Spokane opposite the NWC's Spokane House along the well-worn Indian trail. Also in 1812, the PFC built small posts on the Boise and Wallowa rivers. These small outposts ranged as far north as the Shuswap Nation in New Calendonia, near the juncture of the Thompson and North Thompson rivers, near today's Kamloops, British Columbia, and as far east as Flathead Post in western Montana.26

Meanwhile, life at Fort Astoria vacillated back and forth between monotony and drudgery. The incessant rain cast a gloom over everything, impeded progress, and encircled the encampment in continual mud. During lean times, their limited and meager diet of
The frontispiece of Gabriel Franchère's *Narrative of a Voyage* shows Astoria as it appeared in 1813.  

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sun-dried fish, a few wapato roots, or dog and horseflesh was not sumptuous fare. Daily routines for laborers consisted of clearing the area of decaying trunks, large fallen timber, thick underbrush and rocks. Men were tasked with fetching water, cutting firewood, sawing logs, collecting cedar bark for shingles, and boiling sea water to extract salt. Further chores included making musket balls, washing clothes, making mocassins, digging cellars and making charcoal for the blacksmith. Men were assigned to assist the cooper in making barrels or to help the carpenter in construction of barges, shallops and building a wharf. Standing guard duty did not offer up much excitement. Others tended the hogs, goats and sheep brought from Hawaii that had not been washed overboard on the *Tonquin* during a storm. Still others worked in planting and tending the vegetable garden. Unfortunately, the only things that grew well that year were turnips, radishes, and a few potatoes.²⁷

Those with a religious bent, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, offered prayers, read the Bible, and paid devotion. The men usually had a reduced schedule or time off on Sundays and holidays. A variety of illnesses and injuries decreased production, including axe accidents, bouts of flu, scurvy, diarrhea, hernias, and venereal disease. A few of the men probably smiled in secret when McDougall accidentally shot himself in the groin with a blunderbuss.²⁸ Several men like Mr. Mumford, Paul Jeremy, and the Belleau boys talked about deserting and tried to get others to go with them. They actually tried to desert but were tracked down and captured. After finding all of the provisions Jeremy had planned to take, McDougall put everything under lock and key and reduced the liquor ration from three to two times per day. But deserters and employees alike appreciated the extra rations of grog and good food doled out on holidays like the Fourth of July and New Year’s Day.²⁹

Limited recreation opportunities presented themselves in the form of singing and dancing, playing cards, dice games, or checkers. Games of skill included footraces, horse races, wrestling, and shooting contests. A number of men sought diversion or companionship with local women, but venereal disease proved a sufficient deterrent for some. During the winter, the men suffered from the kind of ennui or boredom that comes from having too much time on one’s hands and too little will to find something productive to do. Franchère noted,
Astoria was a crudely constructed outpost in 1811. In the aftermath of the War of 1812, the British renamed the post Fort George. Lieutenant T. Saumarez of the HBMS Blossom drew this plan of Fort George in 1818. BANCROFT LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY
In the intervals of our daily duties, we amused ourselves with music and reading; having some instruments and a choice library. Otherwise we should have passed our time in a state of insufferable ennui, at this rainy season, in the midst of the deep mud which surrounded us, and which interdicted the pleasure of a promenade outside the buildings.  

On June 29, 1812, Robert Stuart entered a description of Astoria:

Our present Fortification ... is only about 75 feet by 80 feet; it is well stockaded with pickets 17 feet long and 18 inches in diameter, having two strong Bastions, at opposite angles, so as to rake two sides each, inside are a framed store two stories high, 60 feet by 30, with good cellars and a powder magazine. - a dwelling house, one story high & 60 feet by 25. - a Blacksmiths shop, and a large shed for carpenters, cooper, &c. ... [this] winter about 20 Men are to be employed in extending the Fortification, and 30 are now engaged in preparing a frame for a dwelling house, to be two stories high & 60 by 30 feet, which with another Store and Kitchen shall be the principal additions made to the present buildings.

Occasionally men were sent out on hunting or fishing enterprises, particularly to the Willamette Valley, where game animals abounded in great numbers. One group left Astoria on October 1, 1812, with a small assortment of merchandise to gather fish and furs for the winter. Franchère reported,

The trip was highly successful: we found the game very abundant, killed great quantity of swans, ducks, foxes, &c., and returned to Astoria on the 20th, with a part of our venison, wild fowl, and bear meat, besides seven hundred and fifty smoked salmon, a quantity of the Wap[aljo root (so called by the natives), which is found a good substitute for potatoes, and four hundred and fifty skins of beaver and other animals of the furry tribe.

