

# Holy Ground

Exploring Catholic history in the Pacific Northwest

PART 8: THE SHORT-LIVED DIOCESE OF WALLA WALLA

OCTOBER 11, 2020

This series of essays exploring the history of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest began in September, 2019 but was interrupted when the bulletin was suspended due to the pandemic. It now resumes. You can catch up on the first six essays in the series at <https://www.stjames-cathedral.org/history/holyground/holyground.aspx>

**B**ishop A. M. A. Blanchet had prepared for his new duties and his new diocese as systematically as he could. He recruited priests and other helpers to assist him in establishing the Church in the wilds of Walla Walla; he raised a considerable amount of money to enable him to buy land and build churches; and he followed all the best advice about the Oregon Trail.

But nothing went according to plan. His party's relatively late departure meant that there was insufficient grass for the cattle to graze on along the Oregon Trail; many animals starved, and the twelve yoke of oxen Blanchet started with soon dwindled down to so few that heavier items—including the all-important plow—had to be abandoned along the way. "From Fort Hall to Walla Walla there were no less than a hundred wagons abandoned on the road because there were no more beasts to pull them," Blanchet wrote to the Bishop of Toronto. And travel turned out to be far more expensive than Blanchet anticipated. By the time he arrived in Walla Walla, he had spent almost all he had: "Farewell then, to the hope of beginning the episcopal establishment with the money subscribed by Quebec and Montreal; one must live while awaiting such help as may come from France."

When he spoke of help from France, Blanchet was alluding to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, a mission society established by French laywoman Pauline Jaricot, which later became an official agency of the Vatican. Little did Blanchet know that



ABOVE: Tiloukaikt, one of the chiefs of the Cayuse, painted by Paul Kane. CENTER: Dr. Marcus Whitman. BELOW: Father J. B. A. Brouillet, Vicar General of the Diocese of Walla Walla.

within a few months, the 1848 Revolution would see barricades rise in the streets of Paris and Louis Philippe fall from power. It would be a long time before the much-needed funds could reach the struggling Church in the Pacific Northwest. Without cash, Blanchet could only hope to purchase land and build churches if he could secure a credit advance from the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Walla Walla.

The almost total lack of funds was not Blanchet's only difficulty. Less than three weeks after his arrival in Walla Walla, Blanchet received a visit from Dr. Marcus Whitman.

In the fall of 1847, Whitman was one of the best-known figures in the American west. A Methodist missionary as well as a medical doctor, Whitman had arrived in Waiilatpu, six miles west of present-day Walla Walla, eleven years earlier. He established a mission among the Cayuse and at the time of Blanchet's arrival was planning to start a new mission in the Dalles, in Oregon. Whitman's success had been mixed; indeed, he seemed to be more effective at bringing new white settlers to the region than in converting the indigenous people. In hindsight, part of the challenge was Whitman's insistence that the native peoples adopt farming, abandoning not only their religious practice, but their whole way of life. When Bishop Blanchet arrived, frayed relationships were reaching their breaking point, especially as Dr. Whitman was powerless to treat an epidemic of cholera and measles among the Cayuse, who were dying in great numbers.

The frustrated Whitman, however, placed the blame on the advent of other missionaries, especially the Catholics. As A. M. A. Blanchet wrote to his brother, the Archbishop of Oregon City, "It was on September 23rd, at Fort Walla Walla, that I first saw Dr. Whitman. He showed much

displeasure at my arrival to these reaches. He spoke of religion.... that he didn't like Catholics; and for this reason, would come to our aid with food only if we were starving." In his account, Father J. B. A. Brouillet, Blanchet's vicar general, recalled Whitman's words: "I know very well for what purpose you have come." To which Blanchet replied: "All is known... I come to labor for the conversion of the Indians, and even of Americans, if they are willing to listen to me."

This was a rude awakening to the realities of missionary life in Walla Walla. The Bishop persisted, nevertheless. He directed Father Ricard and the Oblates to establish a mission west of the Columbia River, while he and Brouillet ministered to the Cayuse on the east. Their chilly reception by the whites notwithstanding, the priests found a warm welcome from the native people. The Oblates were soon building St. Rose Mission among the Yakima, and Blanchet was heartened by the welcome he received from the Cayuse, who readily invited him to make a home among them.

