

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN SERVICES IN WESTERN MONTANA

On September 20, 1835 Montana's first Christian services were held on the West Fork of the Bitterroot. Rev. Samuel Parker, a Presbyterian missionary, was ill but asked a Nez Perce Indian he called Charlie to conduct the Sunday service for a group of fellow Indians.

Parker and Dr. Marcus Whitman started their journey on April 7th from St. Louis with a caravan of the American Fur Company. They went as far as the Green River where Parker preached at the rendezvous. Whitman then turned back and Parker continued west with a party of friendly Indians that were willing to listen to his sacred message. Parker was en route to Fort Vancouver on the lower Columbia River when he stopped in Montana.

Parker's visit to the Bitterroot may be attributed to the 1804-1806 Lewis and Clark Expedition as they met native tribes along the way. Clark had invited a few to go east to meet the "Great White Father." In 1831, three Nez Perce Indians and one Flathead Indian, traveled to St. Louis, to meet with Clark (then Superintendent of Indian affairs), looking for the "Book to Heaven." That visit inspired Whitman and Parker to answer the call for missionaries to move to the American West.

Parker was the first Presbyterian in this region. He went on scouting locations for potential missions. During the winter of 1835 to 1836, Parker was a guest at the Hudson's Bay Company's fur trade outpost at Fort Vancouver. He was then the first Presbyterian missionary in what would become the state of Oregon. He traveled through Western Oregon to select sites that were later used by the missionaries of the American Board for Foreign Missions, including what became the famed Waiilatpu Mission at Walla Walla where the Whitman massacre occurred in 1847.

Samuel Parker then left the region by ship, sailing first to the Sandwich Islands and then around Cape Horn to the Eastern Seaboard.

Parker returned to New York and informed the board of the best sites for missions. He was then rejected for missionary work for the board due to his advanced age. He published a book in 1838 describing his journey to Oregon in "Journal of an Exploring Tour Beyond the Rocky Mountains."

Parker was born on April 23, 1779, educated on the east coast graduating in 1810, and ordained in 1812. He taught and preached in New York until 1833 before heading west in 1834. Samuel Parker died on March 21, 1866, and is buried in Ithaca, New York.