

Kettle Falls Historical Center

If you needed to name the most historic place in Eastern Washington, I suggest that the Kettle Falls Historical Center is it. The Center is not just an interpretive center. Its location on the camping grounds next to the lower Kettle Falls places it on the gathering place for Native tribes from hundreds of miles around for thousands of years.

At Kettle Falls the Columbia River crosses over a deposit of very hard quartzite rock. The river could not cut through it, hence the falls. It could tumble rocks to churn their way down into the layers of quartzite beneath the falls, hence the kettles. Salmon had a tough time swimming up the falls. If they fell back, natives could catch them in baskets. If they leapt into the air, natives could spear them. With careful management indigenous people let enough salmon pass the falls to sustain the population and still leave thousands to be harvested for the human population.

This great food source made Kettle Falls not just a place to fish, but also an annual gathering place. On April 16, 1825 Hudson's Bay Company Governor George Simpson commanded his employee, John Work, to move the company post at Spokane House to the rich bottom land just to the east of the falls. The new fort was named after Andrew Colvile, a major a member of the Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company. Simpson's instructions are all about establishing a farm on the location to raise food for the fur trading posts on the west side of the Rocky Mountains. But the location, not accidentally, placed it in the midst of that tribal gathering ground to interact with the people who provided furs and food for the company. The Heritage Network is preparing to commemorate the bicentennial of the establishment of Fort Colvile in 2025.

Today the legacy of that move provides the museum with many stories to tell. The museum was originally conceived as a repository for the artifacts collected by David Chance from his archeological digs on Hayes Island and nearby areas, 1973 to 1976. The work was funded by the Park Service and they decided to store the artifacts in an archive that is part of Fort Vancouver, across the river from Portland Oregon. They remain there out of sight and without interpretation to the public to this day. With the help of tribal members and local history buffs, the space was filled with murals, exhibits and artifacts that show the many faces of that early history.



Among the marvels at the museum is this dugout canoe built by the Chewelah-based Voyagers of Rediscovery. Canoes of several kinds were critical to operations at the fort. Columbia Boats, designed to transport cargo and passengers both up and down the river were built

at Fort Colville for the whole Columbia-centered operation of the HBC. Light, maneuverable sturgeon nosed canoes were used by the natives.

The museum houses the original mill stones of the Hudson's Bay grist mill powered by Meyers Falls on the Colville River. A complete model of the grist mill shows visitors how that operation worked. The mill made Meyers Falls the longest continual hydropower operation west of the Mississippi.

The "fort" was in practice a huge farm that not only grew grain for the mill but also potatoes, beef cows, hogs and horses. Hundreds of horses raised there were used to transport furs and trade goods to other forts and over the mountains.

There are furs, traps and guns at the museum which were at the core of the fur trade. But the museum also displays vestments like those used by Catholic Priests who held services at the restored Saint Paul's Mission building nearby. You will find an elaborately embroidered vest on display as well as moccasins, gloves and other bead work which show how European crafts learned from immigrant nuns evoked floral creativity in the hands of local women.

The museum also shows the multiple tools made of stone, fiber, wood and leather used to harvest and preserve salmon. Teepees and clothing from the era as well as dioramas of housing and activities in each season of the year show everyday life before the fort was built. Collections of arrowheads and sometimes of baskets and other crafts add to the diverse slice of history preserved at the Kettle Falls Historical Center. It opens May 15th. More information is available on their website, www.kettlefallshistoricalcenter.com.