

May 08, 2025

This year's 200th anniversary of Fort Colvile's founding offers an opportunity to reflect on its broader historical legacy

By E.J. Iannelli



Young Kwak photo

The remains of the Hudson Bay Company's outpost known as Fort Colvile, established 200 years ago in 1825, lies somewhere deep beneath the waters of Lake Roosevelt.

f you were to set off looking for Fort Colvile, you'd be unlikely to find it.

Occasionally, for a brief period in late spring when Lake Roosevelt is drawn down to accommodate the impending snowmelt, you might be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the fort's faint footprint. During the rest of the year, the former grounds of the trading hub sit on the bottom of the horseshoe-shaped inlet known as Singer's Bay near the town of Kettle Falls.

With some generosity of imagination, latter-day curiosity seekers and history enthusiasts can still stand along the water's edge and pretend that darker patches of current are a sign of something significant below. But the only reliable evidence of Fort Colvile's erstwhile whereabouts is a stone monument that was erected near the former site by the Washington State Historical Society in 1932.

Even then, *reliable* is a debatable term. Less than a decade after it was placed, the marker was relocated to higher ground on an adjacent bluff next to St. Paul's Mission. Not long after that, in the early 1940s, the soon-to-be completed Grand Coulee Dam impounded the Columbia River, flooding 21,000 acres of animal habitats, entire towns, centuries-old fishing spots and sacred grounds, all of them topographical casualties of the resulting manmade lake.

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Given the relative obscurity of Fort Colvile's now submerged ruins, an obvious question arises: Why would anyone want to go looking for it in the first place?

With the help of individuals and groups from around the region, Kettle Falls-based historian Joe Barreca is hoping to provide a variety of answers to that. For the fort's bicentennial this year, he's loosely organizing separate local events into a monthslong observation and retrospective.

The cornerstone events include the annual Northwest Fur Trade Historians encampment and the grand reopening of the Kettle Falls Historical Center (May 17-18), the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation's Salmon Ceremony (June 20), the Kettle Falls Historical Center's Native Culture Weekend (June 21-22) and a themed summit at the Mistequa Hotel in Chewelah featuring leading area historians (Oct. 18).

Although many of these events aren't directly linked to the bicentennial, Barreca says that the 200th anniversary of Fort Colvile's founding serves as "a good time to dispel a few misconceptions about the fort and the fur trade." As he recently explained in an article he

wrote for *The Silverado Express*:

"The arrival of European culture and capitalism is not considered a good thing by Native Americans in light of what followed. It was highly destructive to the animals and the land. It brought rules, religion, law enforcement, Western diseases and cures that they didn't have. This is not a celebration. It is a commemoration, a time to learn by reflecting on our common history."



Young Kwak photo

The Fort Colvile historical marker outside the Kettle Falls Historical Center.

NOT EXACTLY A FORT, NOT EXACTLY COLVILLE

Barreca has good reason for wanting to clear up some parts of the historical record. In just name alone, Fort Colvile is a source of potential misconceptions.

Note the spelling of *Colvile* with a total of two l's, which deviates from the three l's found in most regional spellings of the name. Yet all of these Colvilles — whether you're talking towns, forts, rivers or national forests — have a common namesake in Andrew Colvile, the

Scottish-born governor of the Hudson's Bay Company from 1852 until his death in 1856. (Not even the Washington State Historical Society was immune to this confusion. Their 1932 site marker incorrectly reads "Colville.")

Furthermore, despite its military-sounding designation, Fort Colvile wasn't a barracks or munitions store — unlike, say, the similarly named Fort Colville, which was a semi-contemporary U.S. Army post located about 14 miles away. The trading post's naming simply followed the convention that the Hudson's Bay Company used for many of its other locations in the region, such as Fort Okanogan and Fort Vancouver.

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Construction on the trading post began in summer 1825, four years after the omnipresent Hudson's Bay Company — already 155 years old by that point — had bought out its regional rival, the North West Company, giving Hudson's Bay a near monopoly on the North American fur trade.

