

The Treaty Trail: U. S. - Indian Treaty Councils in the Northwest

CHRONOLOGY AND LOCATION OF TREATY COUNCILS EAST OF THE CASCADES

Washington Territory Governor Isaac Stevens intended to make treaties with the Indians to secure the necessary resources for building the railroad and to obtain land sought by the ever-increasing stream of settlers flowing into the region.

The Walla Walla Treaty Council: Walla Walla Valley

News of the western treaties had quickly passed to the eastern Washington tribes, along with sad tales from the nation's interior and East concerning the plight of the tribes in those regions. Washington tribes were aware that Indian lands had been ceded, but fair compensation and services had not been received in exchange for lands. They were understandably wary of Stevens and the treaty proceedings.

Although the Nez Perce, traditionally friendly to the whites, readily agreed to attend the Walla Walla Council, the Yakama, Walla Walla, and Cayuse bands were initially very reluctant to participate. Despite their misgivings, however, the Council formally convened on May 29, 1855, with thousands of tribal members in attendance.

The chiefs at the Walla Walla Council were firm, businesslike negotiators, sure of their strength and confident in their negotiating skills. When faced with the inevitable decline of their way of life, they sought to gain the best treaty terms possible. Stevens was forced to make compromises, and the Walla Walla Treaty was signed by all the tribes present.



Bloods Come Into Council, Blackfoot County, 1855 by Gustav Sohon is the artist's interpretation of a scene at the Blackfeet Council with four Blood Indians riding into camp on horseback. Two men are shown in the foreground, one carrying a large American flag and shooting a gun into the air.

Washington State Historical Society Collections.

The Walla Walla, Cayuse and Umatilla Treaty Council:

Mill Creek, Washington

Treaty signed: June 9th, 1855

Tribes: Cayuse, Umatilla

The Yakama Treaty Council:

Mill Creek, Washington

Treaty signed: June 9th 1855

Tribes: Yakama, Palouse, Pisquouse, Wenatshapam, Klikatat, Klinquit, Kow-was-say-ee,

Li-ay-was, Skin-pah, Wish-ham, Shyiks, Ochechotes, Yakama, Palouse Pisquouse Wenatshapam, Klikatat

The Nez Perce Treaty Council:

Mill Creek, Washington

Treaty signed: June 11, 1855

Tribe: Nez Perce

Hell Gate Treaty Council:

Missoula, Montana

Proceeding further east, into what is now Montana, Stevens met with the Flathead, Salish, Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai tribes. These tribes were under constant attack by the Blackfeet Indians, so Stevens promised that he would procure easement rights from the Blackfeet to allow the tribes to hunt on the plains east of the Rocky Mountains.

Once again, Stevens's misunderstanding of tribal culture created conflict at the proceedings, and angry words were exchanged before an agreement was finally reached.

Treaty signed: July 16th 1855

Tribes: Flathead, Kootenay, Upper Pend d'Oreilles

The Blackfeet Treaty Council:

Fort Benton, Montana

Three tribes comprised the Blackfeet Nation—the Blackfeet of the north, the Piegan, and the Blood. These three, sharing kinship ties, customs, a common language, and traditional enemies, were collectively the most powerful and feared tribes of the region. They actively resisted the activities of American explorers and fur traders.

Fifty-nine chiefs attended the Blackfeet Council, including delegates from tribes west of the Bitterroot Mountains. Three thousand five hundred Blackfeet, Nez Perce, Flathead, Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreille Indians attended the council, and once again Stevens persuaded the tribes to sign a treaty with the United States.

Treaty signed: October 17th

Tribes: Blackfoot Nation: Piegan, Blood, Blackfeet, Gros Ventres
Flathead Nation: Flathead, Pend d'Oreille, Kootenay, Nez Perce

War Breaks Out

Twelve days after the Walla Walla Treaty was signed but before it was ratified by Congress, the *Oregon Weekly Times* prematurely published this announcement: "By an express provision of the treaty, the country embraced by the cession (lands given up by the Indians) and not included in the reservation is open to settlement..." This announcement sent streams of settlers and gold seekers to lands east of the Cascades, igniting outrage among the tribes and eventually driving the Yakamas to war against the intruders.

While Stevens was still returning from the Blackfeet Council, he learned of warfare in the Territory. Proceeding on through the Bitterroot Mountains and into the Spokane River valley, Stevens demanded a council with the chiefs of the Spokane, Coeur d'Alene, Colville, and Isle de Pierre tribes.

The Spokane Treaty Council

Dec. 5th, 1855

The Spokane Council was unique: of the four councils held in the eastern part of the Territory, this was the only one that did not produce a treaty. Stevens had a true dialog with an Indian leader, Spokane Garry who had been educated by the Hudson's Bay Company mission school and spoke excellent English. His wisdom and command of the language placed Stevens in defensive position. Although no treaty was signed, Stevens counted the council as a minor victory since it had secured a promise from the Spokane that they would not join with the Yakamas to create an alliance against settlers.

Sources:

Buerge, David M. "Big Little Man: Isaac Stevens (1818-1861)," in David Brewster and David Buerge, eds., *Washingtonians: A biographical Portrait of the State*. Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 1988.

Nicandri, David L. *Northwest Chiefs: Gustav Sohon's View of the 1855 Stevens Treaty Councils*. Tacoma: Washington State Historical Society, 1986.

Richards, Kent D. *Isaac I. Stevens: Young Man in a Hurry*. Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1993.