US Army Corps of Engineers®
Portland District

FORT CASCADES TRAIL GUIDE

Top to bottom: Petroglyph Replica; Warren Fishwheel No. 3; The blockhouse at Grand Ronde, OR, which was of the same construction style as the one at Fort Cascades (1850s) Skamania County Historical Society

BUILDING STRONG®

Welcome to the Fort Cascades National Historic Site

Here along the powerful Columbia River, many of the dramatic events that shaped the settlement of the Pacific Northwest occurred. Though it is quiet and uninhabited today, this small and seemingly unimportant piece of land was a focal point of history.

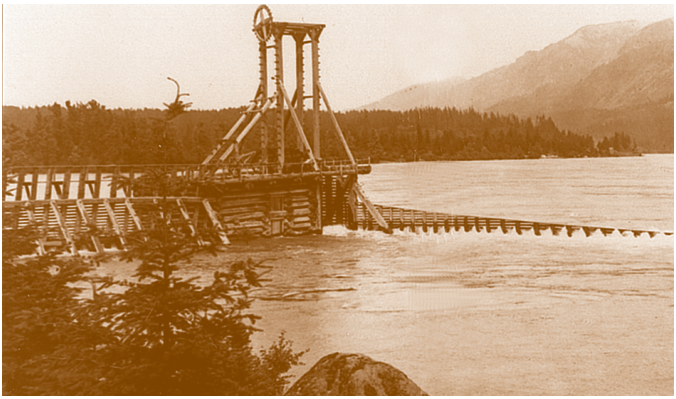
Leave today's busy urban pace and slowly walk this level, one-and-one-half-mile trail. Feel the presence of those who went before. Here is a glimpse of the struggles, drama and everyday life of Native Americans, explorers, soldiers, settlers, railroad workers and fishermen.

Use the map in this trail guide to follow the historic events at the Lower Cascades. The numbers below correspond to the numbered markers along the trail. Please help preserve our cultural heritage by staying on the trail and not removing any objects within this National Historic Site.

1. Warren Fishwheel No. 3 - 1894

Imagine the sounds of creaking wood and splashing fish from a large fishwheel spinning in the Columbia River, catching salmon as they swim upstream. Fishwheels are large revolving devices powered by river currents that scoop enormous quantities of fish from the water. Beginning in the 1880s, entrepreneurs in the fishing industry used fishwheels to catch salmon for the canneries along the river.

You may see the line of rocks in the water that channeled fish into log cribs where the fishwheel scooped them from the river. Warren Fishwheel No. 3 was located on the upstream side of the rock channel near the shoreline. Due to the depletion of salmon, Washington state outlawed fishwheels in 1934, ending their use in the Pacific Northwest.



Warren Fishwheel No. 3 *OHS Negative 25787*

2. The Great Flood of 1894

In 1894, the river that once provided the livelihood for the community of Cascades devastated the small town. Imagine the power and force of the river that altered this landscape so drastically. In this area you will notice the trail begins to lose elevation, marking the floodwaters' edge. The highest recorded waters on the Columbia River occurred during the Great Flood of 1894 and the river's scouring action removed the soil where Fort Cascades stood, exposing the many boulders lying by the trail ahead of you.

3. Cascades Townsite - 1850 to 1894

The town of Cascades was founded in 1850 as an outpost for travelers and traders. The U.S. Army selected the town for the site of Fort Cascades in 1855 to protect the portage around the dangerous rapids just upstream.

