

Why Was Fort Colvile Established and Spokane House Closed?

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On April 14, 1825, Hudson's Bay Company Governor (general manager) George Simpson, returning east after a six-month inspection tour of the Columbia District, arrived at Kettle Falls, on the upper Columbia River. As Simpson wrote in his journal, while his boat crew was portaging around the falls,

I went to the Chiefs Lodge about a Mile above the Carrying place; had an interview with him and some of his principal followers and intimated my wish to form an Establishment on his Lands provided he undertook to protect it and assured us of his Friendly disposition. He received the proposal with much satisfaction and offered me the choice of his Lands in regard to situation or quantity. We selected a beautiful point on the South side about 3/4ths of a Mile above the Portage where there is abundance of fine Timber and the situation eligible in every point of view. . . . Lined out the Site of the Establishment 150 feet Square on a bank facing and commanding a view of the River and I have taken the liberty of naming it Fort Colvile.

Simpson also wrote that this would mean “abandoning the Establishment of Spokan House and forming one here in its stead.”¹

This essay looks into why Simpson decided to close Spokane House, a trading post located about sixty miles up the Spokane River from the Columbia that had been established in 1810, on the orders of North West Company explorer and trader David Thompson,² and build a new post just above Kettle Falls. Simpson was well known for taking credit for bold decisions on his own assessment of the situation, exercising his considerable authority.³ But HBC archival

¹ Frederick Merk, ed., *Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson's Journal . . . 1824-25*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 139.

² Mark Weadick, *A History of Spokane House, 1810-26* 4th ed, (Spokane, WA, 2019), 3. For more on Thompson's activities in the Pacific Northwest, see Jack Nisbet, *Sources of the River: Tracking David Thompson through the Inland Northwest* (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 1994).

³ Consider the title of one of his biographies: James Raffan, *Emperor of the North: Sir George Simpson and the Remarkable Story of the Hudson's Bay Company* (Toronto: Harper Collins Canada, 2010).

documents show that the decision to close Spokane House and replace it with Fort Colvile was heavily influenced by information and recommendations from men lower in rank, of whom Simpson was sharply critical, directly or indirectly.

In his April 14 journal entry signaling the beginnings of Fort Colvile, Simpson wrote: “My reasons for abandoning the Establishment of Spokan House and forming one here in its stead are explained under Date the 8th Inst.” On that date Simpson stopped where the Spokane River enters the Columbia, and explained his decision:

Forks Spokan River, Friday, April 8th: Had a consultation with Messrs [Alexander] Kennedy [James] McMillan [Archibald] McDonald & [Alexander] Ross on the subject of removing the Establishment of Spokan House to the Kettle Falls; the advantages to be derived from this change are, that a very heavy expence and serious inconvenience in transporting the Outfits and returns between the Main River and the present Establishment by Land a distance of about 60 Miles will be avoided; that at the Kettle Falls an abundant stock of Fish may be secured for the maintenance of the Post throughout the Year; that the Indians in that neighbourhood and towards the Lakes will exert themselves more than heretofore and in all probability make considerable Hunts as their Lands are tolerably Stocked with Beaver. . . . The Coutonais and Flat Head Posts may be supplied with equal facility from one place as the other if it is found that by the Flat Head and Coutonais Rivers the Water Communication is impracticable, but if practicable the use of Horses may be discontinued.⁴

That passage is often quoted or referenced in the fur trade literature, setting out the rationale as if Simpson had reached his determination on his own. But another entry in his journal, less well known than the entry for April 8, 1825, indicates that the move from Spokane to Colvile was first suggested by someone else. More than five months prior, on October 26, 1824, as he was traveling down the Columbia, Simpson approached Kettle Falls for the first time, and made the following entry in his journal:

The Portage would be a good situation for a fort as the soil is tolerably good and extensive Gardens might be made and Fish collected in any quantity at little Expence: it has been suggested to me that Spokan Establishment should be removed to this place but I shall be better able to form an opinion on that head after visiting the latter place.⁵

⁴ *Fur Trade and Empire*, 134.

⁵ *Fur Trade and Empire*, 42.

