

WILLIAM McWHIRK: WALLA WALLA PIONEER

William McWhirk was one of Walla Walla's first merchants and my great great grandfather. His story began in rural Ohio where he was born in 1827 of a Scottish immigrant father and New England mother. The eldest of several children, William was captivated by the American West after reading a "dime novel" written by a fur trapper, a type of book which popularized frontier life and probably lured many pioneers to the West.

At the age of 25, William went west, and rather than continuing on to Oregon or California, stopped at Ft. Hall in what is now southeastern Idaho near the confluence of the Snake and Portneuf Rivers. Ft. Hall was originally built by American Nathaniel J. Wyeth in 1834 and sold to the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) in 1837, its southernmost trading post serving the Upper Snake trapping and trading region. Richard Grant was the HBC's Chief Factor at Ft. Hall in 1852, and William worked for him for the next two years, although the type of work he did for Grant is not yet known.

In 1854 William reportedly moved to an area 30 miles below Salmon Falls and whip sawed enough lumber to build a boat which he took down the Snake River, stopping at the confluence with the Boise River near what was then the HBC's Ft. Boise; there he operated his boat as a ferry for the next three years. Severe flooding on the Snake had destroyed many ferrying operations, and he probably saw a lucrative business opportunity essential to American emigrants flooding into the West.

Historical records indicate that William McWhirk went to present-day Walla Walla in 1857 where he built a house and dry goods store, possibly a tent store, at the corner of Second and Main. There is also an account of McWhirk going to Walla Walla in 1858 at the behest of Henry Isaacs, an established merchant and miller at The Dalles. Although the dates don't coincide exactly, it is possible that McWhirk's Walla Walla venture was a dry goods business which involved Isaacs, the more seasoned merchant. Regardless, by 1859 McWhirk apparently tired of being a merchant and sold both house and store to Frank Worden. He then tried his hand at farming, something his family would have been familiar with in Ohio, and cultivated a sizable tract of land and invested in livestock. Throughout his tenure in Walla Walla, McWhirk was civically active and participated in the creation of the City and County of Walla Walla.

On October 1, 1859, William married Margaret Laroque, metisse daughter of the elusive Joseph Laroque. (There is evidence that Margaret was born at Ft. Hall along with her siblings, and that a Joseph Laroque lived there and had business dealings with HBC there between at least 1834 and 1837, possibly longer; it is not known whether William might have known the Laroque family at Ft. Hall.) William and Margaret had a daughter, Henrietta, in 1860, and all 3 of them are recorded in the 1860 U.S. Census in William's household. In 1861 the couple had a son, Charles, who was reportedly born at Lapwai, Idaho, but it is unclear why he would have been born there if his family still lived in or near Walla Walla. William and Margaret divorced in 1863.

In 1864 William McWhirk shows up in a neighboring part of the Washington Territory, this time back on the Snake River where he had a town site surveyed at the confluence of the Snake and the Palouse River, and the area was referred to as McWhirk's Ferry. The impetus for this venture was development of the Kootenai mines, and apparently 100 pack animals used the ferry en route to the mines in that year.

William McWhirk may have had several business ventures operating at this time, but the severe winter of 1866 apparently killed off enough of his livestock so that he lost all his property and investments to creditors. He apparently took what little he still possessed, the two children Henrietta and Charles, and relocated near Missoula in what is now Montana (At one time prior to their becoming U.S. territories, all of present-day Idaho and about one-quarter of Montana had been part of Walla Walla County!).

McWhirk acquired a tract of land where the Rattlesnake and the Missoula Rivers join, and managed to divide it into smaller parcels which he sold to others, the land on which Missoula stands today. During these years all of William's brothers also came west, and brother Cyrus entered into Missoula businesses with William, including a dry goods store and a "mild drink" saloon. William and Cyrus apparently used part of their land as a large fruit, vegetable and flower garden, an area at the east entrance to Missoula which was widely known as McWhirk's Gardens and contributed to Missoula being known as the "Garden City." William later moved to Corvallis where he was a merchant until his death there in 1889.

William's daughter Henrietta died in childhood, but son Charles grew to manhood in Montana and had a large family including my grandfather. Charles McWhirk would have been 1/4 Indian and apparently returned to the Walla Walla/Umatilla area often enough to be remembered by older Umatilla residents as a man who helped others protect their property from unscrupulous people trying to take over Indian land.

Bob McWhirk
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Kapoho, Hawaii