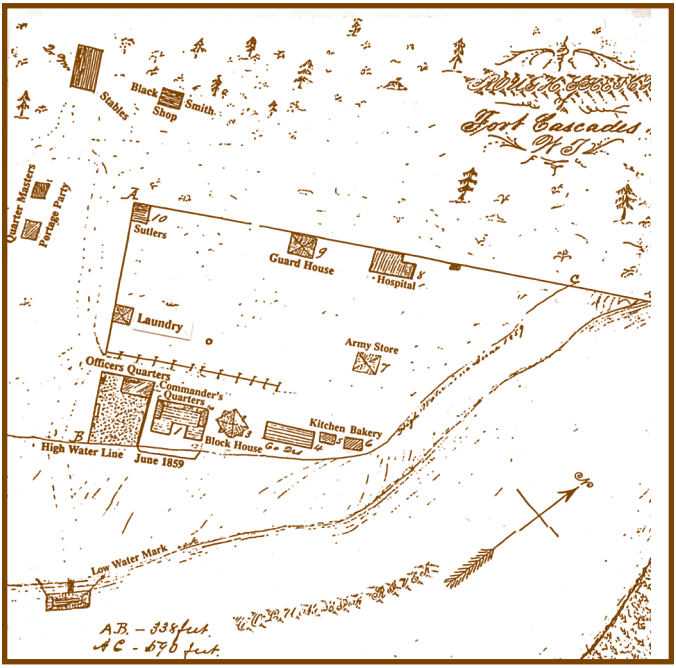
Imagine the chopping of wood used to power steamships and the rumble of the train moving cargo from the Lower Cascades to the Upper Cascades. The 1880 census shows 134 residents of the town and records indicate that nearly all of the men worked for the railroad, labored on the wharf at the Lower Landing or chopped wood used to fuel the steamers and locomotives.

The Army abandoned the fort in 1861 at the start of the Civil War. Town residents moved into the abandoned fort and repurposed the vacant buildings as homes, a jail, a school and a courthouse. Cascades served as the county seat until officials moved the government offices to Stevenson, Washington, in April 1893.

Cascades, Washington Territory (1867). *OHS Negative 21105, C. E. Watkins*

4. Fort Cascades Compound - 1856 to 1861

By 1855, the Pacific Northwest was filled with conflict between Native Americans and the influx of settlers. The U.S. Army seized land within the town of Cascades and built a fort to protect the portage around the Cascade Rapids. Before the fort could be constructed, local Native Americans attacked and burned all structures and supplies in late March 1856. The Army immediately began construction of the Fort Cascades blockhouse just a few hundred yards east of where you now stand, as well as Fort Lugenbeel at the Upper Cascades. By late 1856, completion of the forts secured the portage along the "Cascades of the Columbia".



A map of Ft. Cascades taken from an original drawing by D. R. Ransom (1859).

5. Johnson Donation Land Claim - 1850

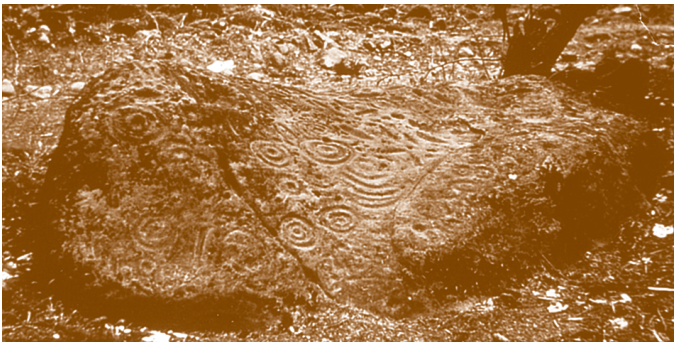
The Lewis and Clark expedition brought back stories of the area's incredible beauty and rich bounty. The portage around the hazardous rapids known as "The Cascades of the Columbia River" was the last major difficulty settlers faced during their westward migration along the Oregon Trail. Once past the rapids, the calmer river offered an ideal location to settle. The Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 declared that every male citizen over 18 years of age who had become a resident of the Territory before December 1st 1850, and who had lived on the land for four years could be granted 320 acres of land.

