

A Brief History of Ferry County

The History of Ferry County, though relatively short, has been eventful. The area that now comprises the county was first mentioned in written records by David Thompson, explorer, surveyor, and fur trader, in his account of his trip down the Columbia River in 1811. Thompson stopped at the place now known as Kettle Falls, a major salmon fishing site. He wrote a brief description of the surrounding country and remarked that the Indians had treated him well. He continued on his trip down the river and left his native hosts to their fishing.



Republic, 1898

Although Thompson was the first to write down his observations on the Kettle Falls area, he was only the most recent in a long series of visitors. In Thompson's day, Indian groups from miles around gathered at the Falls for the spring and summer salmon runs. The Falls were the second most important fishing and gathering place on the entire Columbia. However, the hundreds of Indian families who camped there were themselves simply the most recent links in a long chain of residents.

Archaeologists, working on both sides of the river at Kettle Falls, have located many buried camp sites. Some of these contain evidence indicating that people have lived there for approximately 9,000 years. The rest of Ferry County has not been systematically investigated for traces of early Indians, but many archaeological sites are known and others probably lie undiscovered, an unusually rich cultural heritage whose value is just now beginning to be appreciated.

In 1824, the British-based Hudson's Bay Company established a fur trading fort, Fort Colville, just above Kettle Falls. Although the fort was located in what is now Stevens County, its influence spread across a vast area. Some of the Company's retired French-Canadian employees were probably Ferry County's first permanent European residents. They married into local Indian families, and many of their descendants still live in the area.

The following decades were a time of rapid change. The first missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant arrived in the 1830's. The Jesuit fathers and their Indian parishioners built St. Paul's Mission near old Ft. Colville, and the Catholic Church became a strong and lasting force in the area. The influence of the missionaries was enhanced by the establishment of parochial schools and by the vaccinations with which they fought the last of the great smallpox outbreaks. Few of these events actually took place in Ferry County, but the new ideas and new technology spread rapidly, as did the practice of agriculture, introduced by the Hudson's Bay Co. and encouraged by missionaries of all denominations.

In the 1840's, Canada and the U.S. established the International Boundary in its present location. Ferry County and neighboring Ft. Colville became American territory. The U.S. Army established a military post at Pinkney City, just north of the present town of Colville, and called it Ft. Colville, a name which has confused historians, students, and tourists ever since because of its similarity to the Hudson's Bay Company name. Pinkney City also became the temporary county seat of newly-formed Stevens County which, at that time,

included all of what is now Stevens, Ferry, Spokane, and Pend Oreille.

The next great changes came to Ferry County in the 1850's. Washington Territory was established in 1853. Four years later, gold was discovered at Rock Creek just north of the poorly marked U.S. Canadian border. Trails to Rock Creek cut across the rich interior valleys of the Kettle River and Curlew Creek, and traveling prospectors had a chance to admire the county's rugged beauty for the first time.

As the country filled with newcomers, land ownership became a pressing problem. A large tract of land, mostly mountainous and including all of modern Ferry County, was set aside as Indian Reservation. Although it was called the "Colville Reservation", and present-day descendants of its residents are called the Colville Confederated Tribes, this territory originally supported several different Indian groups. Members of other groups, including Chief Joseph's band of Nez Perce, arrived later, under pressure from the government and new settlers. The modern Colville Confederated Tribes, still residents on the reduced reservation lands, include descendants of at least twelve different ethnic groups.

In 1883 the area enjoyed a brief glimpse of fame. General Sherman, a major figure in the Civil War, passed through on a tour of the frontier. His exact route is not known, but he probably came over the Deer Creek-Boulder Creek route, rather than the 5,575 foot pass that bears his name.

The first U.S. government surveyors passed through Ferry County in 1893 and 1894. They established the township and range lines and made the first reliable notes on agriculture, residence, trails, and wagon roads in the area. These survey expeditions set the stage for the biggest "boom" in the area's history.