Chinookan customers and Native relations

Trading with the coastal Chinooks, Clatsops, as well as the tribes upstream on the Columbian Plateau presented a myriad of challenges. The Chinooks and Clatsops had been trading with Spanish, British, and New England ships for at least three decades by the time Fort Astoria was built. Their network reached up the coast to Nootka on Vancouver Island and south to Cape Blanco and extended up the Columbia River to the Dalles and into the Columbia Plateau. Northwestern tribes traditionally used dentalium shells to turn into jewelry or as a medium of exchange. Kettles of iron, brass, copper, and tin along with cups, pots, pans, axes, knives, awls, fish hooks, needles, fire steels, traps, tobacco, mirrors, trade guns, and ammunition were all on the shopping list. Natives also traded furs and foodstuffs for clothing and accessories such as linen, cotton, flannel, muslin, calico clothes, woolen blankets, handkerchiefs, assorted thread and buttons, scissors, needles, awls, brooches, ribbons, paints, and hats.

While trying to acquire useful metal tools and manufactured goods, and to form trading alliances, Indian leaders used the same native methods they used in controlling their own trading networks, which involved diplomacy, gift-giving, and marriage. They adroitly tried to serve as the middlemen of the trade, with village leaders closest to the fort trying to prevent other tribes from coming in to trade and to prevent traders from going out to trade with others or to establish additional forts. Although not entirely successful, the Chinook proved to be astute traders, insisted on high quality merchandise and fair prices, or took advantage of traders not being on guard.

Moreover, in 1805-06 the Chinookans had interacted and traded with the Lewis and Clark Expedition, whose Fort Clatsop had been built less than six miles from where Fort Astoria, was located on the west side of the Netul or Lewis and Clark River about three miles upstream from Young's Bay. While not intended to be a trading post, local village leaders like Chief Coboway at Point Adams traded dried salmon, elk, wapato roots, and berries with the Captains for trade goods. Some expedition members also
engaged in more intimate trading with Clatsop maidens. The Corps of Discovery’s three month stay was marked by incessant rain, infestations of fleas, and a general state of misery.44

The first to greet and welcome the Astorians were the Chinooks from Baker Bay on the north side of the river. Their leader Comcomly extended his assistance and help to the newcomers. "The natives visited us constantly and in great numbers," Franchère noted, "some to trade, others to gratify their curiosity, or to purloin some little articles if they found an opportunity."35 For their part, the Astorians clearly did not understand why they should have to ask Indians permission or provide them with compensation for using native resources such as cutting timber, harvesting animals, fishing the river, or building forts on Indian land. The traders only understood exchanging merchandise with the natives for furs. In addition to acquiring the furs, the Chinooks also served as guides, interpreters, hunters, boatmen, companions, and spouses. A man named Watatcum served as one of the PFC’s hunters, and was given goods for the elk and other animals he brought to the fort. Another, named Coalpo (or Calpo), provided knowledge of the countryside and occasionally guided Astorian ventures to trade with inland nations or increase the food supply in the larder with deer, elk, bear, geese, and ducks.36

Then came rumors of war. After a few months of friendly interaction, some of the natives withdrew in late July and the Astorians learned from a friendly Chinook that some of their jealous neighbors were planning to raid and plunder the post. “We hastened, therefore, to put ourselves in the best possible state of defence,” Franchère recorded continuing that

formidable aspect to deter the Indians from attacking us; and for greater surety, we organized a guard for day and night.37

Added to their preparations for defense came the terrible news of the destruction of the Tonquin. Moreover, while facing hostile enemies abroad, they also faced defection from within. Morale at Astoria had never rebounded since the deaths of the eight men when they arrived at the Columbia and now a number of men openly talked about desertion again. Nevertheless, the war rumors eventually subsided and attention was turned back to trading with natives for fish and furs.38

The Astorians were primarily traders, which made them dependent upon their native suppliers to deliver the furs. Like many Northwestern Indians, Chinook chieftain Comcomly redistributed this traded wealth in a variety of ways, most commonly via the potlatch ceremony, but also through marriages, gift-giving, trade, theft, or plunder. Intermarriage, too, created a kinship relationship and alliance that enabled both sides of the marriage to benefit from the arrangement. Comcomly used many types of diplomacy to maintain his wealth, power and prestige. He sometimes withheld news, distorted the facts, and even told Astorians lies about other tribes and leaders, fueling the Astorians’ fears of attacks from, and prejudice towards, unknown Indian nations in order to keep control of the trade.

Comcomly had rescued McDougall from drowning on April 7 when they had finished their scouting trip on shore and were heading back to the Tonquin, which was anchored in the bay. McDougall was finally convinced of Comcomly’s sincere friendship. The Scot recounted that “whatever the Indians around us might be disposed to do, we could depend on his good offices to quiet them, and assist us on every occasion.”39 Now the “shrewd old savage with one eye” as author Washington Irving described him, made the Pacific Fur Company partner one of the family. Comcomly’s daughter Icloee married Duncan McDougall on July 20, 1813, after the manner of the country, cementing ties between Comcomly’s village and Chief Factor McDougall at Astoria.40