The Hudson Bay Company's governor of Canada at the time, George Simpson, visited the Inland Northwest to assess its networks and infrastructure.

"Simpson saw that at Kettle Falls, there was a nice flat that a trading post could be built upon. He met with the salmon chief and got an agreement that the Hudson's Bay Company could build a trading post there at Kettle Falls," says Mark Weadick, president of the Northwest Fur Trade Historians.

"The salmon chief specified, though, that the company could not develop or participate or compete with the tribes in obtaining the salmon. And so Fort Colvile opened up a new fur trade territory in the Upper Columbia, which included the Kootenai River, the Kettle River and on into what is Canada today," he continues.



Courtesy of the artist

Artist Shaun Deller's watercolor painting depicts a "Columbia boat" being loaded with bales of fur to be shipped out from Fort Colvile.

Hudon's Bay Company honored the salmon chief's stipulation, not least because the company was more concerned with economics than colonization. And the international trade around furs was far more profitable than fish. In exchange for a single rifle, the Hudson's Bay Company could potentially bring in double-digit beaver pelts that each commanded a cash markup of several hundred percent when sold to the factory.

Beaver fur in particular is both waterproof and insulating. Those qualities had made it a sought-after material for high-end fashionable attire as well as military uniforms.



"A Western 10X beaver fur felt hat today will run you about $1,000," Weadick explains. The 10X refers to the quality of the felt used in making the hat.

"The beaver fur felt hats back in the day were expensive. They were often referred to as gentlemen's top hats, and beaver fur felt hats could be passed down from father to son if they were taken care of," he says. "So, relatively speaking, the price [of these hats] would compare to today's dollar amount."

According to data Weadick provided, the Hudson's Bay records for 1830 show that trappers operating in the Upper Columbia and Western Montana regions brought 7,565 pelts to Fort Colvile. Around 2,900 of these were beaver furs, augmented by muskrat, mink, bear, marten, otter and other varieties.

However, Fort Colvile didn't deal exclusively in animal pelts. As a trading post, it moved other goods as well, though often in exchange for furs. In 1827, barely two years after its founding, 670 pounds of gunpowder, 700 pounds of tobacco, 1,344 lead balls and 60 guns passed through Fort Colvile, not to mention sundry beads, knives, blankets and kettles.

The flat expanse around the fort also offered plenty of arable land for farming. At its peak, Fort Colvile would cultivate 340 acres with crops like potatoes, corn, oats, barley and wheat. Those harvests helped supply a company-owned grist mill at nearby Meyers Falls. The White Mud Farm, located about 10 miles to the east, reared beef and milk cows as well as pigs, horses and chickens.





This agricultural and livestock aspect of Fort Colvile was so significant that the Washington State Historical Society marker calls it out over any mention of the fur trade. Its plinth proclaims, "Here began trade farming, milling and stock raising in Stevens County."



Library of Congress photo

Men from the Spokane Tribe, photographed at Fort Colvile in 1861 by the British North American Boundary Commission.A view from the bluff of Hudson Bay Company's Fort Colvile trading outpost in 1860, about a decade before it was abandoned.

A TALE OF TWO DAVIDS

Despite the perspective reflected on that monument, the founding of Fort Colvile in 1825 isn't necessarily a starting point on any particular timeline. Instead, it's more like an entry point into a much larger story of human activity that extends 200 years forward to the present day and over 9,000 years into the past.

In fact, Fort Colvile doesn't even mark the beginning of Euro-American fur trading in the region. That distinction is generally granted to David Thompson, the first known white person to navigate the full length of the Columbia River, which became a major transcontinental thoroughfare for traders and explorers of all kinds.

Thompson himself was a fur trader, explorer and cartographer working for the North West Company, and it was on their behalf that he set out in 1807 to survey the Canadian Rockies in search of rich sources of pelts and viable waterways to transport them.

Waterborne transport involved two fundamental considerations: the conduit and the craft. It wasn't enough to have a waterway that connected two points. The traders also needed a safe and efficient means of navigating that waterway.