Who would have made such a suggestion? It turns out that it was HBC Chief Factor Alexander Kennedy, John McLoughlin's predecessor as superintendent of the Columbia District. Kennedy first arrived at Spokane House on October 18, 1822.⁶ In the Spring of 1823 he wrote a report on the trading post and the surrounding area, to be carried east with the annual York Factory Express in time for Simpson to read it before his own trip west. As Kennedy explained:

There are few or no Beaver in this part of the country now, so that if the Indians were inclined to work we have little or nothing to expect from them, and this is another reason why I think that **a Post at the Kettle falls would be much more beneficial to the Company.**

There are a great many Indians along the Columbia who are little known to the Traders in this quarter, particularly those above the Kettle Falls, who seldom or never visit any of our trading posts. It is well known that that part of the country is rich in Beaver, particularly near the Borders of the Rocky mountains, and by being nearer to those Indians, which we would [be], **if a Post was established at the Kettle falls** we would have a better opportunity of acquiring an influence over them, and by introducing our goods amongst them, it might be the means of making them look after Beaver, instead of passing their time idly—half starved and half naked as they are now, at least there is a much better prospect of succeeding in a country where there is Beaver to be caught than where there is none.⁷

Kennedy recognized that the territory around Spokane House, after thirteen years of operation, including a period of intense competition between the North West Company and John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company, was trapped out. Meanwhile, the upper Columbia presented relatively untapped opportunities—abundant beaver and Natives who might be willing to improve their condition by trapping them in exchange for trade goods. Note how the last item in Simpson's rationale of April 1825 echoed Kennedy's report of April 1823: "that the Indians in that neighbourhood and towards the Lakes will exert themselves more than heretofore and in all probability make considerable Hunts as their Lands are tolerably Stocked with Beaver." The "Lakes" in question were the Arrow Lakes in the Columbia between Kettle Falls and Boat Encampment, the Western terminus of the Athabasca portage over the Rocky Mountains.

⁶ Bruce M. Watson, *Lives Lived West of the Divide* (Kelowna, BC, 2010), 530.

⁷ Alexander Kennedy, "Spokane District Report, 1822-23, Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA) B.208/e/1, folio 3d. Emphasis added. The original manuscript is in Appendix 2. This document is undated, but similar district reports were typically dated in early April, in time to be carried east by the York Factory Express.

There is further evidence that in closing Spokane House and opening Fort Colvile, Simpson was relying on the advice of those with more experience west of the Rocky Mountains than he could claim. One of the participants in the “consultation” of April 8, 1825, along with Kennedy, was Alexander Ross, a veteran of the Pacific Northwest fur trade. As an employee of Astor’s Pacific Fur Company, Ross arrived at the mouth of the Columbia in 1811 on the *Tonquin*, participated in establishing Fort Astoria, and spent the winter of 1811-12 at a newly established PFC trading post where the Okanagan River enters the Columbia. He went on to work for the North West Company after it acquired the PFC in 1813, and continued with the HBC following the merger of 1821. In 1823-24 Ross led the HBC’s Snake Country brigade, trapping beaver in the Snake River watershed, and over the winter of 1824-25 he was in charge of Flathead Post (near present Thompson Falls, Montana). In March 1825 he brought the season’s fur returns from Flathead Post to Spokane House, from where they would be taken on down to the newly established Fort Vancouver. On March 25, 1825, Ross wrote in his journal:

Of all the situations now chosen for the purposes of commerce in the Indian country, Spokane House is perhaps the most singular. Far from water communication, far from any principal tribe of Indians, not very convenient for living, & out of the way for all the various purposes of trade, the prey to a set of saucy indolent natives, who never give, in the course of the year, a part of [the] costs, but yet are enriched & indulged in laziness, by the transportation of property & horse business.

In some cases it is perhaps not easy to apply a proper remedy to an evil, but that cannot be said of the present, & when the evil is very great, a remedy of some kind should be attempted, Spokane forks on the West, the **Kettle falls on the North**, Coeur d’ Alines on the South, or Lac Pend’ Oreille, on the East, would all do. By the two former, there would be no portages, & provisions abundant, and both Flatheads & Kootannais returns brought to the above by water. It is said that there are impediments in parts of River Pend’ Oreille as well as McGillivrays [today called the Kootenai] river; . . . but these impediments or inconveniences also remain to be known.⁸

No doubt Ross conveyed those sentiments to Simpson in the “consultation” on April 8, contributing to Simpson’s decision to close Spokane House and build Fort Colvile just above Kettle Falls. Note how the wording of Simpson’s journal entry echoes Ross, on the question of “impediments”: “The Coutonais and Flat Head Posts may be supplied with equal facility from one place as the other if it is found that by the Flat Head and Coutonais Rivers the Water Communication is impracticable, but if practicable the use of Horses may be discontinued.”

