

2023 Fort Umpqua Tour Script

Welcome to Fort Umpqua!

I'm _____ and will be your tour guide through the fort complex today. I will share a little about the fort as we stand right here near the entrance, and then we will walk through each station and take a closer look at everything.

In the 1820's and 30's, America and Europe were in a competition with each other to gain land. What is now known as the state of Oregon was once a territory that both the US and England were exploring and laying claim to. During that time, Explorers, voyagers, trappers, traders and settlers moved here to the homelands of several Native Indian tribes.

This particular area– the land we stand on now– was once land that Great Britain claimed. In 1836, Fort Umpqua was established by the British-owned Hudson Bay Company. They chose the site in this very wild and unsettled land about a mile upriver from us here, across from where Elk Creek meets the Umpqua because it was an ideal hub between the Willamette and the Umpqua Valleys, and it helped the British in their goal of claiming as much of this area as they could. The Fort became HBC's southernmost trading fort. It only took 6 months for 10 men to build it! The front gates are actually behind us, facing the river since it was how most people would have accessed the fort during that time. The main trading products included furs that were exported overseas to the Europeans. In exchange for furs, trappers could get food, supplies and gear. The fort also traded with Natives, exchanging items like brass kettles, needles and thread, colorful beads, shells, clothing, and blankets for furs. The most valuable fur was the beaver because the waterproof hairs closest to the leather could be shaved off and molded together to make top hats, which was the style of the mid 1800's until silk hats were the next big thing.

(this is a good opportunity to begin walking and take them to the big sign on the kiosk and show them the timeline and the correlation between trapping beaver and the manufacturing of top hats).

1. The Granary Building: Nowadays we say “store”, but back in the 1800's, people used the word “granary”. This was where most of the trading and purchasing of goods happened. The clerk kept detailed records of everything traded or sold. Inside you can find many furs that would have been found in the Umpqua area in the 1800's such as beaver, mink, cougar, rabbit, deer, elk, and more. You can also see items including bells, beads, arrowheads, knives, blankets and sewing products that were traded.

(you can show them the beaver pelts on the counter and let them feel them. Show them the undercoat–these are what they used to make the hats. The hatters would soak the pelts in mercury to get the soft hairs free from the hide. Since mercury causes brain damage and insanity, the expression “the mad hatter”, or “mad as a hatter” arose).

(You can also look at the miniature of the construction of the building. Point out that during this time period, they would not have used nails in the construction. Metal was heavy and expensive

to ship as well as extremely time consuming to have a blacksmith make each nail individually. Instead they used mortise and tenon joints, dovetails, tongue and groove and wooden pegs.)

2. Fur Press: This was handmade for ECEC by the local brigade of the American Mountain Men. This is what workers used to press the furs they sent overseas to Europe into "bales". Each bale weighed about 90 pounds and was placed on a pack animal and taken up to Fort Vancouver and then shipped out.

(you can show them the sign that has some very helpful pictures for them to be able to visualize a bale of furs and how the press worked).

3. The Blacksmith Shed: blacksmiths made tools, repaired traps and other items for the fort and the people in the area. All Hudson Bay Company forts had a blacksmith shed, but the original Fort Umpqua did not have a smithy shed inside the fort walls.

4. Kitchen Garden: the kitchen garden includes medicinal herbs and vegetables—many of which were native to this area. Medicinal herbs including borage, wormwood, mugwort, and others helped upset stomachs, headaches, and various digestive problems. The Heritage Orchard was added when this replica of Fort Umpqua was built. It is located on the hillside and it includes a grafted apple tree found at the old fort site that is believed to be among the original trees planted by John Baptiste Gagnier—one of the Fort's most well-known post masters.

5. Barracks Building: the men's quarters, known as the Barracks Building, is where all the men who worked at the fort lived. The number of men working at the fort would fluctuate; rising as high as 13 and dropping down to as few as three. The men worked as cooks, laborers, builders, and clerks in the granary. In addition they tended to the crops and livestock. Like most HBC posts in the Oregon Country, the fort housed people from a variety of backgrounds: French Canadians, Métis, local Natives, Iroquois, and Scots. Some also came from the Sandwich Islands (now called Hawaii) through an agreement HBC made with the governor of Oahu to provide them with workers—each on a three-year contract. At the end of the "contract", they were given the option to settle their accounts with HBC (collect their earnings, minus any costs for food, supplies or clothing they needed to purchased from the company during their time spent working for HBC) and go back to Hawaii, or stay here in the area.

(a great article to read about the Hawaiians and their contribution to the Northwest, HBC, and the fur trade can be found here:

<https://hanahou.com/19.2/kanaka-in-the-land-of-timber-and-mist>)

6. Originally there was a Fort Master's quarters and office here in the fort's complex. You can see the footprint of how big the building would have been. The fort master oversaw everything happening at the fort, and would routinely send reports to Fort Vancouver and England. We use this space for reenactment activities and other events, but you can visualize what the fort complex would have looked like with a third building.

(there is a sign that you can show them at the footprint of the building. It has a portrait of Gagnier, one of the most well-known post masters here at Fort Umpqua).

7. Going through the gates towards the river you can find information about the Native Indian tribes that lived here for thousands of years before any explorers or europeans ever arrived. You will also find information about the Hudson's Bay Company's relations with local tribes. *(there is a large sign near the log-bench that has great illustrations—it talks about how the Native Indians hunted, fished, and gathered plants for food and for making things)*

In 1846, a treaty between Great Britain and the United States was signed, and this area was officially made Oregon Territory. The popularity of the beaver fur felt-top-hats was replaced by a fascination with tall silk top-hats. Much of this area had been trapped out. Hudson's Bay Company slowed down its operations here and the fort became a minor trade post for folks passing through. On November 15, 1851, Fort Umpqua burned down. Most of the fort was destroyed. However, Hudson Bay Company records indicate that a small amount of trade was kept up from one of the smaller outbuildings for 2-3 more years until all operations were terminated and Hudson's Bay Company permanently moved out of the area. Ultimately, most of the remains of Fort Umpqua were washed away in a massive flood in 1862.

I would like to thank you for taking the time to learn about the unique history of Fort Umpqua and what life looked like here in the 1800's. We hope you have enjoyed the Elkton Community Education Center Native Plant Park, Butterfly Pavilion, Cafe, and Fort and we encourage you to come back again!

As you walk up the hill and back to the top, take a look at the Heritage Orchard on your left. There are bee hives, asparagus plants, and lots of apple trees! Follow the road to the right and it will take to the parking lots, upper lawn, office, and bathrooms.

Have a good day, everyone!