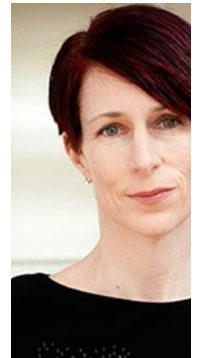


# A new view into Pacific Northwest history

Nearly two centuries before the Inland Northwest grew into a globally popular destination for wine and outdoor enthusiasts, the region hosted a surprisingly long list of international guests.

New research by **Jennifer Thigpen**, associate professor of history and an expert on America's foreign mission movement, demonstrates that, as American Protestant missionaries and their wives labored to bring Christianity to the region's native inhabitants in the early nineteenth century, they also carefully built networks across a complex set of competing local, national, and international interests.



Jennifer Thigpen

The diary of one of those wives, Mary Richardson Walker, is among the myriad sources Thigpen relies on to paint a vivid picture of everyday life in the Oregon Territory. It provides details of some of the missionaries' interactions with far-flung Native American tribes and visitors from France, Great Britain, Germany, and many other places.

"This project promises to help transform the way scholars understand the American foreign mission movement's relationship to the American West," Thigpen said. "The missionaries who traveled to what is now Washington did so in the nineteenth century as global actors on an increasingly global stage and played a large role in claiming the region for the United States."

Her research is part of a new book-length project, tentatively titled "Going Out to the World: American Foreign Mission Movement in the Global West."

## Life on the eastern Washington frontier

The WSU Libraries Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections houses Walker's diary and personal letters, providing one of the few known accounts of life at the Spokane-based Tshimakain mission. In addition to hosting international guests, the mission, run by Walker and



1843 drawing of the Tshimakain mission by Charles Andrew Geyer. Elkanah and Mary Richardson Walker established the mission in 1838 near present-day Spokane to work with Native Americans. Courtesy WSU MASC.

her husband, Elkanah, from 1838 to 1843. She assisted American settlers who came west to colonize the Oregon Territory, Thigpen said.

“Few historians have taken seriously the central place of American missionaries in the country’s expansion in the West. Mary Walker’s diary was the first piece of what has become a substantial body of evidence illustrating that the American missionary enterprise in Washington had much larger global connections and implications than historians have traditionally assumed.”

With the support of a grant from the Oregon Historical Society, Thigpen has been able to expand the scope of the project to include more of the Inland Northwest. In addition to Walker’s diary, she is using several other primary source documents—such as the letters of Marcus Whitman, a famous American physician and missionary who settled in the early- to mid-1800s in what is now Walla Walla, Wash.—to further investigate the role protestant missionaries played in colonizing the region.

Marcus Whitman’s letters contain detailed accounts of the region’s abundant natural resources that were already being heavily exploited by the British-owned Hudson Bay Company. While Whitman maintained a cordial relationship with the British traders, his personal correspondence sent back East to the United States reveal his concern regarding the British presence and encouraged his counterparts to send new settlers to take advantage of the territory’s fertile land, gold, and other resources.

“The missionaries came here to save souls, but they got swept up in this other story,” Thigpen said.

## Women’s work

Thigpen’s new book will expand upon her prior research of the American Protestant mission in Hawai’i, and particularly the way women negotiated the distance between their expected role and the ones they crafted for themselves.

“Mary Walker is interesting to modern readers because of her grit and the extent of her self-sufficiency. She gave birth every other year during nearly two decades on the frontier. Sometimes she was attended by a doctor, other times not. She carried a medical encyclopedia with her to

assist in these events,” Thigpen said. In addition to the domestic labor expected of them, Walker and her mission sisters carried out important diplomatic activities, including engaging with women from local tribes and forming alliances with a diverse cast of influential characters.

“Although society at the time had very particular ideas about the roles that women could and should fulfill, mission wives often challenged, expanded, and altered their roles,” Thigpen said. “From a modern context, it is extraordinary what these women accomplished.”



Mary Richardson Walker (1811-1897) in an undated portrait, courtesy of WSU MASC.

-By Will Fer