

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

WILLIAM CRAIG, INTERPRETER 1807-1869



This portrait of Bill Craig was created by Gustav Sohon on June 4, 1855.
Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

William Craig was born in Virginia in 1807. At the age of seventeen he killed a neighbor following an argument and fled west. He seldom spoke of his early life, possibly fearing arrest for his crime.

Craig the Mountain Man

Craig was a trapper-explorer in the American West as early as 1829. In partnership with several other men, he established a rough log post named Fort Davy Crockett, at the Green River in Brown's Hole, a favored wintering site for the Indians in the northwest corner of Colorado.

In 1833, he temporarily traveled to California with a group sent by Captain Bonneville under the command of Joe Walker. Craig achieved some notoriety when he played a prank on his commander, tricking Walker to dive headfirst into the Humboldt River where only a few inches of water covered soft mud. Scrambling out of the mud, and scooping mud out of his eyes, Walker went for his rifle, but Craig was able to

stay out of gunshot range until his anger subsided.

In the summer of 1840, Craig and his trapper friends learned that supply trains would no longer be passing by Fort Davy Crockett, so the watering hole was closed, and Craig headed further west.

Arrival at Lapwai

According to the diary of missionary Henry Spalding, Craig arrived in the Lapwai Valley on November 20, 1840. Unlike most of the mountain men, he stayed in the valley, settling about eight miles up from the Spalding Mission. He was the first non-missionary settler in what is now the state of Idaho.

He married a Nez Perce woman named Pah-Tis-Sah (also known as Isabel). She was the daughter of James, also known as Big Thunder, a chief of the Nez Perce. Craig infuriated the missionary by advising his father-in-law that he should charge Spalding for the use of his land, water and timber. Craig's loyalty to his adopted people was not always an annoyance to Spaulding. Craig's knowledge of Nez Perce language enabled Spalding to write a Nez Perce dictionary. Spaulding then taught the tribe how to read and write.

What is an Indian Agent?

An **Indian Agent** was the term used to refer to an official representing the U.S. government in dealing with an Indian tribe or tribes.

First Indian Agent for the Nez Perce

Craig was a well-educated man of his time, capable of writing well-composed letters and reports. From 1848 to 1858 he served as the first Indian Agent for the

Nez Perce people. He served as the interpreter for the Nez Perce at the Walla Walla and Blackfoot Councils. The Records of the Walla Walla Council of 1855 show that Red Wolf made this request:

I have only one or two things to speak. I want Mr. Craig to stay there in the Nez Perce country, and not go away. The reason why I wish Mr. Craig to stay there is because he understands us. He speaks our language well. When there is any news that comes into the country we can go to him and hear it straight. The same for us when anybody comes to speak to us, he will sit down with us and we understand them. It is good for him to stay there to interpret on both sides so that each can understand the other.

The Nez Perce thought so highly of Craig that they asked Isaac Stevens to put a provision in their treaty allowing the former mountain man to keep his homestead in a reservation otherwise off-limits to whites. His homestead was often used for councils of the Nez Perce, occasionally drawing crowds of up to two thousand people.

Officer of the Volunteers

Craig served as a volunteer in the Yakima Indian War, eventually attaining the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Over time, he became frustrated with some of the consequences of the treaties. In an 1858 report, he wrote:

Subtly some evil disposed persons have begun to introduce whisky...the pernicious and bad effects of which have become most glaringly apparent within the past

few months. From what source they obtain it is impossible to tell...many of the Cayuses and Walla Wallas living in the valley have been leading a most dissolute and renegade life lately, under no control whatever.



MAIN STREET, WALLA WALLA, IN 1877.

This early image of Walla Walla shows the city less than 10 years after Craig's death.

Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

Craig's Later Years

During the winter of 1858-59 Craig left Lapwai and briefly became the first postmaster of the new town of Walla Walla. Upon leaving that job he returned to his farm, from which he ran a hotel and stage station.

In April of 1869, William Craig died following a paralytic stroke at the age of sixty-two.

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