

THE MYSTERY OF THE FLATHEAD VALLEY'S LOST TRADING POST

Where was the 1811 Hudson's Bay Company's Howse House?

Four years after Lewis and Clark left Montana, the Canadian Hudson's Bay Company established a trading post somewhere between Somers and Kalispell.

The problem is – no one knows exactly where.

The story centers around Joseph Howse, who was sent to spy on the Hudson's Bay Company's competitor, the upstart North West Company.

Howse had emigrated from southern England in 1795 and apprenticed with the fur-trading company at York Factory on the semi-arctic Hudson Bay.

His first assignment centered around Edmonton House, now a major city in Alberta. He then crossed the Rockies through a pass now named after him. It was the Hudson's Bay Company's first expansion west of the Continental Divide. A river and peak also bear his name.

Despite Howse literally putting his name on western Canada, little is known about him. Only a handful of his reports survive and his maps were later sold and then lost. Most of what we know about him comes from the journals of Canadian fur trader David Thompson.

Thompson was the first European to explore the Columbia River from source to the ocean and founded outposts across eastern Washington and western Montana.

Thompson had broken his leg early in his career and during his two-year convalescence he taught himself to use the sextant. The Indians called him "the Stargazer."

His feats were largely forgotten until a century later, when a Canadian cartographer wondered why his maps of the Columbian River basin were so accurate, and dug up Thompson's papers.

Though Thompson had originally signed on with the Hudson's Bay Company, in 1794 he joined other disgruntled fur traders who had formed the rival North West Company.

Though competitors, the two companies sometimes had adjoining trading posts. These posts were typically known as "Houses," though occasionally they were fortified.

The Hudson's Bay Company was especially interested in Saleesh House, a fur trading post Thompson founded in 1809 near present-day Thompson Falls, Montana. They sent Howse to investigate.

We know Howse left Edmonton in 1810. According to one account, he had two canoes and nine men. Others reported 17 people, including four Cree Indians. He later provided a brief summary of his journey, which involved heading down the Columbia, then branching off to paddle up the Kootenai River to near present-day Libby, working his way to the Clark Fork and the lower Flathead River.

A later letter confirmed he had set up business somewhere north of Flathead Lake. There has been some speculation he actually reached Lake Pend Oreille, but that is generally rejected.

Howse returned to Edmonton in 1812 with 36 bundles of furs worth £1,500. Later he mentioned he had also accompanied a group of Flatheads to the three forks of the Missouri between December and February during his stay in the Flathead Valley.

Ironically, Thompson took off the summer of 1811 on his historic trip to the mouth of the Columbia River.



With almost no contemporary information to work on, the actual location of Howse House has remained a mystery.

In 1962, Barry Braunberger and Twain White explored a possible site in the Lower Valley. Braunberger was an optometrist interested in history, and White was an amateur archaeologist who ran the Lookout museum on Flathead Lake.

Working off the premise that Howse had arrived by canoe, they focused on the mouth of Ashley Creek where it enters the Flathead River, south of Creston. The barrel of an early gun had been found on the site, and there were some chimney remains. However their digging recovered little beside arrowheads and carved stones used to anchor fish nets.

Based on the premise that Howse came by horse, Thompson Falls native Carl Haywood picked another spot. His logic is spelled out in his book, *In Search of Howse House* (2013).

In particular, Haywood felt the Ashley Creek was prone to spring flooding and too marshy for a trading post.

He favored a location on the west side of the valley. It would have been near the junction of two major Indian trails, he noted. One trail followed the present Highway 2 from the west into the Valley, and the other headed north up the present Highway 93 toward Eureka and the Kootenai River.

Based on writings by the Valley's earliest pioneer, Haywood narrows the location to an area near the present Rocky Cliff Drive, west of the FedEx complex.

In particular he quotes Emma Ingalls, who wrote a paper, *Over Trails of the Past*, in 1945. She placed the trading post on property in the area originally owned by Eugene McCarthy. Ingalls and McCarthy were both early pioneers. She and her husband had published the Inter Lake in Demersville in the 1890s and McCarthy was a contractor during the building of the Great Northern Railway in 1891.

She wrote, "The remains of the old trading post established in about 1808 were still in evidence." But McCarthy had, "Tore down the old chimneys and filled in the excavation, and where this historic building once stood, Mr. Griffith has a grain field."

There is logic to the site. The Lower Valley is blocked by several wandering sloughs in the area north of Somers. Until Highway 93's modern fill, the early road into the valley hugged the hillside. And the Valley's first settlement is thought to have been at Ball's Crossing, just to the north.

Not knowing the present location of early Hudson's Bay Company trading posts is hardly unusual. Some were located by tribal members or fur traders who remember visiting them as youngsters. But the location of Thompson's Saleesh House at Thompson Falls has never been nailed down, and remains a source of local contention.

In September of 1812, Howse returned to England. He had become fluent in the language of the Cree, who occupied much of western Canada. Using his reputation as a linguist, he was able to pursue life as a gentleman and scholar. His *Grammar of the Cree Language* was published in 1884. Other papers contained information on the Kootenai language, and the Salish language of the Flatheads. His advice was sought by the Royal Geographical Society and the Church Missionary Society.

There is evidence that Howse left an Indian wife behind.

On the other hand, Thompson brought his Cree wife, Charlotte, with him when he retired to eastern Canada. Bad investments and health problems left him broke in later years.

To the end, Thompson remained a strong critic of the decision to surrender western Washington State to the United States. He always felt the Columbia River should be the international border.