The dwelling house was raised, parallel to the warehouse; we cut a great quantity of pickets in the forest, and formed a square, with pales in front and rear, of about 90 feet by 120; the warehouse, built on the edge of a ravine, formed one flank, the dwelling house and shops the other; with a little bastion at each angle north and south, on which were mounted four small cannon. The whole was finished in six days, and had a sufficiently
The Chinook were willing to exchange pelts for manufactured goods but not out of necessity or need. While they were particularly fond of trading for dark blue beads, for instance, their trading independence and indifference frustrated the PFC's clerks who relied upon the Chinooks for food even more than they did for fur. The Chinooks successfully controlled the Astorians' access to fish, making the traders dependent upon the Indians. At the same time, the Chinooks operated as middlemen to protect their political and economic interests, to capitalize in acquiring and selling goods and furs with coastal and inland tribes, and to guard their strategic position by trying to prevent the Astorians from moving inland. When the Astorians did eventually arrive at the Willamette Valley in 1812, the Kalapuyan peoples showed little interest in the chase. William Wallace, who helped build Wallace House, called the local tribe a "set of poverty-stricken beings, totally ignorant of hunting Furs."\(^{41}\)

Communication between natives and newcomers on the Northwest Coast was facilitated by sign language and by the development of one of the most significant and longest lasting trading languages, often referred to as Chinook Jargon. The vocabulary of nearly 1000 words was a compilation of Chinookan and Nootkan words, as well as those of Salishan neighbors, and a smattering of English and French terms. Words like "give" were substituted as "potlatch," "fur" became "tipso." Others resembled their original English sound. "Grease" and "fish" were rendered as "glease" and "pish." Words like ship, tea, or skin were adopted without change and, over time, sentence structure moved from native to English construction and could be easily learned and adapted to the trade. Later, missionaries would use the jargon to proselytize and to translate scriptures and hymns. This trading language helped break down communication barriers and contributed to cross-cultural sharing.\(^{42}\)

In addition to language barriers, the fur traders and Indians believed in different notions of justice. Occasionally, these legal systems intersected in deadly combinations. Such an incident occurred when John Clarke, who operated the PFC's Spokane Post, discovered that a silver goblet had been appropriated from his Catatouch camp. He called the tribal leaders together and demanded the return of the item and revenge on the culprit. The tribal council informed Clarke that, happily, the goblet had been found and returned. Clarke insisted, however, the thief should be turned over to him and receive capital punishment. The thief thought he was perfectly safe under Indian law because the item had been returned. Clarke summarily hung the man. His recklessness cost the company dearly. Clarke left the Palouse River and joined Alexander Ross at the Walla Walla River. Chief Tummatapam rode up to the camp at full gallop, pulled up and exclaimed, "What have you done, my friends? You have spilt blood on our lands!" The chief pointed to a cloud of dust raised by approaching warriors and said "What can I do?" Not waiting for a response, he whirled his horse around and departed. The Astorians quickly struck camp and departed. They did not fully understand the Indian notion of collective consequence, for if they had, they may have been able to offer compensation to "cover the dead" by buying off vengeance. Predictably then, the dead man's kin retaliated and exacted vengeance, killing several PFC employees to atone for Clarke's hasty action that required a blood price to be paid.\(^{43}\)

Another incident at Celilo Falls in the summer of 1812 highlights these different notions of justice. When several natives tried to take some PFC property, they were stopped and, in the ensuing struggle, two were killed. John Reed received severe wounds to his head from an axe handle. The village war chief demanded satisfaction for the death of two of his villagers. He proposed that the PFC turn over Reed's body to the relatives of the dead Indians so that their families could hack Reed to pieces and restore harmony between the company and the village. Reed, however, was not dead yet, so the PFC averted vengeance by offering three blankets and some tobacco to cover the dead. Nevertheless, the Indians prevented the Astorians from ascending the falls in this attempt.\(^{44}\)

Indians helped pursue, track down, detain, and ransom deserters. On November 10, 1811, P. D. Jeremie and the two Belleaux fled Astoria stealing a canoe, along with firearms and ammunition. Franchère and Mr. Matthews, with five natives, pursued the trio before finally catching up to them after the three men had
been imprisoned by the Clannahminnamin. Franchère had to pay the village chief eight blankets, a brass kettle, a hatchet and other goods before the chief would return the men, their canoe, and their rifles.

*Nothing but our firmness compelled him to accept the articles offered in exchange; but at last, with great reluctance, he closed the bargain, and suffered us to depart in the evening with the prisoners and the property.*

The Indians around the Cascades of the Columbia felt like the Astorians should offer them a fee or gifts every time they used the portage. Relationships grew so hostile that they attacked David Stuart’s group while portaging the rapids, during which skirmish two Indians were killed. The Indians captured fifty guns and a considerable quantity of ammunition, as well as other goods. The Astorians felt it absolutely necessary to capture a principal chief of the Wishrams, tie him to a stake, and threaten to cut his head off with a sword unless the village returned the goods they had taken as a toll when the Astorians tried portaging the Dalles. The ploy worked and the Indians returned the majority of the stolen property and guns. The Astorians told them to keep the things that had not been returned to cover the bodies of the two Indians killed in the skirmish. Despite these difficulties, Franchère eventually concluded "In spite of the vices that may be laid to the charge of the natives of the Columbia, I regard them as nearer to a state of civilization than any of the tribes who dwell east of the Rocky mountains.""45