⁸ Alexander Ross, “Journal Kept at Flathead Post during the Winter 1824/25,” HBCA B.69/a/1, fo. 7d. Emphasis added. The original manuscript is in Appendix 3. Thanks to Jack Nisbet for pointing me to this source.

It is somewhat ironic that in deciding to close Spokane House and establish Fort Colvile, the imperious George Simpson was influenced by information and opinions supplied by Alexander Ross and Alexander Kennedy, because Simpson was harshly critical of both men—Ross directly and Kennedy indirectly.

Elsewhere in his journal, in explaining why he decided to remove Ross from command of the HBC's Snake Country trapping brigade (and put Peter Skene Ogden in that position), Simpson declared that Ross to be "a self sufficient empty headed man . . . whose reports are so full of bombast and marvellous nonsense that it is impossible to get at any information that can be depended on from him."⁹ Despite Ross's considerable experience in the Pacific Northwest, Simpson removed him from the region, and the fur trade, by offering him the position of schoolmaster at HBC's Red River Colony (near today's Winnipeg).¹⁰

Simpson's criticism of Alexander Kennedy was indirect, but perhaps more damning, because Kennedy was a member of the senior team whose management Simpson lambasted at several points in his journal. Soon after arriving at Fort George in November 1825, he wrote:

Everything appears to me on the Columbia on too extended a scale *except the Trade* and . . . I feel that a very Severe reflection is cast on those who have had the management of the Business, as on looking at the prodigious expences that have been incurred and the means at their command, I cannot help thinking that no economy has been observed, that little exertion has been used, and that sound judgment has not been exercised but that mismanagement and extravagance has been the order of the day.¹¹

In later entries Simpson criticized "the gross mismanagement and wretchedly bad system on which the Company's affairs have been conducted in this quarter and which is inexcusable and unpardonable," and vowed that "this slovenly careless mode of doing business which has hitherto been so general throughout the Columbia will not be repeated."¹²

"Those who had the management of the business" after the HBC extended its control over the Columbia District with the merger of 1821, were Chief Factors John Haldane and John Dugald

⁹ *Fur Trade and Empire*, 46.

¹⁰ Ross chronicled his experiences in three volumes which together constitute a major source for the history of the fur trade era in the Pacific Northwest: *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River* (London: Smith & Elder, 1849); and *Fur Traders of the Far West: A Narrative of Adventures in the Oregon or Rocky Mountains 2 Vols.* (London: Smith & Elder, 1855). All three may be downloaded from Google Books.

¹¹ *Fur Trade and Empire*, 65.

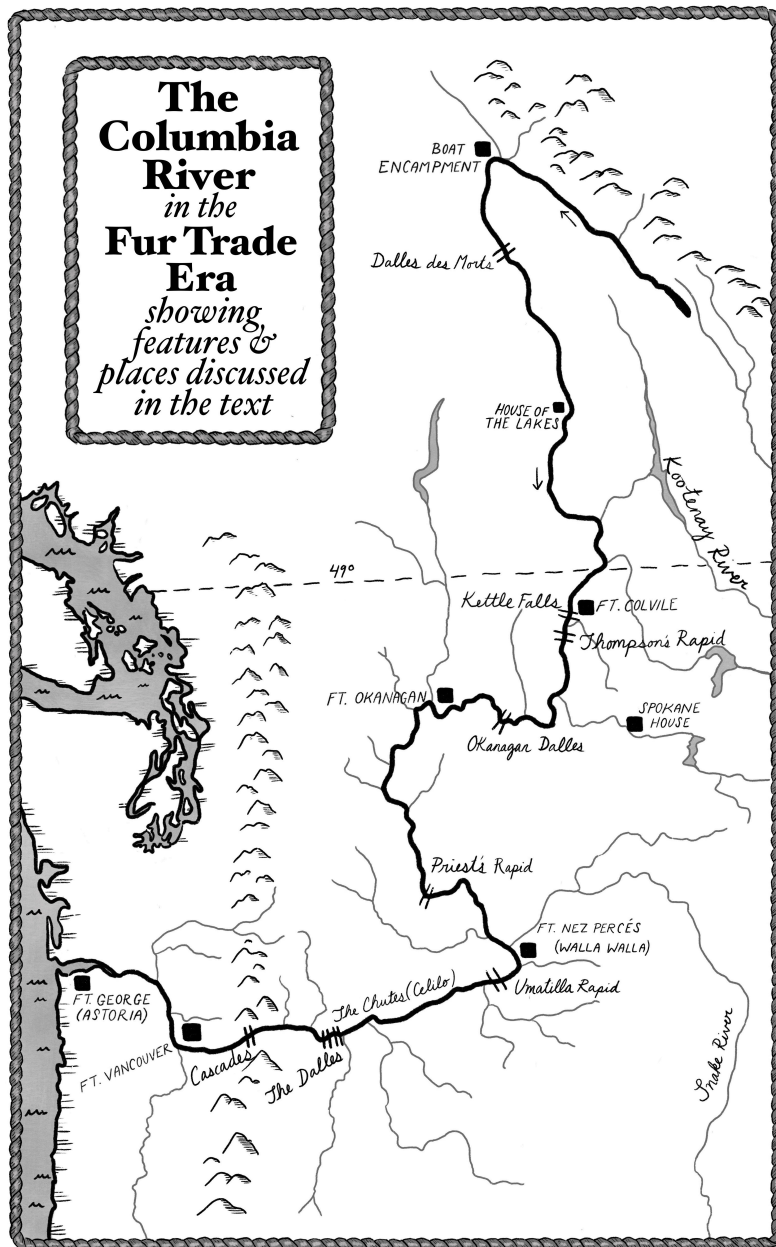
¹² *Fur Trade and Empire*, 93, 131.

