Walla Walla, Washington

Nestled near the southeast corner of Washington State is the beautiful little city of Walla Walla. At just over 31,000 people, Walla Walla is about 20 minutes from the Oregon border and, if the Snoqualmie pass is clear, a four-hour drive from Seattle. Unlike Seattle, Walla Walla is located in a semi-desert known as the Okanogan Valley that stretches up into British Columbia, Canada, where it is known as the Okanagan Valley. Same idea, different spelling. The climate is generally dry and sunny and with proper irrigation, a great place to grow fruit.

The state of Washington owes a lot to Walla Walla. In fact, the state’s oldest bank was established back in 1869. It is the Baker Boyer Bank, and it was there before Washington even was a state. North America’s oldest company, the Hudson’s Bay Company had a trading post near the current site of Walla Walla. The trading post was a fort and has been restored with many of the original buildings still standing. Fort Walla Walla is just a few minutes’ drive from downtown Walla Walla.

The name comes from a Native America name that means “Place of Many Waters.” This is likely due to the Walla Walla River joining the fabulous Columbia River nearby. It is said that Walla Walla is such a nice place that “they named it twice.”

The official beginning of Walla Walla was early in 1862 when it was incorporated. While this fort had long been a popular place for travelers heading west to Oregon, it was the gold rush in Idaho that really “put it on the map.” Although the gold rush helped Walla Walla became the biggest settlement in the territory, the sustaining force of this town was the strong agriculture industry that was taking hold. The glorious summers of bright sunshine were a dream come true for farmers.

Almost 30 years before the incorporation of the town, it was a physician, Marcus Whitman, and his wife, Narcissa, who set up a mission in the Walla Walla area. While, at first, the Whitmans were welcomed and the medical advances (as crude as they were in the 1830s) helped many of the local people. However, an epidemic of measles soon hit the natives hard. Likely brought along with the white settlers and traders, this disease, although serious at times, was not often fatal to white men, but it was deadly to the natives.

The Walla Walla natives turned to Whitman and his wife to save them, but any cure or treatment was beyond the medical science of the day. It is believed that the natives thought the Whitmans were refusing to cure their people, so in one of history’s most famous attacks, the locals attacked the Whitman’s Mission. Eyewitness accounts claim that eleven or twelve people were killed and over 50 were taken hostage.

This area of the United States was under a provisional government. This attack lead to a series of events, one of which was the formation of Oregon as first territory west of the Rocky Mountains. President James Polk signed the bill in 1848, which then included the area of Walla Walla. This lead to the Cayuse War. During the next two years, although the hostages were eventually released, many of the tribal people were forced to move to reservations. This opened the land to even more immigration of white settlers into the area.

The settlement at Walla Walla was once considered the likely place for the capital of the newly formed state of Washington. In fact, the then-Governor’s mansion still stands.

Today’s city is known for its crops, perhaps the most famous is the Walla Walla Onion. This sweet onion grows extremely well in the unique weather of the area. Hot and sunny summers of semi-arid conditions combine with cloud-covered winters that, although plenty of snow falls, stabilize just below freezing. This permits crops to survive the winter and burst forth as soon as spring begins.

Not only sweet onions, but recently, vineyards and the accompanying wineries have become a major part of the economy. In fact, the wineries in the valley produce over $100 million in revenue annually.