

Spokane House

On April 23rd, 1810, David Thompson was about to leave for a quick exploration of the Pend Oreille River and then to take a load of furs across the Rockies and back to North West (Fur) Company (NWC) offices in Montreal. Before he left, he hired his old friend, Jocko Finley, who had recently been working for the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), to travel west and establish a trading station near the mouth of the Little Spokane River where it entered the main Spokane River.



Jocko Finley likeness by Shaun Deller

This spot was a prime native fishery. An island formed where the two rivers joined and the channels around it made a good spot for fish weirs. Hundreds of people gathered there during the fish runs. In that way it was like the Kettle Falls fishery since the natural gathering place also made for a natural trading location. Spokane House was the forebearer of Hudson's Bay Fort Colvile, which this series is about. But that is getting ahead of the story.

Jacques Raphael Finley was born in 1768 to a Scottish father, James Finley and mixed Chippewa/French mother. Jaco grew up in the fur trade. By the time he was 31, he was working for the North West Company and was paid much as David Thompson, an amount that was as high as possible for a "half breed", a testament to his skill.

Thompson didn't "go on rotation" for a sabbatical in Montreal as he had hoped. After transferring his family to a better location on Lake Winnipeg, he became aware of movements by the Hudson's Bay Company and the Pacific Fur Company to the Columbia District and headed back west to help establish NWC territory on the Columbia and map the rest of the Columbia River. He was back across the Rockies and down to Spokane House in 1811.

Thompson's concerns were well-founded. John Jacob Astor, a wealthy American businessman had decided to enter and control the fur trade in the northwest. He founded the American Fur Company (AFC) and its subsidiary the Pacific Fur Company (PFC). He hired a ship, the Tonquin, which had already established trade with China to sail to the mouth of the Columbia, where with difficulty it crossed the bar into the Columbia and established Fort Astoria. Another party from the Pacific Fur Company was headed overland at the same time.

When Thompson arrived in Spokane house with trade goods he found buildings for Finley's residence, for storing furs and for trade. He quickly travelled north with Finley, built more canoes, and took them down the Columbia to Fort Astoria where both the Astorians and Thompson were surprised to meet each other. They both spoke English and agreed to engage in a "friendly" competition.

In 1812 the Pacific Fur Company built a large and impressive fort near Jocko's Spokane House. They called it Fort Spokan. Meanwhile the War of 1812 had started on the East Coast. After helping establish Fort Astoria, the Tonquin had sailed to Vancouver Island where while it was being attacked by hostile natives stores of gun powder ignited destroying the boat, most of the crew and the rest of the trade goods. This bad luck for the PFC was soon compounded when the North West Company, intent on

securing British territory in the Columbia District convinced the British Navy to send the frigate HMS *Raccoon* to the mouth of the Columbia to capture Fort Astoria. Word of the mission arrived before the ship. By the time it arrived, the Astorians, who were almost all British subjects although they worked for an American company, had already sold the assets of the Pacific Fur Company to the North West Company. Fort Astoria became Fort George and Fort Spokane became Spokane House. Jocko Finlay and his crew gladly took over the newly built fort. *“For the next few years, Spokane House was a bright refuge for the few company men in the area. Dances and parties were held in the storage rooms, helping both the men and their neighbors endure the long cold winters. The gates of the fort were seldom closed, as the relationships that were established with the local tribes were truly peaceful and friendly.”* (Mark Weadick – *The History of Spokane House*)

Competition and conflict between fur trade companies elsewhere remained intense. In an effort to resolve differences between the North West Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company, the British government demanded that the two merge and George Simpson took charge of the company’s holding in North America. Simpson soon charged John Lee Lewes and John Dugald Cameron to conduct an inspection of the old NWC posts west of the Rocky Mountains. They found life at Spokane House too undisciplined for their tastes. Peter Skene Ogden was put in charge of Spokane House in 1824.

The Spokane House location fell into disfavor with Simpson because its position on the Spokane River did not give it an advantageous approach to the Columbia, lacked access to cedar for boat-building and other trees for firewood and was not prime agricultural ground. In 1825 Simpson ordered all the Spokane House resources and personnel to move to Kettle Falls and establish Fort Colville.

The Métis fur traders stationed there were not happy with the move. The clash of cultures was clear. The French/Indians from Spokane spoke French, were Catholic, had families in Spokane and were used to a relaxed way of life in the winter. The Hudson Bay gentlemen were Protestant, intent on gaining every advantage of the new location, planting crops, building boats, raising herds of pigs, cows, and horses. Not long after the move to Kettle Falls, many Métis moved out and built “French Town” near what is now the French Rocks boat launch 10 miles south of Kettle Falls on Lake Roosevelt.

Hudson Bay men stripped Fort Spokane of metal hinges, door and window frames and anything else that could be used building Fort Colville. Jocko Finley stayed behind. Now 57 years old, he reconstructed enough of the abandoned fort to make it his personal residence. He lived another 3 years and died in 1828. He was buried at his own request beneath the gun tower on a corner of the fort.

After the site was purchased by Washington State Parks and became part of Riverside State Park, archeological surveys found the outline of the posts palisade underground. They subsequently found a buried body and some artifacts in one corner of the old fort. Among the artifacts an old tobacco pipe was engraved “JF”. The bones etc. were taken to a museum and left in storage until a relative of Finley insisted that they be replaced at their original location. Even then, the museum kept the pipe and other possessions until local historian, Walt Goodman, after whom the Chewelah Museum has been recently renamed, and who is a descendant of Jocko Finley fought to have the artifacts also reburied with Jocko’s bones. Local historical interpreter at Spokane House, Matty Ross, whose five-time great grandfather was Jocko Finley along with hundreds of other relatives hopes that some day the State Parks Department will erect a monument at the site acknowledging Jocko’s place in Spokane history.