Cameron. Both of them went east of the Rocky Mountains before Simpson’s arrival, leaving Chief Factor Alexander Kennedy to take the brunt of Simpson’s wrath.

Both Kennedy and Ross traveled east with Simpson in April 1825, leaving others to carry out Simpson’s decision to close Spokane House and open Fort Colville—a decision influenced by information and recommendations from Kennedy and Ross.

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Appendix 1: The Columbia River in the Fur Trade Era



This map shows the location of Spokane House, about sixty miles up the Spokane River from the Columbia, in relation to Fort Colville, just above Kettle Falls on the main stem of the Columbia.

Source: Thomas H. Holloway, “Columbia Boats, Voyageurs, and the River They Ran: Transporting Freight and Passengers on the Columbia River during the Fur Trade Era,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 113:2 (Spring 2022), 60.

Appendix 2: Alexander Kennedy on Spokane House vs. Kettle Falls

nothing. There are few or no Beaver in this part of the Country now, so that if the Indians were inclined to work we have little or nothing to expect from them, and this is another reason why I think that a Post at the Kettle falls would be much more beneficial to the Company.

There are a great many Indians along the Columbia who are yet little known to the Traders in this quarter, particularly those above the Kettle Falls, who seldom or never visit any of our trading posts, it is well known that that part of the Country is rich in Beaver particularly near the Borders of the Rocky mountains, and by being nearer to those Indians, which we would, if a Post was established at the Kettle falls we would have a better opportunity of acquiring an intercourse with them, and by introducing our Goods amongst them, it might be the means of making them look after Beaver, instead of passing their time idly—half starved and half naked as they do now, at least there is a much better prospect of succeeding in a Country, where there is Beaver to be caught than where there is none.

Source: Alexander Kennedy, "Spokane House Report, 1822-23," Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA) B.208/e/1, folio 3d.

Appendix 3: Alexander Ross on the disadvantages of Spokane House, and possible alternatives

Of all the establishments now known for the purposes of commerce in the British country, Spokane House is perhaps the most singular. For from water communication, for from any principal trade of land and, not very common for living, & out of the way for all the various purposes of trade, it may be a set of things indolent natives, whose season gives, in the course of the year, a profit for trade; but yet are embled & indulged in laziness, by the transportation of property & their business.

In some cases it is perhaps not easy to apply a proper remedy to an evil; but that cannot be said of the present; & when the evil is very great, a remedy of some kind should be attempted. — Spokane House, on the West, the Little falls on the North, Lewis & Clark on the South, or Lac Seul on the East, would all do. — For the two former there would be no postage, & provisions abundant; but the Little falls & the other are not so situated to the shore by water. It is said that there are some settlements on banks of River St. Louis as well as Mr. Gelliboy's river; this I again is I am afraid that these improvements are impossible, remain to be known. — Nor is it impossible to improve

Source: Alexander Ross, "Journal Kept at Flathead Post during the Winter 1824/25," HBCA B.69/a/1, fo. 7d.