In February of 1896 the North Half of the Colville Indian Reservation, all but a few allotments still belonging to Indian families, was opened for the staking of mining claims. The first claim was staked on Eureka Creek, just north of the present town of Republic and south of Mud Lake. By that spring there were 64 men in Eureka Camp, and the gold rush was on. Gold seekers poured into the booming tent-town from all directions. Freight piled up at Marcus near the old Hudson's Bay Fort, and business boomed in the little town of Nelson (now Danville) where the Nelson brothers, Peter and O.B., had established a trading post on the Canadian border. Nelson boasted the county's first, and for awhile only, post office.



Republic, Spring 1899

The "rush" lasted until roughly 1900 and produced notable changes. Eureka Camp changed its name to Republic in honor of one of its major mines and acquired a post office. The business district moved south to its present location, and the tents and canvas-topped shacks of the early days were replaced by frame buildings. A few of these still stand in spite of frequent fires. Thousands of mining claims were staked. Many of them "petered out", some were absorbed by the growing town, some paid off modestly, and a few made their owners rich. 1898 saw Republic's first streets and lots platted. In the space of two months that same year, the town's population

increased by 2,000 people. Drinking water sold for 25 cents a barrel from a horse-drawn water wagon, and public policy decisions were made by mass meetings of miners. The

following year, Ferry County separated from Stevens County, took on a more formal form of government, and became a county in its own right. That year also saw the loss of half the town's business district to fire in spite of the efforts of the volunteer fire department.

Mining continued to be a major economic activity. Other small mining towns sprang up. Some, like Curlew, Orient, and Keller still exist. Others, Ferry, Toroda, and Belcher among them, are only memories. In 1898 the "South Half" which is still reservation, was opened for mining. Claims produced scattered private lands within the reservation, a situation that is still causing controversy.

The turn of the century brought more changes. Logging on the reservation had been strictly controlled, but in 1900 these restrictions were eased and small sawmills were soon in operation up almost every creek. This state of affairs persisted into the 1950's; although by then, the mills had changed from steam to gasoline, diesel, and electric power. The first year of the 20th century also brought the opening of the "North Half" to homesteading, and the gold rush was replaced by a modest "land rush" as people hurried to the county seat in Republic to file on their chosen claims.

Although the first railroad franchise in the area was granted in 1889, construction did not begin until much later. Two rival companies, the Washington and Great Northern and the Republic and Kettle River (later known as the Spokane and British Columbia Railway) constructed their lines simultaneously during 1901 and 1902 each competitively racing to reach the gold fields of Republic. The R&KRR was a local line, designed to connect Republic with Canadian gold smelters. In its brief career it was known by seven or eight different names and fought railroad magnate Jim Hill to a standstill in Canadian and American courts. This local line (known affectionately as "Hot Air" Line in honor of its somewhat overblown publicity and its shaky financing), reached Republic first, but the Great Northern was not far behind. Both lines operated into the early 1920's, when the "Hot Air" went broke and shut down. The long predicted railroad "boom" never materialized, and the small towns along the route sank into obscurity, along with the "Hot Air" roadbed and trestles which have been replaced by state and county roads. Part of the Great Northern route which for many years was still followed by the Burlington Northern trains has presently been abandoned.

Ferry County's fortunes have shifted with the times since the early mining days. War and peace, depression and "boom" have left their marks. When President Roosevelt created the Forest Reserves in 1907, the first step towards National Forests, much of Ferry County was included. Most of this land remained remote and unreachable until the 1930's when the Civilian Conservation Corps built miles of forest road and strung telephone lines, linking fire lookouts and ranger stations across the county. The construction of Grand Coulee Dam and the filling of Lake Roosevelt in the late 1930's provided jobs, electricity, and irrigation projects which ended the Columbia River salmon runs, drastically changed the county's shoreline on the river, flooded hundreds of archaeological sites, and forced the towns of Keller and Inchelium to move to higher ground. The 1950's saw the lowest ebb in the county's population since the early gold rush days. This trend began to reverse itself during the 1960's, and population increase has been accelerating ever since. In spite of recent changes, Ferry County continues to survive, and its residents preserve the



Republic, present day Photo Courtesy Washington State Magazine/Robert Hubner

tough and independent attitudes of the frontier so recently left behind.

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