In July of 1850, George W. Johnson was the first pioneer to call this location his home. Johnson filed a Donation Land Claim for 320 acres and laid out the town of Cascades, Washington Territory- only the third town to be mapped north of the Columbia River. Shortly after building his farmhouse, Johnson (along with several partners) built a trading store, bakery and pubic house for travelers. In 1855, the U.S. Army seized Johnson's land claim for the construction of Fort Cascades. In 1866, after a decade of lawsuits and letters, Johnson was finally compensated for the Army's use of his land.

6. Petroglyph Replica - Date Unknown

This petroglyph (rock carving) is a replica of a rock that was found here. Although its meaning is unknown, it serves as a reminder of the people who first inhabited this area. Lewis and Clark's journals noted a village of 14 houses in this general area which may have been a seasonal fishing site for the Clahclellar band, the native inhabitants. By the early 1830s disease had significantly reduced the native population and many of the local bands collectively became known as the Cascades Indians.

The original petroglyph can be found in front of the Skamania County Courthouse Annex in Stevenson, Washington.



Petroglyph in its original location (1954)

7. McNatt's Hotel - 1858

Like many pioneers, Thomas and Ellen McNatt sought a better life out west. After crossing the Great Plains in 1853, the McNatts eventually settled at Fort Cascades in 1858 and established a hotel and tavern on the main entrance road into the fort.

Archeologists excavated numerous objects from this site including bricks, square nails, fragments of china, bottle glass and glassware. These items help paint the picture of pioneer life in the region during the late 1800s.

8. McNatt's Barn and Stable - 1858

Similar to hotel parking today, it was common for 19th century hotels to board travelers' horses. You are now at the site of Thomas McNatt's barn and stable, 500 feet from the western perimeter of the fort compound. Researchers determined the building's location by examining the original boundary surveyors' notes from 1859.

9. Quartermaster's Complex – 1857

The Quartermaster's complex stood a short distance south of here in what was an open clearing. It included stables, a barn, blacksmith shop and Portage Party House. The U.S. Army's Quartermaster Department provided supplies, clothing and transportation for the soldiers stationed at Fort Cascades. During the winter of 1858-1859, the Army also built the Quartermaster's storehouse and a wharf to facilitate the transport of supplies.

The buildings were located along the Military Portage Road near the entry gate to the fort compound. In the fall of 1862 the former Quartermaster's residence served as the Cascades' schoolhouse and, in the mid-1860s, as the county's first courthouse.

Foreground: Sutler's store; Background: Portage Party House, Quartermasters' Residence, Stables. U.S. Military Post, Lower Cascades, Columbia River, May 1860

School children at Cascades, Washington Territory

10. Blacksmith Shop and Sutler's Store - 1859

Standing here at the blacksmith's shop in 1859, you would hear the loud strikes of the blacksmith's hammer as he molded iron into goods like horse shoes and tools.

The Sutler's Store, located across the Portage Road from the Quartermaster's Complex, was similar to a modern day convenience store and sat in the northwest corner of the fort compound. The store provided non-military goods like tobacco, candy and coffee to soldiers. It was the only civilian structure allowed within the fort compound.

Lower Cascades (1867), C.E. Watkins

11. Military Portage Road - 1856

Foaming rapids, rushing whirlpools and dangerous rocks were the harsh welcome for the U.S. Army's first troops to cross the Cascade Rapids. In May 1849, the Army lost six men to the unforgiving rapids. In 1855, the U.S. Topographical Engineers sent Lt. George Derby and civil engineer Robert Whiting to survey the 95-mile route between Fort Vancouver and the isolated Fort Dalles. The critical six-mile portage route around the Cascades was completed in one year. The roadbed as it passed through the town of Cascades is still visible in this location.

12. Warren Portage Tramway- 1890's to 1930

The openings on either side of the trail are remnants from the Warren Packing Company's Portage Tramway. Frank Warren needed an efficient way to transport the tons of fish caught by his fishwheels to his cannery downstream. In the late 1890s, Warren constructed a short tramway connecting his fishwheels to the Cascades' Lower Landing where the fish were brought downriver to the cannery in present-day Warrendale, Oregon. The tramway operated until 1930.

