

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

KAMIAKIN, HEAD CHIEF OF THE YAKAMAS C. 1800-1878



This portrait of Kamiakin was created by Gustav Sohon. Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

Kamiakin lived in what is present-day central Washington as a child, but his family traveled to the Great

Plains, where he was distinguished as a warrior and buffalo hunter. He accrued substantial wealth, allowing him to marry five wives. He broke custom and angered his uncles by marrying women from rival families. Nonetheless, his choice created kinship ties with many tribes.

A Natural Leader

Courage, good judgment, and generosity were Kamiakin's best claim to leadership. He demonstrated good business sense early in the 1840s by traveling to Fort Vancouver, trading horses to settlers in exchange for cattle, and driving the cattle back to Yakima. Kamiakin's herd was the first in the Yakima Valley.

Kamiakin planted one of the earliest gardens known to the agricultural history of Yakima at his home in Ahtanum. His interest in gardening was uncommon for his time, and he pursued this avocation even to the extent of irrigating his land.

Kamiakin Seeks a Teacher

In 1850 an opportunity arose to secure a teacher for the Yakama people, when Kamiakin met a Catholic priest in Walla Walla. Kamiakin offered the priest a place on his property for a mission, if the priest would teach his tribe. As a result, two Catholic Fathers arrived, and built St.

Joseph's Mission on the Ahtanum Creek. In addition to teaching the Catholic faith, the priests trained the Yakamas in digging irrigation ditches and growing crops.

Chiefs in the Region

In 1853, when Washington Territory was established, Kamiakin was the most prominent Yakama chief, although not the head chief. There were several Yakama bands, each headed by its own chief.

The Treaty Process Begins

Governor Stevens began the treaty process with the objective of "civilizing" the Indians, pushing them onto reservations out of the way of the hordes of white settlers already headed west.

Word went out to the Indians that the President in Washington, D.C. desired Indian land for the white men, and that a great white chief was on his way west to buy it. If the Indians refused to sell, soldiers would come and drive them off their land. This news understandably angered the tribes, resulting in prejudice against the newly appointed Governor of Washington Territory, Isaac Stevens.



This 1853 lithograph of Fort Vancouver was created by Gustav Sohon in November of 1853. Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

Preparing for Trouble

At this point, Kamiakin began building a

confederation of Indian tribes to oppose non-Native settlement. He quickly enlisted Peo-peo-mox-mox, Head Chief of the Walla Walla, and Looking Glass, War Chief of the Nez Perce to his cause.

These three chiefs planned a council for Indians only in the remote Grande Ronde Valley of Eastern Oregon.

At one point Kamiakin rallied tribal forces saying:

We wish to be left alone in the lands of our forefathers, whose bones lie in the sand hills and along the trails, but a pale-face stranger has come from a distant land and send word to us that we must give up our country, as he wants it for the white man. Where can we go? There is no place left. Only a single mountain now separates us from the big salt water of the setting sun. Our fathers from the hunting grounds of the other world are looking down on us today. Let us not make them ashamed! My people, the Great Spirit has his eyes upon us. He will be angry if, like cowardly dogs, we give up our lands to the whites. Better to die like brave warriors on the battlefield, than live among our vanquishers, despised. Our young men and women would speedily become debauched (destroyed) by their fire water and we should perish as a race.

At the Grande Ronde council, the tribal leaders prepared for Governor Stevens' upcoming Treaty councils by developing strategies to try to keep their lands. However, Lawyer, a Nez Perce chief, notified A. J. Bolon, the Indian agent, of the Grande Ronde council. Governor Stevens learned of the meeting and knew what to expect going into the 1855 Walla Walla Treaty Council.

The Chiefs Speak at Walla Walla

Kamiakin reached the council ground, accompanied by Peo-peo-mox-mox, on May 28th, 1855. When they saw the huge number of Nez Perce present, they began to realize that Lawyer had betrayed their trust. Not wishing to accept gifts from false friends, Kamiakin refused Stevens' offer of tobacco for his pipe and provisions for his party.

The speeches of the council went on day after day, with all the chiefs—except for Kamiakin—setting forth their wishes for their tribes. Then Joel Palmer, Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Oregon Territory, said: *I want to say a few words to these people, but before I do, if Ka-mi-akin wants to speak, I would be glad to hear him.* Kamiakin replied, *I have nothing to say.*

Kamiakin's contempt for the U.S. continued.

Later, an Indian agent attempted to ease Kamiakin's poverty by giving him some blankets due under the provisions of the 1855 treaty. He rejected them and pointed to his ragged clothes, saying: *See, I am a poor man, but too rich to receive anything from the United States.*

Kamiakin died in 1877, and was buried near the village he founded.

Sources:

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The map above shows the locations of both Walla Walla (1) and the Grande Ronde Valley (2). Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.