

WALLA WALLA TREATY COUNCIL OF 1855

In 1855 a treaty council was held in the Walla Walla valley between Governor Isaac Stevens of Washington Territory, Superintendent of Indian Affairs Joel Palmer of Oregon Territory, and many of the upper Columbia and Snake River Indian tribes. The council opened on May 29, 1855 on Mill Creek in what is now the city of Walla Walla, and concluded 13 days later on June 11. Several thousand Indians were present, as well as Stevens' and Palmer's supporting staff, a detachment of soldiers, and a number of whites living in the area.

It has been said of this event, "In its general importance and difficulty [it] has never been equaled by any council held with the Indian tribes of the United States." The council resulted in the signing of three treaties, establishing the Yakama, Nez Perce, and Umatilla Indian Reservations, and the ceding of all remaining tribal lands to the United States.

Location of the Council Grounds

The location of the exact grounds of the Treaty Council of 1855 has been a topic of considerable controversy over the years. What is clear from the reports of Gov. Isaac Stevens and his staff is that it was on the north bank of Mill Creek. Most all students of the question agree in addition that it was somewhere east of the current intersection of First and Main in the city of Walla Walla, though precisely where has not been determined.

While the camps of the various participants were spread out over a large area, it appears likely that the main council deliberations took place in this immediate vicinity.

Whitman College historian W.D. Lyman in his *History of Old Walla Walla County* (1918) writes: *There seems some difference of opinion as to the exact location of the conference. It has generally been thought that Stevens' camp was at what is now known as Council Grove Addition, near the residence of ex-Senator Ankeny.*

The name Council Grove was given to the area just southeast of the intersection of Park & Alder Streets in this vicinity. Crescent Street, where Senator Ankeny lived, begins at Alder Street east of the intersection and from there curves into Birch Street.

Although the current channel of Mill Creek is north of this location, according to Professor Lyman, *"It appears from the testimony of old-timers that Mill Creek has changed its course at intervals in these years, and that as a result the exact identification [of the Council grounds] is difficult.* It is possible that in 1855 Mill Creek followed the curve of Crescent Street or was at least parallel to it and then continued down or parallel to Birch, as it did during the flood of 1931, before the construction of the current concrete

channel. That would have put this site on the north bank of Mill Creek at the time, consistent with early accounts of its location.

Additional confirmation of this possibility is found in the 1876 birdseye view map of Walla Walla showing large trees lining the south bank of Mill Creek as it approaches Alder before continuing northwest on the bank of the creek in its current channel, as well as continuing southwest to a large grove and open space along Crescent Street, suggesting that the creek previously took this path.

A treaty marker was placed at this site in 1925. Five years later, another monument to the treaty council was installed at the entrance to the Whitman College amphitheater. The original inscription on the treaty rock there reads in part, "Here were camped from May 24 to June 12, 1855, two thousand Indians of the Nez Perce Tribe, with their famous chief, Hol-Lol-Sote-Tote, Lawyer, attending the Great Council called by Governor Stevens." A second inscription was added in 1955 that reads, "To commemorate the 100th anniversary of the signing by their forefathers of the treaties with the United States of America near this place on June 9 and 11, 1855, this plaque is presented by the people of the Yakima, Nez Perce, Cayuse, Walla Walla, and Umatilla Indian Tribes."

Regarding the Whitman location, Lyman wrote in 1918, *"William McBean, a son of the Hudson's Bay Company agent at Fort Walla Walla during the Cayuse war, who was himself in Stevens' force as a young boy, told the author nearly thirty years ago that he believed the chief point of the conference was almost exactly on the present site of Whitman College.... It seems plain...that the Indians were camped at various places along two spring branches, College Creek and Tannery Creek."*

Lyman also mentions the view that the council was "near the residence of Mrs. Clara Quinn." Walla Walla 2020 research has identified that residence as being at the corner of Colville and Rose, just northeast of the intersection of First & Main where Fort Walla Walla was established in 1856, also said to be on the 1855 treaty grounds.

In addition to the main arbors where official proceedings took place, meals were served, and a storehouse was constructed, the participants camped over a wide area, as a result of which it is likely that some parts of the Council grounds covered the entire area from First & Main to Whitman College and beyond.

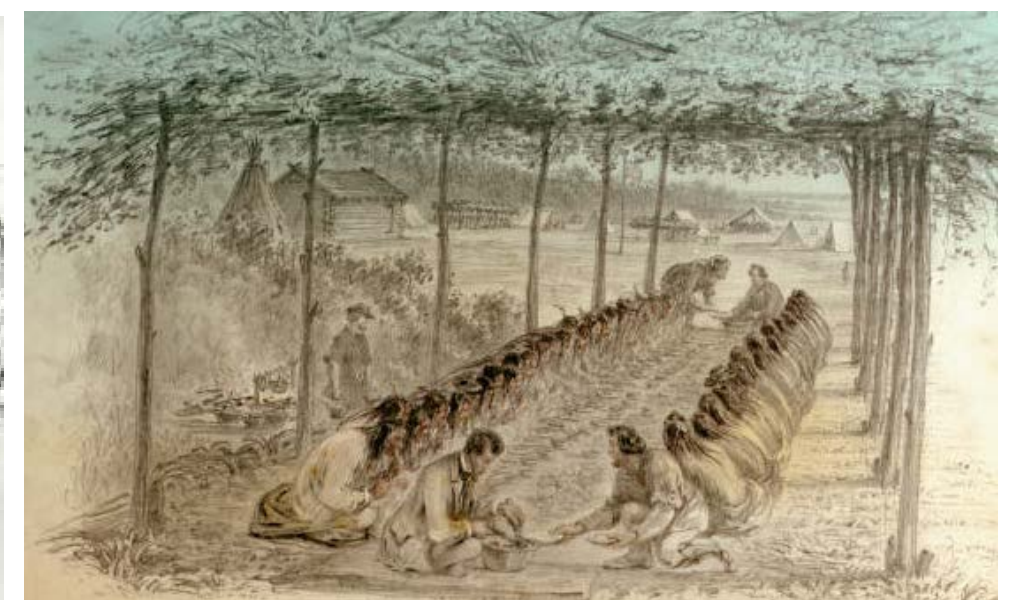
Key excerpts from the official record of the council proceedings, including statements by Stevens, Palmer, and each of the Indian leaders who spoke, are available at www.wallawallatreatycouncils.blogspot.com.



Nez Perce arriving at the Treaty Council Grounds



Official Proceedings of the Council



Chiefs at Dinner with Stevens & Palmer, 1855