**Reinforcements, expansion, and competition**

Good news finally arrived at Astoria from the direction of the Rocky Mountains when the overland Astorians began to arrive in successive waves after many months of hardship and toil. The overland Astorians under Wilson Price Hunt totaled around sixty-four in number – only forty-five would make it to Fort Astoria. The entourage included several company officers including Ramsay Crooks, Donald McKenzie, Joseph Miller, and Robert McClellan. Clerk John Reed, botanists John Bradbury and Thomas Nuttall, nine hunters, and about fifty employees, completed the ensemble that embarked from St. Louis on October 21, 1810, before stopping to winter near future St. Joseph, Missouri. The following spring, they added interpreter Pierre Dorion and his pregnant wife Marie and their children Baptiste and Paul, hiring them away from a fur trading expedition led by Manuel Lisa.47

On April 21, 1811, the overland Astorians resumed their journey, intending to follow Lewis and Clark’s route up the Missouri River, cross the Rocky Mountains, and descend the Columbia. News of Blackfeet hostilities, and the timely meeting of three Kentucky hunters named John Hoback, Jacob Reznor, and Edward Robinson, caused Hunt to reconsider. Hunt altered his course at the Arikara villages in present-day South Dakota, venturing westward through the Dakotas and Wyoming plains before crossing the Big Horn and Wind River mountains. A series of wretched luck and poor organization and leadership led to numerous mishaps from inclement weather, difficult geography, lack of food, and encounters with native inhabitants. Traversing the Snake River Valley proved an especially difficult test, resulting in the deaths of several men, the loss of the horse herd, insufficient supplies, and fracturing of the party into several forces who independently tried to make their way to the Columbia."45

Donald McKenzie, Robert McClellan, John Reed, and eight voyageurs reached Fort Astoria on January 18, 1812, as the first overland Astorians to arrive.49 Hunt’s group of thirty men, one woman, and two children arrived a month later on February 15. Other stragglers arrived in May. Many of these new arrivals received assignments to travel to the interior to augment numbers at trading posts or to dig up caches of goods. Some of them also found more stragglers, including two shareholders, Ramsay Crooks and John Day, whom Indians had attacked and stripped of their clothing and gear, leaving the duo naked and stranded along the shores of the Columbia in eastern Washington. Day spent the remainder of his life in Oregon, working for the NWC. Crooks gradually ascended up the company ranks to become the leader of the AFC a few decades later.50

The arrival of the overland Astorians coincided with the arrival of the *Beaver*, Astor’s
supply ship that sailed into the estuary on May 8, 1812, and began unloading mail, supplies, and reinforcements. These consisted of five clerks including Ross Cox, seven Americans, five voyageurs, a dozen Hawaiian laborers, and a shareholder named John Clarke. The arrival of Hunt and the influx of men and supplies provided new incentive, energy, and manpower for the PFC to expand their operations to compete with the Nor'westerns. Prospects began to improve and all signs finally pointed to success. McGillis, Pillet, and three Hawaiians set out to hunt beaver, one of the first times this was mentioned specifically in the records.

On May 16, 1812, Stuart sent Ross to trade with the Kamloops and Thompson River Indians. He sent messages to the different tribes, alerting them to bring their furs in to trade. Over 2,000 Indians gathered during the next two weeks, trading leaf tobacco at the rate of five leaves per skin until he ran out of tobacco. The success of Ross's excursion was just one sign that the company was about to make some money.

A flotilla of sixty-two persons left Astoria on June 30 with a considerable assortment of merchandise to create a number of new posts. In addition to their headquarters on the Columbia (Astoria under Duncan McDougall) and their inland center on the Okanogan (Fort Okanogan under David Stuart and Alexander Ross), Astorians established and maintained trading posts on the Willamette (Wallace House under Wallace & Halsey), Spokane (Fort Spokane or Spokane Post under John Clarke), Clark Fork (Flathead Post), Thompson (Kamloops/Shuswap under David Stuart), and Clearwater (McKenzie's Post under Donald McKenzie, Alfred Seton, John Reed) rivers. Establishing all of these outposts did not come without a price nor without some unintended consequences. McDougall lamented that during July,

"The natives (seeing us weakened no doubt by these outfits), manifested their hostile intentions so openly that we were obliged to be constantly on our guard. We constructed covered ways inside our palisades, and raised our bastions or towers another story. The alarm became so serious toward the latter end of the month that we doubled our sentries day and night, and never allowed more than two or three Indians at a time within our gates."

Shortly after Donald McKenzie arrived at Fort Astoria January 18, 1812, he was tasked with heading a large party to engage in hunting and trapping on the Columbia, Willamette, and Snake rivers, where he established a post. Leaving Astoria a second time in March 1813, he traveled to Fort Okanogan and Spokane Post to deliver supplies and returned with 140 packs of furs. In the fall, McKenzie traveled inland with more supplies to the interior, only to be robbed by Indians.

