



Who Was Marcus Whitman?

Marcus Whitman (September 4, 1802–November 29, 1847) was an American physician and missionary in the Oregon Country. Along with his wife Narcissa he started a mission in what is now southeastern Washington state in 1836, which would become a stop along the Oregon Trail. Whitman would later lead the first large party of wagon trains along the Oregon Trail, establishing it as a viable route for the thousands of emigrants who used the trail.

In 1834 Whitman applied to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. However the organization accepted only married couples. In 1835, he traveled with missionary Samuel Parker to present-day north-western Montana and northern Idaho, to minister to the Native American bands of the Flathead and Nez Percé people. During this journey, Whitman treated several fur trappers during an outbreak of cholera. At the end of their stay, he promised the Nez Percé that he would return with other missionaries and teachers to live with them.

After his return Whitman attended a speech by Parker, now representing the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, which called for missionaries. In 1836, Whitman married Narcissa Prentiss, a teacher of physics and chemistry. Narcissa had also been eager to travel west as a missionary, but she had been unable to do so as a single woman.

In 1836, the couple, and a group of other missionaries including Henry and Eliza Spalding, joined a caravan of fur traders and traveled west, establishing several missions as well as their own settlement, Waiilatpu (Why-ee-lat-poo, the 't' is half silent), which means "place of the rye grass" in the Cayuse language. Located in the Walla Walla Valley, just west of the northern end of the Blue Mountains, near the present day city of Walla Walla, Washington. The settlement was in the territory of both the Cayuse and the Nez Percé tribes of Native Americans. Marcus farmed and provided medical care, while Narcissa set up a school for the

Native American children. In 1843, Whitman traveled east, and on his return he helped lead the first large group of wagon trains west from Fort Hall, in eastern Idaho. Known as the "Great Emigration", it established the viability of the Oregon Trail for later the homesteaders.

The influx of white settlers in the territory brought new diseases to the Indian tribes, including a severe epidemic of measles in 1847. The Native American's lack of immunity to new diseases and limited health practices led to a high mortality rate, with children dying in striking numbers. The zealous conversion attempts by the Whitmans, as well as the recovery of many white patients, fostered the belief among the Native Americans that Whitman was causing the death of his Indian patients. The Indian tradition of holding medicine men personally responsible for the patient's recovery eventually resulted in violence. In what became known as the Whitman Massacre, Cayuse tribal members murdered the Whitmans in their home on November 29, 1847. Most of the buildings at Waiilatpu were destroyed. Twelve other white settlers in the community were also killed. For several weeks, 53 women and children were held captive before negotiations led to them being released. This event triggered an ongoing conflict between white settlers and local tribes, known as the Cayuse War.



In 1953, the state of Washington donated a statue of Whitman to the National Statuary Hall Collection in the Capitol Building in Washington DC (See photo). The Washington State Legislature has declared the fourth day of September as Marcus Whitman Day.