The failure of the Treaty of Ghent to resolve the boundary issue gave the British a fur-trade monopoly in the Pacific Northwest. After the Hudson’s Bay Company merged with the North West Company in 1821, it dominated the trade. It was then that Sir George Simpson, the Hudson’s Bay Company governor in British North America, turned the entire Oregon Country into a company preserve. Dr. John McLoughlin was appointed chief factor in the Columbia District, one of the company’s four administrative districts across Canada, which covered present-day British Columbia and the states of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. McLoughlin, who stood six feet four inches in height and had a tremendous chest, was of Scottish ancestry. He was born in 1784 in what is now the province of Quebec; later, his parents moved to Quebec City to educate their children. At the age of fourteen McLoughlin began to study medicine with Sir James Fisher, a medical doctor who lived near Montreal. Four and a half years later, at the age of eighteen, he received permission to practice medicine and in 1803 became a resident physician with the North West Company at Fort William, now Thunder Bay, Ontario. In late July 1823, McLoughlin traveled from Fort William to Fort George on the Columbia River to assume his new responsibilities.

Although the Hudson’s Bay Company’s traders still occupied what had been Fort Astoria, McLoughlin and other officials in the company realized the southern boundary of British territory might soon be the Columbia River. They decided to construct a new post on the north bank of the river. The site selected was about a hundred miles inland from the mouth of the Columbia on a bluff about a mile above the river and six miles above where the Willamette River flows south into the Columbia. As the new post was being constructed, McLoughlin traveled by canoe back and forth between Fort George and the new post, supervising the movement of goods plus thirty-one head of cattle and seventeen hogs. By the spring of 1825, the new post was completed, and on March 19, Sir George Simpson, the pudgy little governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company, broke a bottle of rum against the new post’s flagpole. The Union Jack was raised, and the post was officially named Fort Vancouver after English Captain George Vancouver, the earliest explorer to penetrate the Columbia River region. It was a pointed reminder to the United States that a subject of Great Britain was the first white man there. The governor then sailed away, leaving Fort Vancouver in McLoughlin’s hands.
This photograph, made about 1851, shows Dr. John McLoughlin. (Courtesy Bill Gulick and the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site)

It was soon evident to McLoughlin that the location of Fort Vancouver was too far above the Columbia River. Its location on a bluff about a mile from the river made it difficult to haul food and supplies from boats to the post. Also, water had to be brought too great a distance from the river. Four years later, in 1829, a new post was constructed above flood level on Jolie Prairie, or Belle Vue Point, a broad area of prairie and trees sloping upward to dense forests, much closer to the Columbia. McLoughlin supervised the construction of the new Fort Vancouver, a parallelogram about 750 feet by 450 feet surrounded by a stockade fence 20 feet high. In time, there would be a bastion in the northwest corner mounting two 12-pound cannon. In the center against the front wall were several 18-pound cannon. Two wide double gates were the only entrance and exit to the post. On the back side of Fort Vancouver, McLoughlin supervised the planting of fields of grain, fruit orchards, and a large vegetable garden. More imposing were the many buildings, including a pharmacy, a stone powder house, a chapel used as both a church and a school, warehouses for furs, English goods, and other commodities, plus workshops for carpenters, mechanics, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, tanners, coopers, and other workers. Nearer the Columbia River but outside the stockade, a village of about sixty houses was constructed in rows with streets. Here lived mechanics, laborers, and voyageurs. Their housing, however, was nothing like that enjoyed by married officers and McLoughlin inside the stockade.
Married officers had small houses, each with two rooms, but McLoughlin's house was a large one-story structure with many rooms, constructed about eight feet above the ground to provide storage space. It was palatial. A double flight of stairs led up from the ground to a verandah and into a central hallway. Off this hallway was a large dining hall with a huge mahogany dining table, damask napery, flat silver, Spode china, and Waterford glassware, all of which was used for multicourse dinners prepared in the kitchen, one of several outbuildings behind his house. The meals might include red meat or lamb, tripe, or pork, rice, vegetable soup, fowl, salmon or sturgeon, rich butter and cream sauces plus fresh bread and hot biscuits. Desserts might be rice pudding, apple pie, melons, and grapes or cheese with bread and hot biscuits. The only alcoholic beverage served was wine with dinner, and only occasionally. McLoughlin and his guests nearly always dressed for dinner, with the host wearing a black broadcloth suit with wide satin lapels. His guests might wear semi-Indian attire, jackets of tanned deerskin trimmed with beads and fringe made by their wives. After dinner, there was fellowship and good conversation on world affairs, philosophy, art, science, politics, or subjects other than fur trading in the smoking room of McLoughlin's house. McLoughlin himself did not smoke but did not mind if others did. He had a fine library, perhaps the only one west of the Rocky Mountains. There was nothing like Fort Vancouver anywhere else in the West. It was an oasis of Western civilization in the wilderness.

