



Marcus Whitman

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MARCUS WHITMAN WAS BORN ON September 4, 1802. At the age of seven, when his father died, he went to Rushville, New York, to live with his uncle. He dreamed of becoming a minister but did not have the money for such a time-consuming curriculum. Instead, he studied medicine for two years with an experienced doctor and received his degree from Fairfield Medical College. In 1834 he applied to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Two years later, Whitman married Narcissa Prentiss. A teacher of physics and chemistry, Narcissa was eager to travel west as a missionary but, as a single woman, had been forbidden to do so.

Marcus and Narcissa made an extraordinary team. They joined a caravan of fur traders and went west, establishing several missions as well as their own settlement, Waiilatpu, in the Blue Mountains near the present city of Walla Walla, Washington. Marcus farmed and gave medical attention, while Narcissa gave classes to the Indian children. Returning from a trip east, Whitman assisted in the “Great Emigration” of 1843, which clearly established the Oregon Trail.

The primitive health practices of the Indians and their lack of immunity to diseases such as measles fostered the belief that Whitman was causing the death of his patients. The Indian tradition holding medicine men personally responsible for the patient’s recovery led to the murder of the Whitmans on November 29, 1847, in their home.

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Bronze by Avard Fairbanks
Given in 1953; located in National Statuary Hall.