The partners decided it was time to send Astor an express to share news, both bad and good. A small party led by Robert Stuart, which included Ramsay Crooks, Robert McClellan, and four others, ventured east on a return journey to New York in mid-1812, ascending the Columbia River to Walla Walla before setting off across the Blue Mountains. Stuart traveled overland south of Hunt's route and discovered the South Pass through the Rocky Mountains. Like the outbound Astorians, the inbound Astorians also faced winter travel, starvation, Indian hostilities, and other hazards.

In May 1812, Astor signed an agreement between the Pacific Fur Company and the Russian-American Company that included provisions that neither would trade weapons or ammunition to the Indians, and that they would respect each other's hunting grounds at the 54 degrees 40 parallel. The PFC would continue to supply the RAC headquarters at Sitka and ship Russian furs to China on commission. Wilson Price Hunt embarked onboard the Beaver to initiate the plan, as well as to fulfill the agreement Astor had made to sell Russian furs in China on consignment. This agreement between the PFC and the RAC was to remain in force for four years "unless some unforeseen contingency should render a modification necessary."

Selling out before being driven out

Unfortunately for Astor and his Columbian enterprise, an "unforeseen contingency" arose when the United States declared war on Great Britain on June 19, 1812. News of the outbreak of hostilities between the Americans and British eventually reached Fort Astoria on
January 15, 1813. During the summer, eighty Northwest Company traders under John G. McTavish arrived at Astoria anticipating the arrival of a British war ship and NWC supply ship. Unfortunately, the ships did not arrive during the summer and the NWC had to beg food from the post they anticipated taking over soon. Eventually, the protracted nature of the long expected flotilla forced the NWC to come to the bargaining table to offer to purchase the fort. After several months of waiting, McTavish convinced Duncan McDougall that it was foolishly hard to risk total loss by waiting for the British warship to arrive, capture and plunder Fort Astoria. Franchère noted:

*When we learned this news, all of us at Astoria who were British subjects and Canadians, wished ourselves in Canada; but we could not entertain even the thought of transporting ourselves thither, at least immediately: we were separated from our country by an immense space, and the difficulties of the journey at this season were insuperable: besides, Mr. Astor’s interests had to be consulted first.*

The PFC leaders held a council of war and "after having seriously considered that being almost to a man British subjects, we were trading, notwithstanding, under the American flag." The only dissenting vote was David Stuart. Nevertheless, they recognized that the British would likely blockade American ports and prevent Astor from re-supplying Astoria. Therefore, they concluded to abandon the establishment in the ensuing spring, or at the latest, in the beginning of the summer. We did not communicate these resolutions to the men, lest they should in consequence abandon their labor; but we discontinued, from that moment, our trade with the natives, except for provisions; as well because we had no longer a large stock of goods on hand, as for the reason that we had already more furs than we could carry away overland.

The NWC had good cause to warn the Americans because they had pressured the British government to send a ship to do that very thing. The Royal Navy ordered a warship to sail to the Columbia to capture Fort Astoria and plunder whatever they might find. Meanwhile the USS Essex under Captain David Porter rounded Cape Horn and in the spring of 1813 was the first and only American warship in
the Pacific. The HMS Raccoon, in company with the HMS Phoebe and HMS Cherub, along with a NWC supply ship, the Isaac Todd, rounded Cape Horn. While the Phoebe and Cherub hunted down and destroyed the Essex off the Chilean coast, the 28-gun frigate Raccoon and the NWC privateer Isaac Todd proceeded on to Astoria with a letter of marque to seize the American establishment.

Shortly after his arrival in February 1812, Wilson Price Hunt had sailed on the Beaver to Sitka per Astor’s agreement with the RAC and loaded 75,000 seal skins and sea otter pelts before sailing to Hawaii. Hunt stayed there awaiting another Astor ship to take him back to Astoria while the Beaver continued on to Canton to trade her precious cargo. Meanwhile, the next Astor supply ship, the Lark, had sustained considerable damage in a Pacific storm, and the British navy had blockaded New York harbor, preventing Astor from sending any additional vessels. When Hunt received news of the war, he gathered supplies and hired the Albatross to ferry him to Astoria, arriving on August 20, 1813, and re-supplying Astoria with 35 barrels of salt pork or beef, nine trecce of rice, a great quantity of dried taro, and a good supply of salt.

Unfortunately, Hunt’s efforts were in vain because the other PFC partners had already made up their minds it was time to abandon the venture. He reluctantly concurred with their decision. With the British blockade in the Atlantic, a warship presumably on its way in the Pacific, their supply ship in China, and fort supplies running low, the offer from the NWC to buy Astoria and its stores and assets proved an offer they could not afford to pass up. Hunt returned to Hawaii, trying to charter another ship to salvage $100,000 worth of fur, but his efforts proved futile. He eventually returned to Astoria on the Pedlar.