"When David Thompson came through, it's well known that he was inspired by all the canoe-making cultures along his pathway," explains Shawn Brigman, a Spokane tribal member, Sinixt descendant and artisan who has not only studied historical canoes but also developed a modern variant, the Salishan Sturgeon Nose Canoe.



Library of Congress photo

"And so when he made it to Kettle Falls, he wanted to design his own boat, but he designed his own boat based on all the methods that he had previously learned from different Indigenous groups. People kind of leave that part out."

The inland canoe that Thompson developed became known as the Columbia boat, over 100 of which would be produced at Fort Colvile. Artist and historical reenactor Shaun Deller captured this style of boat in a watercolor painting that Barreca has selected for the bicentennial poster.

"What [the *voyageurs*] needed was a boat that was lightweight. When you had to portage it around rapids and such, you could have all the men who were the paddlers of the boat lift the canoe up and carry it a distance and put it back in the water. And yet you could carry a lot of weight in it," Deller explains. He estimates that each canoe could hold up to 4,000 pounds.

Deller's painting depicts not just the sturdy lap-sided canoe but the people who used it. In the upper left are figures who represent a clerk and chief factor — the "higher-paid company men" dressed in "fancier European clothing of the time," he says.

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At the painting's bottom right are two resting *voyageurs*, a word that describes the French and mixed-race traders who came westward to haul the furs and bales of trade goods across vast and treacherous expanses of wilderness. Above them, a third and fourth *voyageur* are engaged in the laborious activity of carrying the heavy bales to the canoe for loading.

During his series of expeditions, Thompson oversaw the establishment of the trading post that would become known as Spokane House at the confluence of the Spokane and Little Spokane Rivers in 1810. In many ways, Spokane House could be considered a precursor to Fort Colvile. The posts' stories are linked through figures like Jacques Raphael Finlay, a skilled multiracial trapper and scout.

Finlay — better known by his nickname, Jaco — was one of the North West Company men who traveled alongside and sometimes ahead of Thompson. Spokane-based historian and naturalist Jack Nisbet has written extensively on Finlay's almost ubiquitous presence throughout the region in various essays as well as his 2003 book *Visible Bones*.

"Thompson is important because he's the first written description we have," Nisbet says. "But damn near everybody that worked for him stayed and married somebody from the tribes. And then they were here 15 years down the road when [David] Douglas arrived."

Douglas was a Scottish botanist who, much like Andrew Colvile, continues to be memorialized by the liberal application of his surname to other things, most notably the Douglas fir and the Douglas squirrel. At just age 25, he came to the area in the spring of 1825 on a mission from the Royal Horticultural Society of London to identify and collect plants — and in particular their seeds — throughout the Pacific Northwest.

"Douglas," Nisbet explains, "is the first white man who's not on a fur trade payroll to show up there and start doing systematic natural history."

The fur trading posts provided Douglas with a local base of operations for his scientific forays. In 1826, Douglas visited Spokane House, which, owing to the merger, had recently changed hands from the North West Company to Hudson's Bay. It had also been supplanted by the newly founded Fort Colvile, a decision that was based on George Simpson's grumbling assessment that Spokane House was, at 60 miles' distance, simply too far from the convenient arterial of the Columbia River.

At Spokane House, Douglas met its founder, Jaco Finlay, who offered him a warm welcome but wasn't in the position to be a lavish host. As Douglas recorded in his journal, Finlay and his family had been subsisting on camas bulbs and "a species of black Lichen which grows on the Pines" for several weeks. Ever curious, and perhaps out of a sense of politeness, Douglas jotted down the recipe for the roasted lichen cakes.

When Douglas returned from a trip along the Spokane River later that afternoon, he found that "Mr. Finlay had obligingly put my gun in good order, for which I presented him with a pound of tobacco, being the only article I had to give."

