

Peter Skene Ogden — *master of the inland fur trade*  
*David A. Bainbridge*

Peter Skene<sup>1</sup> Ogden was born in Quebec City to Isaac Ogden a jurist (and Loyalist), and Sarah Hanson in 1794. He was to lead a remarkable life of adventure in the fur trade. Two of his brothers were lawyers, but even though he was educated he was not suited to a desk job. After a brief spell with the Astor's American Fur Company in Montreal, he moved over to the North West Company as an apprentice clerk in April 1809.



He started work at the peak of the conflict between the NWC and the HBC. He was assigned to Île-à-la-Crosse (Saskatchewan). He and an older clerk, Samuel Black,<sup>2</sup> were involved in a fight with Peter Fidler at the nearby HBC post in 1810. By 1814 Ogden was at the NWC post on Green Lake in direct competition with a nearby HBC post. They assaulted them and took the post and all the goods. Ogden was also involved in the killing of a native near the HBC post. The native had been scared and may have fired the first shot, but then he was shot and wounded. He was taken in by the HBC post but then given up under threat. This poor soul was then, according to accounts, repeatedly shot, stabbed (by Ogden) and axed by members of the raiding party. In his defense Ogden claimed the native killed was wanted for murder and cannibalism, but there is no evidence of that. By 1818 an account of the incident at Green Lake was forwarded by the HBC to Lord Bathurst, sSecretary of State for War in the colonies and a murder indictment against Ogden was drawn up.

But it was too late. Ogden had been transferred to the Columbia Department in 1817 and was out of reach. He served at Fort George. From 1820-22 he was a clerk at the Thompson's River Post.

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<sup>1</sup> baptized Skeene, he also used Skein and Skeen

<sup>2</sup> Black was almost 40s, Peter just 20. They remained friends. G. Simpson called Black, "the strangest man I ever met". A big bully but able adventurer, eventually killed for mistreating natives.

Although the merger of the HBC and the NWC in 1821 specifically excluded Ogden from the new organization he remained in charge of Ft. Thompson until he headed east to Montreal and then to England to request relief from the ban. The London committee of the HBC relented and in 1823 agreed that he should be appointed a chief trader.

Ogden was sent to Spokane House as Chief Trader and began preparations for the creation of a 'fur desert' in the Snake River country. In 1824 Governor Simpson laid out his goal for Ogden, *"If properly managed no question exists that it would yield handsome profits as we have convincing proof that the country is a rich preserve of Beaver and which for political reasons we should endeavour to destroy as fast as possible."* He also took as his country wife Julia Rivet, a widow of the Spokane tribe (Interior Salish).

Over the next few years Ogden would make six major trips exploring and trapping much of current day Oregon and Idaho, and parts of Washington, California, Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming. For many of his trips his wife and children traveled with him. By 1830 he had a better knowledge of the area than any other explorer.

### **Ogden's Trips**

1824-25. Expedition to Southeastern Idaho and Northern Utah which includes Cache Valley, Ogden Valley, and the Weber River Valley, the site of the confrontation between the HBC and the Americans. He lost many of his freemen and their furs to Johnston Gardiner's party, who offered much better pay for furs. They also encountered a party from Santa Fe under Etienne Provost. Gardiner and Ogden disputed the territorial ownership, but it was neither American or British, but Mexican. Almost at home Ogden lost 9 men, 500 furs, and his journals in an upset in the rapids on the Columbia River. Even so the HBC was happy as these ventures were often returning 100 per cent profit. Ogden's journals are sometimes cynical but attest to his tenacious personality.

1825-26. Expedition from Walla Walla to the headwaters of the Des Chutes, up the Snake to the Malade River, Raft River, and Portneuf, returning by way of the Willamette, having crossed Central Oregon.

1826-27. Expedition to the Klamath country, a part of Oregon unknown to white men at the time.

1827-28. Expedition to SE Idaho, winter on the Snake, notes about American Parties.

1828-29. Expedition to the Snake Country. Follows Humboldt River, explores region north of Great Salt Lake.

1829-1830. On his last expedition he reached the Colorado River and Gulf of California. They heavily trapped the San Joaquin, leaving few beaver for American parties. On this trip his wife and children did not go.

He was worn down and excused from the next trip to California. Instead he moved up to the Northwest Coast. For the winter of 1830-1831 he was at Ft. Vancouver, and in April 1831 he was tasked with establishing a trading post on the Nass River. From 1831-1834 he was Chief Trader at Ft. Simpson. Ogden worked hard to gain trade against the competing American traders and the Russian American Company, He successfully countered the American maritime traders, but failed to establish a post on the Stikine River.

In 1835, Ogden was promoted again and made Chief Factor of the New Caledonia District, with headquarters at Fort St. James. He would spend almost nine years enjoying his family, with time at home and trading without direct competition. This is a lovely post on the end of Stuart Lake. The trips to Fort Vancouver were still arduous but less dangerous and much more predictable than the Snake River expeditions.

In 1844 he went to London for discussions over the future of the Northwest. On the return trip he was accompanied two British officers, Mervin Vavasour and Henry James Warre. They were tourists, but sent across Canada for an assessment of the political situation on the ground in the West. Warre's sketches are very good and give a picture of the forts and setting in the Columbia region.