Astor’s plans to employ so many former NWC men made business sense but it eventually cost him his business on the Columbia. The majority of his partners and employees were British subjects and could not fight against their King and Country. When negotiations between McDougall and McTavish commenced, the duo discussed considerations and prices before settling on the following terms in mid October 1813. Duncan McDougall made the final decision to sell Astoria to John G. McTavish and John Stuart, agents of the NWC.

The whole of the goods on hand, both at Astoria and throughout the interior, were delivered over to the Northwest Company “at 10 per cent on cost and charges. The furs were valued at so much per skin. Thus the whole amounted to 80,500 dollars, and bills of exchange negotiable in Canada were accepted in payment thereof.” Purs totaled some 40,000 skins, including 17,705 pounds of beaver, 907 land otter, 98 sea otter, as well as mink, raccoon, lynx, fox, and bear. The NWC agreed to pay the PFC men the arrears of their wages, deducted from the price of goods delivered, to supply them with provisions, and the Hawaiians could return to their homeland. The rest of the PFC men were offered terms of service in the Canadian company or a free passage overland to Montreal. The majority of the Pacific Fur Company men entered the employ of the Northwest Company.

On the last day of November, when Captain William Black sailed the HMS Raccoon into port with orders to destroy Fort Astoria, a disturbing sight greeted him. Astoria was already under control of the Northwest Company, a British firm. He and his crew were sorely disappointed they had sailed such a long way for nothing and did not get to receive any of the spoils they anticipated from capturing the post. Captain Black appeased himself by raising the British colors to formal possession in a ceremony and breaking a wine bottle to christen and rename the post Fort George in honor of King George III. Black wrote a letter to the Secretary Admiralty in London, stating:

“Country and fort I have taken possession of in name and for British Majesty latter I have named Fort George and left in possession and charge North West Company. Enemies party quite broke up they have no settlement whatever on this River or Coast ... Consort [Isaac Todd] parted from Squadron before reaching Cape Horn, not yet arrived. Natives appear well disposed toward English.”

In April 1814, the consort Black mentioned, the NWC supply ship Isaac Todd, brought
welcomed supplies and offered passage back to Montreal and New England for the PFC men who did not wish to join the ranks of the NWC. Unfortunately, tragedy struck yet again when Alexander Henry and Donald McTavish drowned after their boat capsized in the Columbia on its way to rendezvous with the Isaac Todd. Donald McKenzie, one of Astor’s principal partners, was left with the unenviable task of conveying the papers and terms of the sale of Astoria to Astor in New York.70

In the brigade heading east to Fort William and commanded by John McDonald, Franchère recorded that the men who did not wish to serve the NWC "quitted Fort George (or Astoria, if you please) on Monday morning, the 4th of April, 1814, in ten canoes, five of which were of bark and five of cedar wood, carrying each seven men as crew, and two passengers, in all ninety persons, and all well armed. They departed via Athabasca Pass, the Saskatchewan, and Lake Winnipeg, and reached Montreal on September 1, 1814.

In November, the New York papers announced "The Firm of the Pacific Fur Company is Dissolved."73 Astor’s plan to control the Pacific Northwest trade had ended as British rivals acquired possession of the area and extended their operations into the territory between the Columbia and Fraser rivers. While Astor must have been greatly disappointed with the news, it may have been the best news he ever heard with relation to the post. Moreover, the war actually netted him some profit when he raised funds in the first U.S. bond issue.

The controversy over whether Fort Astoria was sold or captured continued on for several decades.73 The Treaty of Ghent required the return of "all territory, places and possessions whatever, taken by either party from the other during the war." In October 1818, British Commissioner Captain Hickey of HMS Blossom and J. Keith for the Northwest Company restored to J. B. Prevost, Esq., the Fort George settlement in conformity to the treaty. Nevertheless, Fort George continued to operate as a NWC post until that company was forced to merge with the HBC in 1821.74

Following the War of 1812, Astor diversified his operations, adding opium smuggling with China and direct trade with Britain to his portfolio. His American Fur Company gained trading preeminence in the Great Lakes, and expanded its monopoly into the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains in the 1820s. His company used cut-through competition to drive out or acquire many smaller competitors. Ironically, just when the AFC had nearly complete control of the American fur trade, Astor saw the writing on the wall and withdrew from the company, turning his attention to purchasing and developing land in Manhattan, which helped him become the richest American of his day. Meanwhile, declining beaver numbers, the introduction of the silk hat, and competition from the Hudson’s Bay Company forced the AFC to downsize and reorganize under the leadership of Ramsay Crooks. The HBC (which merged with, and swallowed up, the Northwest Company in 1821) used its own Columbia District headquarters at Fort Vancouver to create a fur desert with their Snake River brigades and undersold the Americans at the rendezvous.