Back at Fort Colvile, Douglas had a similar ally and resource in the Irish farmer John Work, who was in charge of constructing the burgeoning trading post. Nisbet describes Work as "a really essential figure" in both the early development of Fort Colvile and in Douglas' efforts to collect and preserve seeds for transport back to England. Work apparently had an excellent knowledge of native plants.

When his two-year excursion came to an end, Douglas described his departure from Fort Vancouver bound for England on March 20, 1827:

"I walked the whole distance to Fort Colvile, on the Kettle Falls, which occupied twenty-five days, not one of which passed without presenting to my notice something of interest, either in Botany or Zoology. The beautiful *Erythronium grandiflorum* [yellow avalanche lily] and *Claytonia lanceolata* [western spring beauty] were in full bloom among the snow."

Much like Thompson, Douglas caused a butterfly effect with ripples extending halfway across the globe. The clarkias, lupines and penstemons that would become quintessential features of English gardens can be traced back to his expeditions.



Young Kwak photo

Joe Barreca, president of the Heritage Network, stands next to "The Sharpening Stone," used by Indigenous people to sharpen their tools for salmon fishing at Kettle Falls.

A TRADING HUB SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL

As pivotal as David Thompson may have been for the Euro-American fur trade and explorers like David Douglas, "he's just a blip on the screen if you're any of the tribal fishermen," Nisbet says.

When Thompson and his crew paddled into Kettle Falls on June 19, 1811, they would have been arriving close to the start of an annual salmon and steelhead harvest that was presided over by the salmon chief. The archaeologist and historian David H. Chance

described the ceremony in his oft-cited book *People of the Falls*:

"The fishing at the falls began in late June, just after the First Salmon dances, which at Kettle Falls happened to coincide with the summer solstice. At the very beginning of the season just one man speared fish, and the first of the catch was boiled with heated rocks in a natural 'kettle' in the bedrock. Everyone present received a morsel."

Paul Kane was a contemporary Irish-Canadian artist who captured these fishing scenes in sketches and oil paintings when he visited Fort Colvile in 1847. Kane also created both oil and watercolor portraits of the Colville salmon chief.

"No one is allowed to catch fish without his permission," Kane wrote in his firsthand account of his journeys, *Wanderings of an Artist Among the Indians of North America*. "His large fishing basket or trap is put down a month before anyone is allowed to fish for themselves. [...] The chief distributes the fish thus taken during the season amongst his people, everyone, even to the smallest child, getting an equal share."

In the same passage, Kane noted that, after the salmon run commenced, the fish "continue to arrive in almost incredible numbers[;] in fact, there is one continuous body of them, more resembling a flock of birds than anything else in their extraordinary leap up the falls."

The salmon ceremony and the typically bountiful fishing season that followed it drew as many as 5,000 representatives from tribes that spread across a 200-mile radius around the falls. And, like any large gathering, it had served as an opportunity to exchange ideas as well as goods for centuries prior to Thompson's arrival. Items traded among the tribes included camas root bulbs, shells, beads and, of course, animal hides.

It's the memory of this ritual and intertribal convention that that the Confederated Colville Tribes honor with the annual *Sxnítk* Salmon Ceremony. This year, it takes place on June 20.

Before the first present-day Salmon Ceremony in 2016, the last time the area tribes had gathered at Kettle Falls was over 75 years earlier and under much more despondent circumstances. The "Ceremony of Tears" in 1940 mourned the Grand Coulee Dam's devastating impact on salmon runs and consequently the Indigenous way of life.



Photo courtesy Shelly Boyd

The annual Sinixt Canoe Journey from Revelstoke, British Columbia, to Kettle Falls culminates in the Salmon Ceremony, this year on June 20.

"We call Kettle Falls *Sxnítk*," explains Shelly Boyd, a member of Sinixt/Arrow Lake band of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. "It's pretty distinctive — not just a landmark but a place of general cultural importance to do this."

As a co-founder of the Inchelium Language and Culture Association and longtime tribal advocate, Boyd has been a driving force behind the Salmon Ceremony and the Sinixt Canoe Journey that precedes it.