13. Cascade Portage Railroad - 1863

A few steps up the hill to your right will bring you to the former grade of the Cascade Portage Railroad. The railway spanned six miles from the Lower Landing on Hamilton Island to the Upper Landing near present-day Stevenson, Washington. The combination of competition from the Transcontinental Railroad on the Oregon shore, the devastating 1894 flood and the completion of the Cascades Canal and Locks in 1896 made the portage railroad obsolete.

In front of you lies an original set of wheels and narrow-gauge tracks from the portage railroad. Many of the locomotives that operated on the CPR were shipped from Philadelphia around South America's Cape Horn.

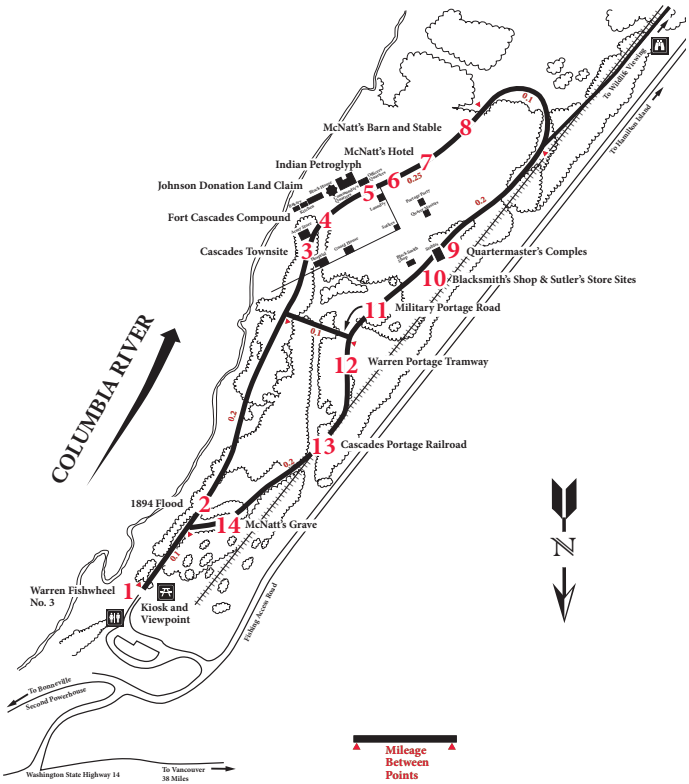
Lower Landing Terminal Facilities (1867) *OHS Negative 21103, C. E. Watkins*

14. McNatt's Grave - 1861

Thomas McNatt, owner of McNatt's hotel, barn and stables and a key figure in the growth of the town of Cascades, succumbed to a lengthy illness in May 1861. The original headstone has been preserved here, however McNatt's final resting place lies within a tract of land which later was set aside by his widow as a deeded cemetery.

We hope you have enjoyed your walk through time, experiencing the sights, events and people who passed this way. The “Cascades of the Columbia” played an important role in the settlement and development of the Pacific Northwest. Due to its historical significance, the Fort Cascades site was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1987 and is considered a valuable cultural resource. The site is managed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for your appreciation.

Trail Map



Public Information
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Portland District
P.O. Box 2946
Portland, OR 97208-2946

Bonneville Lock and Dam Project
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Cascade Locks, OR 97014-0150

Federal rules and regulations concerning public use of this area are set forth in Title 36, Chapter III, of the Code of Federal Regulations and are on display in the areas of the project most frequently used by the public. All other federal, state and local laws also apply in Corps areas.

Under the Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, it is illegal to excavate or remove artifacts from federal land. Violators are subject to a fine of not more than $100,000, imprisonment of not more than five years, and forfeiture of all equipment (including vehicles) used in connection with a violation.

If a violator is observed excavating or collecting artifacts form federal land, report the violation immediately to the local authorities or to Corps of Engineers personnel.