

Places & Faces

Step back in time at Whitman Mission

The Whitman Mission National Historic Site in Walla Walla, Washington, is open daily from 9 a.m.-4 p.m.
National Park Service/Contributed Photo

By Jeff Petersen

For Go! Magazine

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — Climb the hill to the obelisk at Whitman Mission National Historic Site and you'll see a peaceful scene.

One hundred seventy-five years earlier, it was the scene of a massacre.

The site six miles west of present-day Walla Walla, Wash., played a key role in white settlement of the West and the establishment of Oregon Territory in 1848.

Walking more than a mile of paved trails, you'll hear echoes of history. Missionaries Marcus and Narcissa Whitman established a mission to the Cayuse Nation at Waiilatpu in 1836. To the Indian people the area was known as the Place of the Sunflowers due to an abundance of arrowleaf balsamroot, whose yellow blossoms in spring were welcome after long winters.

By 1843, Narcissa had established a school for Indian children. The Cayuse were growing small plots of wheat, corn, peas and potatoes and raising cattle, sheep, hogs and hens. Marcus taught them how to till fields, irrigate crops and erect mills for grinding corn and wheat.

But the Indians were lukewarm to the Christian way of life, preferring their own Seven Drum Religion. The Cayuse mainly congregated at Whitman Mission during spring planting and fall harvest.

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