Astor’s commercial connections extended around the globe, but it was Astoria that helped him leave his mark upon American history. Fortune did not smile on Astor’s Astoria. The sea and land parties suffered numerous deaths. Three of Astor’s ships faced disappointment; the Tonquin was blown up; the Beaver was lost in
unknown seas; and the Lark was damaged beyond repair by a Pacific storm. The fort's affairs were stymied by misfortune before it was finally sold to a rival company. Nevertheless, Astoria represented the first American settlement on the Pacific Coast and the oldest American city in Oregon. Fort Astoria helped solidify American claims to Oregon and opened the way for American settlement of the area in subsequent decades. Two years before his death in 1848, Astor must have been gratified to see the establishment of the British-American boundary at the 49th parallel and the creation of the Oregon Country, of which his Astoria had played a role in bringing to fruition.

Life at Fort Astoria, then, was extremely difficult, culminating in the deaths of scores of men and eventually the demise of the Pacific Fur Company itself. From the fort's inception, the death toll rose faster than the profit ledger. Historians have estimated Astor lost between $250,000 and $400,000 in the enterprise, which in 2012 figures is more than $5,000,000. Alexander Ross summarized the demise of Astor's empire on the Columbia this way:

*In recapitulating the number of casualties or disasters which befell the Pacific Fur Company during its short existence, we cannot help lamenting so great a sacrifice of human life in so limited a period. The tragical list stands thus:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Loss on the bar:</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Land expedition:</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonquin:</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Astoria:</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lark:</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snake country:</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final departure:</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Well might we, with Virgil, say, "Who can relate such woes without a tear!"*

John Jacob Astor's vision for a global fur trading enterprise failed for reasons beyond his control. In 1832, two years before retiring from the fur trade, he wrote a note to Wilson Price Hunt. "Had we succeeded in keeping Astoria, ere now we should all have made great fortunes there, and even more and much more than the Hudson Bay Company now do." Alexander Ross concluded that Astor's empire was proposed to extend its grasping influence from ocean to ocean, and which, to use the projector's own words, "was to have annihilated the South Company; rivaled the North-West Company; extinguished the Hudson's Bay Company; driven the Russians into the Frozen Ocean; and with the resources of China to have enriched America." But how vain are the designs of man! That undertaking which but yesterday promised such mighty things, is to-day no more."

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**NOTES**

1. I thank Aaron Cobia who worked as my research assistant on this essay.
Buckley: Life at Astoria


5 William Broughton, A Sketch of the River Columbia Explored in His Majesty’s Arm’d Brig Chatham, Lieut. Broughton, Commander in October 1792 (Portland, OR: Oregon Historical Society, 1792).

6 Frederic W. Howay, Voyages of the “Columbia” to the Northwest Coast 1787-1790 and 1790-1793 (Oregon Historical Society and Massachusetts Historical Society, 1990).


8 Porter, John Jacob Astor, 1:413-414.


13 Washington Irving’s Astoria was first published in 1836, and has been re-printed numerous times over the years. Washington Irving, Astoria, or Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains, edited by Edgeley W. Todd (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 35; Porter, John Jacob Astor, 1:243; David J. Wishart, The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807-1840 (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 116-120.


15 James P. Ronda, Astoria and Empire (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990) provides an institutional, social, and empirical history of the Astorians.


17 Franchère, Narrative of a Voyage, 95; also, in Thwaites, 6:237.


20 Franchère, Narrative of a Voyage, 116, 123.


22 The earliest illustration of the fort (dated 1813) comes from clerk Gabriel Franchère’s 1819
published account of his service at Fort Astoria. The image clearly shows a stockade with two bastions and two long buildings inside the stockade. Four cannons line the bank above the river; an American flag flies above the post. Roy Watters, Douglas Deur, Douglas Wilson, and Robert Cromwell, comp., *Fort George Research Inventory and Assessment* (Astoria, OR: Portland State University Department of Anthropology and Fort Vancouver National Historical Site, Vancouver, WA, December 2009), 7.


30 Franchère, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America*, Thwaites, 6:279.


32 Franchère, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America*, Thwaites, 6:277-78. The wapato is the bulb of the sagittaria variabilis, or common arrowhead.


39 Ibid., 48.

40 Ibid., 203, and 203n98; J. F. Santee, "Comcomly and the Chinooks," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (September 1932): 271-278; Irving, Astoria, 462.


42 Edward Harper Thomas, *Chinook: A History and Dictionary of the Northwest Coast Trade Jargon; The Centuries-Old Trade Language of the Indians of the Pacific,A History of its Origin and its Adoption and Use by the Traders, Trappers, Pioneers and Early Settlers of the Northwest*


45 Franchère, Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America, Thwaites, 6:264-265.

46 Franchère, Narrative of a Voyage, 261. Occasionally, unusual native visitors livened up the scene, like when the Kootenai Two-Spirit woman Kâux̱nám Núpika (known in English as Man-like Woman and in Chinook Jargon as bërdache or two-spirit people) arrived with her wife and provided descriptions of the interior.


49 Unfortunately, they were not very successful, bringing in one beaver for their efforts. McDougall, Annals of Astoria, 68, 72.


