

Peter Skene Ogden (c.1790-1854)

By Unknown

In 1810 while a clerk for the North West Company, Peter Skene Ogden and a friend climbed over a stockade wall at a rival Hudson's Bay Company post and strutted around the yard with guns, intimidating the occupants. Two weeks later the men returned and physically harassed the post's supervisor, Peter Fidler. Ogden and his friend were on the front lines of the North West Company's competition with the Hudson's Bay Company for territory and Indian trading partners, and they saw the harassment as an enjoyable way to advance their company's interests. Fidler and his men responded to the harassment by abandoning their post within a year. Ogden and his men burned it. After the Hudson's Bay Company absorbed the North West Company in 1821, company leaders turned Ogden's ruthlessness to their advantage against the Americans. Today Ogden is known for his command of the Snake Country Brigade and its attempt to discourage American fur trapping by creating a fur desert between the Cascades and the Rockies.

Ogden was born in Quebec in the early 1790s to parents who had fled the American Revolution. In 1794 the family moved to Montreal. There Ogden was drawn to the fur trade. After a brief stint with the American Fur Company, he joined the North West Company as an apprentice clerk in 1809. He was posted in what is now Saskatchewan for nine years. In 1818 Ogden killed an Indian, allegedly for trading with the Hudson's Bay Company. The North West Company transferred Ogden to the Columbia River to protect him from arrest for the murder. There he served at numerous North West Company posts. He also married a Spokane Indian woman, Julia Rivet, having left his first wife, a Cree Indian woman, behind in Saskatchewan.

In 1821 the Hudson's Bay Company absorbed the North West Company and fired Ogden for his violence toward the company. He traveled to London the next year to petition the company to hire him. After Ogden succeeded in getting his job back, Hudson's Bay Company Governor George Simpson sent Ogden back to the Columbia in 1824. Worried that territory south of the river would pass into American hands and that American trappers would invade established Hudson's Bay Company territory, Simpson wanted to trap out the drainage of the Snake River. By harvesting as many furs as possible, he hoped to make it unprofitable for American trappers to enter the region. He also sought to maximize short term profits in case the territory became part of the United States.

Between 1824 and 1830 Ogden led four expeditions to the Snake Country and beyond. Traveling with as many as sixty men, thirty women, and thirty-five children, he explored and trapped in what are now Oregon, Idaho, California, Nevada, Utah and Wyoming. In 1831 he was sent to establish a fort on the Nass River in northern British Columbia. In 1834 he was promoted to chief factor and in 1835 was given command of the New Caledonia district. In 1845 he was appointed to the board of management for the Columbia district at Fort Vancouver. After the international border was established along the 49th parallel (some 240 miles north of Fort Vancouver), Ogden continued to play a prominent role in local events. In 1847 he negotiated the release of 47 people the Cayuse Indians took prisoner when they attacked the Whitman Mission.

Ogden retired to Oregon City in 1854 and died there that year. Today a state park north of Bend commemorates Ogden's exploration of the region.

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