As chief factor, McLoughlin followed specific orders from the Hudson's Bay Company. He was to stop all traffic in whiskey. He was to develop coastal trade, which the North West Company had neglected. He was to open business with the Russian-American Fur Company, and finish constructing Fort Langley, a trading post on the Fraser River. He also was to sweep the country clean of fur-bearing animals, send brigades south to California, plant gardens, and, most important, keep expenses down. As for the Indians, the Hudson's Bay Company's policy was firm. Indians were to be treated fairly. No effort should be made to change their beliefs or way of life, but if they harmed property or personnel, the Company was to respond with vigor.

McLoughlin followed his orders. He also had no use for an idle or lazy man. If he saw a man doing nothing, McLoughlin sent him to work in the orchards or garden. Later, after mills were built, an idle worker would be sent to one of them. Sundays were days of rest and for attending religious services, but Mondays through Fridays the workdays began early and continued until six o'clock in the evening. On Saturdays the workday ended at five o'clock, at which time workers were given their rations, which consisted of eight
pounds of salted salmon and eight quarts of potatoes per person per month plus a supply of tallow and peas each week. The workers received an annual wage of 17 pounds. From that they had to buy clothing and incidentals and perhaps supplement their food rations. While the workers, or engagés, were for the most part illiterate and lived outside the stockade, the clerks and officers who came from the British Isles lived inside the stockade and formed the gentleman class. Typical of this period, class prejudice was all-pervasive, but all enjoyed free time. Leisure activities included hunting, riding, and picnicking for gentlemen, while the workers found pleasure in footraces and competitive feats of strength. Everyone celebrated when a supply ship or a Royal Navy vessel docked below the post.

*This is the chief factor's house at Fort Vancouver as it appeared in May 1860. (Courtesy Bill Gulick and the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site)*

*Fort Vancouver as it appeared about 1860. The chief factor's house is on the left. The long building (right) is the Bachelors' Quarters. (Courtesy Bill Gulick and the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site)*

Fort Vancouver soon became a center of intense activity as McLoughlin directed the establishment of more posts in what are now Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and British Columbia. Eventually, McLoughlin was responsible for nearly thirty trading posts that were
supplied by Fort Vancouver. He had six ships, and during peak seasons as many as six hundred male employees worked for him. A majority of his officers, clerks, and trappers were from what is now the province of Quebec in Canada. The backbone of the fur trade was the trapper, or voyageur. Most of them were of French and sometimes Scottish heritage. They had their own customs and code of honor above and beyond the expectations of the Hudson’s Bay Company. These voyageurs, plus freelance European and Indian trappers, would trap all winter and then in the summer bring incredible numbers of furs to Fort Vancouver.

As the trade increased and Fort Vancouver achieved a permanent presence, McLoughlin sought to make the post as self-sustaining as possible, in keeping with the Company’s order to keep expenses low. He expanded Fort Vancouver’s agricultural activities to cover almost thirty miles along the Columbia River and about ten miles north from the riverbank. Sawmills, gristmills, and dairies were established. Just south of the employees’ village just outside the stockade, a shipbuilding business was established along with tanneries and a hospital. Surplus goods were used in trade with Russians and in the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands. McLoughlin soon became known as the “King of the Columbia.”

When McLoughlin was about twenty-four years old, he married a Chippewa Indian, but she died giving birth to McLoughlin’s first son, Joseph. Later, at Fort William, McLoughlin married Margaret McKay, the widow of Alexander McKay, who had died aboard the Tonquin. Margaret was part Indian. In time they would have three children—two girls and a boy. Margaret and the children joined McLoughlin at Fort Vancouver after it was constructed. Because there were few white women at the fort, many men married Indian women, who made good wives and housekeepers. Margaret McLoughlin helped to train some of the Indian wives in western household arts and in adjusting to the white man’s life-style.²

The Oregon Trail: An American Saga by David Dary