This summer, which also happens to mark the 10-year anniversary of the event, the paddlers will launch from the Sinixt ancestral lands in Revelstoke, British Columbia, on June 11 and make their way to Kettle Falls over the next 10 days.

"There's two levels of importance for us," Boyd says of the journey.

"One is because Sinixt people were declared extinct in Canada. This is a journey that amplifies our voice and presence in our traditional territory. We are still here. *Púti kwu alá*. And the other is to amplify the voice of salmon who need that cold, clear water of their

homeland as well. The spawning ground in the north is what made the whole Columbia River such a special and important place for salmon."

The event is also an opportunity for what Shawn Brigman calls "cultural recovery." Over the years, a variety of traditional Native American vessels have been used in the journey, including dugout canoes carved from single cedar logs as well as the ancient bark sturgeon-nosed canoes.

The latter have a distinctive angled shape that, as their name suggests, borrows from the natural stylings of the sturgeon to make them more manageable in wind. They measure around 16 feet long, 28 inches wide, and weigh only about 35 pounds. One key contribution of the fur trade was the incorporation of canvas into the canoe's construction.

Brigman's Salishan Sturgeon Nose Canoe, which he created in 2013, has also been a part of the journey. To build it, he drew on his knowledge of native ethnobotany as well as Greek art and architecture.

"I put in what I call Salishan refinements where you do a little tweak here and there to make it pleasing to the eyes," he says. "For example, when I design the nose of the canoe, I like to give it the same curvature as the digging stick," the tool used for harvesting camas root or bitterroot.

The Canoe Journey and Salmon Ceremony could therefore be seen as a melding of tradition and innovation that creates a sense of continuity across generations, even in the face of profound change. It speaks to a point that Boyd's mother often emphasized about resiliency.

"We're not here because our ancestors suffered," she says. "We're here because our ancestors were strong."



Courtesy of ROM (Royal Ontario Museum), Toronto, Canada. ©ROM

Irish-Canadian artist Paul Kane's 1847 oil painting of Kettle Falls depicts the sacred tribal fishing spot before Lake Roosevelt submerged the falls' basalt formations under water in the 1940s due to the opening of Grand Coulee Dam.

HISTORY IS CYCLICAL

When Arnie Marchand was first approached about taking part in a bicentennial celebration of Fort Colvile, the Okanagan historian and member of the Colville Confederated Tribes took issue with the word choice.

"I said, 'You want us, the Indians, to *celebrate* our demise?'"

To Marchand, Hudson's Bay Company posts like Fort Okanagan and Fort Colvile were the reason why the region's beaver population had been hunted close to extinction. They introduced an extractive, exploitative, myopic form of commerce that was anathema to Native ways of life. They represented the first regional incursion of a non-Indigenous presence that would eventually overrun everything.

The forts were, in his eyes, "the beginning of the end." The bitter culmination was the period that Marchand ruefully refers to as "A.D. — after the dam."

"We were salmon people. Our whole reason for living, the whole base of our culture, our tradition, was the salmon. And that," he says, "was just eliminated" as the Grand Coulee neared completion in 1940. When the waters of the Columbia River rose to form Lake Roosevelt, the ancient salmon runs vanished and the roar of Kettle Falls ceased.

Marchand nevertheless agreed to serve as an adviser to the bicentennial event and encourage tribal participation, provided it was framed as something less jubilant than a celebration. He'll also be personally taking part in the October summit, which will feature, in Joe Barreca's words, "an all-star cast of historians, both Native and white." Historian Jack Nisbet will be the keynote speaker.

For Barreca especially, the simple act of people coming together to talk, to learn and to share their individual or cultural perspectives is what matters about the bicentennial.

"All you can hope to accomplish here is to get people aware that this was a cultural watershed, a tipping point, or whatever you want to call it. There's a lot to know and understand, and there's a lot of people and things about it that are swirling around our current existence," he says.