Blanchet and Brouillet visited Tiloukaikt, a Cayuse chief, on November 8. Tiloukaikt told them that the spot he had in mind for them was Dr. Whitman's mission at Waiilatpu – he intended to send Whitman away. In some dismay, they declined this offer, and instead established St. Anne's Mission on the Umatilla River, about 25 miles from Waiilatpu.

Just a day or two after St. Anne's mission was established, Father Brouillet rode to Waiilatpu to baptize some infants at Tiloukaikt's invitation. He arrived in the early evening of November 30, only to discover the bodies of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and a dozen others, lying where they had fallen in the massacre which had taken place the previous day. A few surviving women and about 30 children were confined nearby, terrified hostages. "I passed the night without scarcely closing my eyes," Father Brouillet wrote, and in the morning, did what he could to comfort the living, which was very little: "The sight of those persons caused me to shed tears, which, however, I was obliged to conceal, for I was the greater part of the day in the presence of the murderers, and closely watched by them, and if I had shown too marked an interest in behalf of the sufferers, it would only have endangered their lives and mine." With another man who had been spared in the massacre, Brouillet helped to wash and bury the bodies of the Whitmans and the other victims.

The situation was incredibly volatile. Brouillet, under constant scrutiny from the Cayuse men who had perpetrated the massacre, risked his own life to warn Protestant missionary Henry Spalding. The white settlers wanted to avenge the deaths of the Whitman party and to release the captives; the Cayuse chiefs wanted to avoid war with the whites. Bishop Blanchet found himself in the middle of the dispute, listening to the grievances and concerns of the Cayuse chiefs, who had not directed the massacre, though they well understood why it had happened. Blanchet wrote up terms for peace on their behalf, which were then delivered

to Fort Walla Walla by Father Brouillet.

For a time, it seemed as if peace might be possible. The hostages were released to Fort Walla Walla on December 29. Bishop Blanchet accompanied them to Oregon City, where he intended to plead for a peaceful resolution to the crisis before Territorial Governor George Abernethy. But the Governor had already authorized the formation of volunteer militias to defend white settlements, and before Blanchet reached Oregon, armed volunteers under the direction of Colonel George Gilliam were marching towards Waiilatpu.

Father Brouillet, meanwhile, remained at the mission in Umatilla, still hoping that war might be averted. But fear and misinformation were rampant on both sides, and fighting broke out on February 19, 1848. The next day, Father Brouillet abandoned St. Anne's Mission and sought safety at Fort Walla Walla. There he was joined by the Oblates, and the whole party followed Bishop Blanchet to Oregon. Less than six months after their arrival in Walla Walla, the priests were gone. The Oblates would return, briefly, but St. Anne's Mission at Umatilla was burned to the ground.

The "Cayuse War," as it is called, dragged on for months. Those who had perpetrated the massacre were dead, but white settlers would not accept this. In 1850, five Cayuse chiefs, none of whom had been present at the massacre, surrendered themselves. In doing so, they hoped to secure peace for the Cayuse. In spite of the lack of evidence, they were tried, condemned, and hanged. Among them was Tiloukaikt, who had been one of the first to welcome Bishop Blanchet to the Northwest. Before he was hanged, he said, "Did not your missionaries teach us that Christ died to save his people? So we die to save our people."

#### Works Consulted:

- Brouillet, J. B. A. *Authentic Account of the Murder of Dr. Whitman and Other Missionaries by the Cayuse Indians of Oregon in 1847, and the Causes which Led to that Horrible Catastrophe. Second Edition, 1869. Printed in Portland, Oregon.* Courtesy of the Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle.
- Brown, Roberta Stringham, and Patricia O'Connell Killen, editors. *Selected Letters of A. M. A. Blanchet, Bishop of Walla Walla and Nesqually.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013.
- Schoenberg, Wilfrid, SJ. *A History of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest, 1743-1983.* Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1987.

## MAKE A VISIT

The site of the Whitman Mission is preserved as a park, with opportunities to explore the story of the Whitmans, to learn about the Cayuse people then and now, and to explore trails in a beautiful landscape.

WHITMAN MISSION NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE  
328 Whitman Mission Road, Walla Walla, WA 99362  
<https://www.nps.gov/whmi/index.htm>