In 1845 Ogden was appointed to a newly formed board of management for the Columbia District, with McLoughlin and James Douglas. After he returned to Fort Vancouver in August he carried out his instructions to purchase Cape Disappointment at the mouth of the Columbia for the HBC. He also claimed land for himself.

The Oregon Boundary Treaty of June 1846 fixed the frontier between British and American territory at the 49th parallel, placing the lower Columbia in the United States. After John McLoughlin retired Ogden, Douglas and John Work were responsible for the Columbia Department. This proved challenging as the land was now under foreign control. The scrappy and troublesome American settlers were a nuisance and their mistreatment of Métis and native people was an increasing problem. Many of the people from Kanaka Village and French Prairie chose to move to Vancouver Island. Others would go south to the Gold Rush in California or east to the Grand Ronde reservation.

In December 1847 a Cayuse tribal attack on the mission at Waiilatpu led to the death of 14 people and the taking of 47 prisoners. Ogden was never afraid of a scrape and left Fort Vancouver the morning after he heard the news. Within two weeks he succeeded in negotiating the release of the prisoners.

The Oregon Census of 1850 lists Peter Skein Ogden, 56, Chief Factor HBC, Canada; Fabian Rivet, 5, Oregon Territory; Theresa Rivet, 8, Oregon Territory; Dick Owyhee, 32, steward, Sandwich Islands<sup>3</sup>; Learhenard<sup>4</sup> Owyhee, 32, cook, Sandwich Islands. His wife was living with one of her daughters in Champeog (quite nearby). She would later move with her daughter to Lac La Hache, dying at age 97.

From 1852-1853 Peter was on furlough. In August 1854 he left Fort Vancouver for Oregon City. His health was failing and he died in September. He had saved and invested wisely and left a considerable estate. Governor Simpson, who had earlier worried about Ogden, noted in November 1854, "*Few persons I believe knew him so well or esteemed his friendship more highly than myself.*"

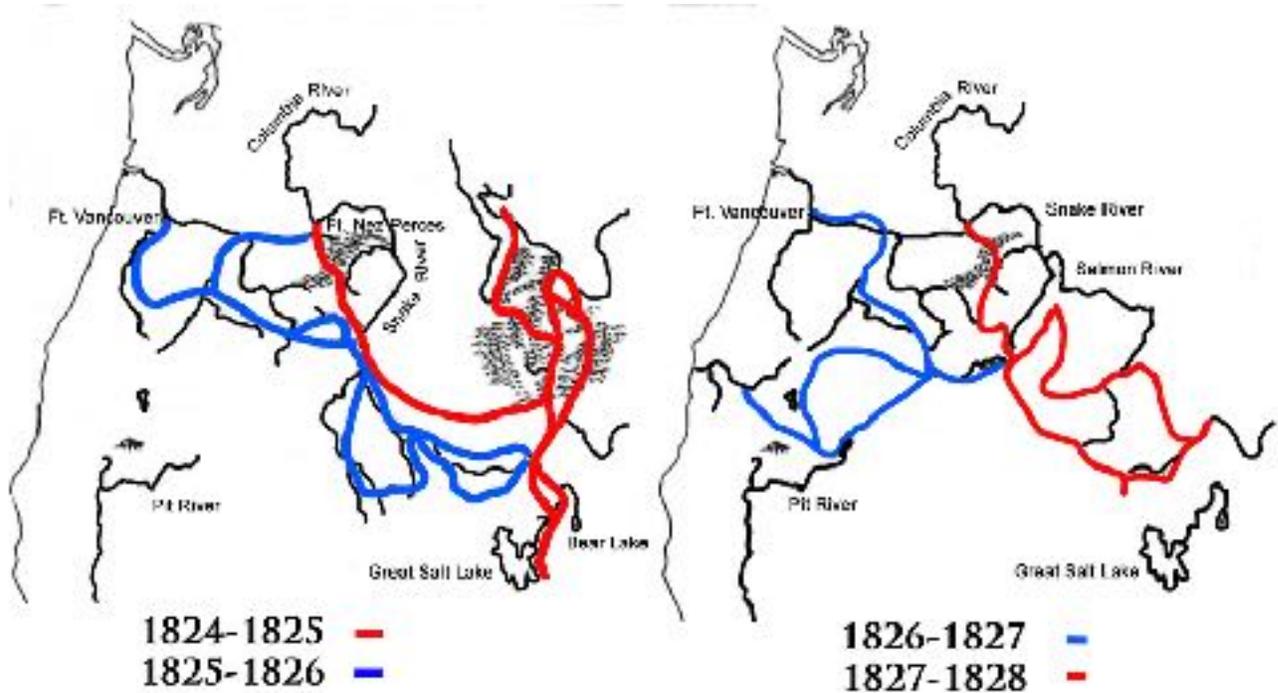
His will provided for a division of land, cash, and bank stock between his children, grandchildren, adopted son, and other relatives. Ogden never formalized his marriage to Julia

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<sup>3</sup> Hawaii

<sup>4</sup> probably misspelling Le'a rhe ard — he does not rush

and despite Ogden's clear instructions his brother, Charles Richard, and sister, Harriet Lawrence, tried to disinherit the Ogden/Rivet family. Governor Simpson developed a compromise by which the property was divided.



## SNAKE COUNTRY BRIGADES