FORT COLVILE BICENTENNIAL EVENTS

May 17-18: Fur Trade Encampment and Grand Reopening of the Kettle Falls Historical Center

June 20: Salmon Ceremony (annual event), parking at Kettle Falls Historical Center

June 21-22: Native Culture Weekend, Kettle Falls Historical Center

Oct. 18: Fort Colvile Summit, 10 am-3 pm, Mistequa Hotel, Chewelah

More information: theheritagenetwork.org

And there is also the message that gestures in the present can transcend the contentions and injustices of the past. After a burst pipe flooded the Kettle Falls Historical Center with water for weeks on end in early 2023, the community rallied to show its support for the organization and its mission of preserving the area's unique history.

"Everything was destroyed. And when I say that, I mean everything. Two of our murals, our tule mat teepee, our canvas teepees and all of our sculptures of our Native American people, all of that was destroyed. Everything had to be taken out, right down to the concrete slab and the studs and the cinder block walls," says Jan Beardsley, the Kettle Falls Historical Society's treasurer.

"So we just put our hearts out to the community, and our community stepped up with lots of small donations and it all added up. They kept us going for the two years, paying the monthly bills and everything. That's how we got the building up and running again."

On May 17 and 18, as the fur trade reenactors recreate a period-accurate scene outside, Beardsley and her fellow members will celebrate — and here the word is appropriate — the Kettle Falls Historical Center's grand reopening. The freshly restored 41-year-old building will feature new displays, restored murals and a revamped gift shop. The Confederated Colville Tribes also donated new large-format paintings by the late Michael Paul, whose seasonal murals had decorated several walls.

For the occasion, Brigman has also created an authentic tule mat longhouse in the building. It will complement one of his handmade canoes, which naturally survived the flooding.

"This is kind of abstract and metaphorical, but what I think is beautiful about all of this is that things happen in cycles. When David Thompson came through, when Fort Colvile was there, there was contact between the Indigenous people and the non-Indigenous people," Brigman says.

"Ten years ago, when we started the canoe journey, there was contact between what you might call primitive skills people, fur trade reenactors and Indigenous people. Now for the bicentennial, it's the same thing. That's kind of cool."



Courtesy of ROM (Royal Ontario Museum), Toronto, Canada. ©ROM
Kane's portrait from the same time period of the Colville Salmon Chief.

The Kettle Falls Historical Center is already on track to enjoy a much longer life than Fort Colvile. Once the fur trade began its decline in the 1840s, it was only a matter of time before Hudson's Bay abandoned it, which it did on June 8, 1871. Within six years, its last chief factor, Angus McDonald, had abandoned it as well, leaving the rotting, dilapidated structures and the land to his son Donald to farm. In 1910, the site burned down in its entirety.

At the same time, Fort Colvile's 46 years of operation offer a window into a period of history as tumultuous as our own.

"During those 46 years, America went to war," Barreca explains. "The Civil War happened. The line between Canada and the United States happened. The changes from horseback and steamboats and railroads happened."

And there is an irony, perhaps satisfying, in the idea that Fort Colvile precipitated its own end. Its existence might not have directly championed white settlement and hydroelectric infrastructure, yet it was undoubtedly a step on the road to those events, and they're the reason its remains are underwater today. But just because Fort Colvile is hard to find doesn't mean we shouldn't go searching for it. ♦

ⓘ The original print version of this article was headlined "In Search of Fort Colvile"



Tags Arts & Culture, Fort Colvile, fur trading, Native American, Hudson's Bay Company, Colville

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E.J. Iannelli has been a contributing writer for the Inlander since 2010. In that time, he's had the opportunity to cover a wide range of topics for the paper (among them steamboating, derelict buildings and creative resiliency during COVID), typically with an emphasis on arts and culture. He also contributes...

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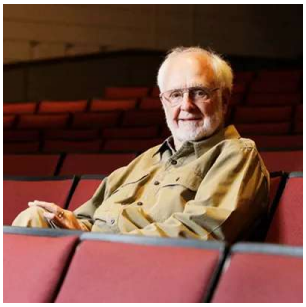
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