51 The voyage of the Beaver from New York, around Cape Horn, to Hawaii, and then Astoria is recorded by PFC clerk Alfred Seton, who reminisced that he had joined the company because he had acquired expensive habits in New York City and “if I had remained I would have found myself overwhelmed with debts, in bad Company, & with little hopes of raising myself to a respectable situation of life.” Alfred Seton, Astorian Adventure: The Journal of Alfred Seton, 1811-1815, edited by Robert F. Jones (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1993), 130. The other journal of note comes from clerk Ross Cox, The Columbia River: Or Scenes and Adventures During a Residence of Six Years on the Western Side of the Rocky Mountains..., edited by Edgar I. Stewart and Jane R. Stewart (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957); McDougall, Annals of Astoria, 88-89.

52 McDougall, Annals of Astoria, 70.

53 Ross, Adventures, 200.

54 June 29, 1812, according to McDougall, Annals of Astoria, 100-101.

55 Franchère, Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America, Thwaites, 6:277-278.

56 Returning to Astoria, McKenzie and his partners sold out to the Northwest Company. On April 14, 1814, McKenzie set out for New York but Astor was upset with him and would not retain him in his employ, so McKenzie returned to Canada and rejoined the NWC. Cecil W. Mackenzie, Donald Mackenzie, “King of the Northwest”; The Story of an International Hero of the Oregon Country and the Red River Settlement at Lower Fort Cheadle (Winnipeg) (Los Angeles, CA: I. Deach, Jr., 1937).

57 Stuart, Discovery of the Oregon Trail, 3-4.

58 Irving, Astoria, 386-387; Gibson, Imperial Russia, 160-161.

59 Franchère, Narrative of a Voyage, 166-167; McDougall, Annals of Astoria, 221-222.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.


64 A tiche is a cask between a barrel and a hogshead in size holding 42 gallons. Franchère,
Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America, Thwaites, 6:287.

Earlier agreements on June 25, 1813, had turned over Spokane House to the NWC in exchange for horses, payable the following spring to help the Astorians take their furs overland. On July 1, 1813, McDougall was worried because the Beaver, which was supposed to be gone for two months, had been absent for eleven months, causing worry over receiving necessary supplies, and the partners made a decision to plan on leaving the following year. On August 25, 1813, the partners resolved to “abandon the country of Columbia river & to conduct the party of clerks & men under their charge to Louisiana & to dissolve the said concern.” A copy of these agreements and the Bill of Sale is reprinted in T. C. Elliott, “Sale of Astoria, 1813,” Oregon Historical Quarterly 33, no. 1 (March 1932): 43-50.


Following the Isaac Todd, from 1814-16 the NWC was supplied by the Columbia and Colonel Allen. Richard Somerset Mackie, Trading Beyond the Mountains: The British Fur Trade on the Pacific, 1793-1843 (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 18.

Franchère, Narrative of a Voyage, 263.


73 Katharine B. Judson, “The British Side of the Restoration of Fort Astoria,” Oregon Historical Quarterly 20, no. 3 (September 1919): 243-260. Governor George Simpson did not like Fort George and called for its abandonment. He ensured its demise by authorizing the construction of Fort Vancouver in 1825 as its new flagship for the Columbia District under the able leadership of John McLoughlin. Fort George was occupied, off and on, until 1848, when the Oregon Country was created. Fort Vancouver was located 100 miles upriver on the north shore of the Columbia opposite the Willamette River, where there was greater agricultural potential for self-sufficiency. H. Lloyd Keith, “Shameful Mismangement, Wasteful Extravagance, and the Most Unfortunate Dissention: George Simpson’s Misconceptions of the North West Company,” Oregon Historical Quarterly 102, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 434-453; Walter N. Sage, “The Place of Fort Vancouver in the History of the Northwest,” Pacific Northwest Quarterly 39, no. 2 (April 1948): 83-102.

74 The British maintained the post had changed hands by purchase, not conquest. The two nations reached a compromise by lowering the Union Jack, raising the Stars and Stripes, and allowing the NWC to retain ownership under U.S. sovereignty and continuing to trap. After less than three years of American ownership and occupation, the British controlled Fort Astoria for nearly thirty-three years. A replica of Fort Astoria was constructed for Astoria’s centennial commemoration in 1911 and was added as a National Historic Landmark on November 5, 1961. T. C. Elliott, “The Surrender at Astoria in 1818,” Oregon Historical Quarterly 19, no. 4 (December 1918): 271-282. For the NWC’s attempts to supply Fort George and trade with China see H. Lloyd Keith, “Adventure of the Colonel Allan,” Oregon Historical Quarterly 105, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 546-567.

75 Alexander Ross, Ross’s Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River, 1810-1813, in Early Western Travels, edited by Reuben G. Thwaites, 7:270.

76 John Jacob Astor to Wilson Price Hunt, January 2, 1832, Astor Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

77 Ross, Adventures of the First Settlers, 7:270.