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Excavating First-Person Accounts of the Whitman Mission Massacre

Tamara J. Luce

Abstract: A potential tool that can be utilized by historic archaeologists to locate and interpret archaeological sites is historic documents. One example of the ability to use documents to understand an archaeological site is the study the massacre that took place at the Whitman/Waiilatpu Mission, a former Protestant mission near present day Walla Walla, Washington. While the fact that a massacre took place at the mission is well known, exactly how the events of that day unfolded are unclear. First-person accounts of the massacre hold the most promise for understanding what took place that day, and can be used to help plan and interpret archaeological investigations.

Historic Archaeology and Document Analysis

Historic and pre-historic archaeology use a variety of tools to learn about the past. One advantage of historic archaeology is the potential use of documents to help locate and interpret archaeological sites. Documents can be particularly helpful when archaeologists are unable to excavate certain areas of sites, such as burials, due to ethical concerns. One example of such a situation is found in excavations of the Whitman/Waiilatpu Mission, the site of a former Protestant mission near present day Walla Walla, Washington. The Whitman Mission is important not only because it was one of the first settlements west of the Rocky Mountains, but because in 1847 it was the site of a massacre. While the fact that a massacre took place at the mission is well known, exactly how the events of that day unfolded are unclear. First-person accounts of the Whitman Mission Massacre hold the most promise for understanding what took place that day, as well as providing future directions for archaeological investigations.

The History of the Whitman Mission

In 1836, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, along with Henry and Eliza Spalding, traveled with fur caravans on the journey west to Oregon Country (Historic Oregon 2008). The two couples had decided to journey west in order to establish Presbyterian missions to “civilize” the Indians living in that part of the world. The Waiilatpu Mission was established on October 16, 1836, with the hopes of working with the Cayuse Indians (Wilma 2003). The Spaldings established their own mission approximately 100 miles east of the Whitman’s mission, and their work centered on the Nez Perce tribe (Bagley 2010:63).

During the first six years that the Whitmans lived at Waiilatpu, their time was focused exclusively on their mission work. In the early 1840s, however, wagon trains began to make their way across the country and travelers often stopped at the Waiilatpu Mission, causing the Whitmans to focus on helping emigrants in addition to their missionary work (Lansing 1993:18). Between 1843 and 1847, the mission served as a regular stopping place along the Oregon Trail (Historic Oregon 2008). The Whitmans took in children orphaned along the Oregon Trail, as well as “half-breed children of mountain men...because the rigors of trapper life were not suited to child-rearings” (Lansing 1993:18). The most famous orphans adopted by Marcus and Narcissa Whitman were the seven Sager children whose parents had died during the family’s journey west in 1844. The Whitmans also served as foster parents to Helen Mar Meek and Mary Ann Bridger, the daughters of mountain men Joe Meek and Jim Bridger (Bagley 2010:223).

Tensions in Oregon Country were high in 1847. The increasing amount of emigrants brought with them diseases to which Native Americans had no immunity. A measles epidemic in late 1847 caused the deaths of several emigrants and an even larger number of Native Americans. The high number of deaths among natives compared to whites caused the Cayuse to suspect that Marcus Whitman was trying to poison them (Historic Oregon 2008). In addition to this fear, the atmosphere was tense due to Catholic missionaries arriving in the area and competing with the Whitmans for parishioners. These two sources of tension are considered by most historians to be the reasons behind the massacre at the Whitman Mission.

The massacre at Waiilatpu took place on November 27, 1847. At the time of the massacre, 74 people were living at the mission, including ten families, six bachelors, and the Whitmans and their children (Lansing 1993:20). After the massacre took place the survivors, mostly women and children, were held captive for a month

until they were ransomed. Upon giving up their captives, the Cayuse learned that a volunteer army was coming to attack them and fled the area after burning the mission. The death of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, as well as the “destruction of the mission...led to Indian wars that kept inland Oregon and Washington in turmoil for many years” (Garth 1948:117-118). The Whitman massacre also helped prompt Washington into declaring the Oregon frontier to be United States territory (Oregon Encyclopedia 2011).

On May 21, 1850, a trial was held for the murder of Marcus Whitman. The Cayuse tribe surrendered Chief Telokite, Tomahas, Isiaasheluckas, Clokomas, and Kiamasumkin, to the court claiming that they were responsible for the massacre. The trial lasted three days and the jury found all five men guilty for the death of Marcus Whitman (Oregon Encyclopedia 2011). On June 3, 1850, the five Cayuse men were hanged for their crimes.

The Whitman Mission is now a National Monument and visitors are able to walk around the mission grounds and visit the mass grave of those killed during the massacre. Archaeological excavations were conducted in the 1940s with the hopes of locating the different buildings that had been present at the mission (Garth 1948:117). While archaeologists have been able to locate the outlines of the mission buildings no work has been done to attempt to understand exactly what happened during the massacre. Part of the reason archaeologists have not attempted to answer this question is because the archaeological record is unlikely to yield information on how the massacre unfolded. The mission was used by numerous people both before and after the massacre, and finding artifacts that can give information about the precise day of the massacre is highly unlikely. Ethical concerns have stopped archaeologists from unearthing the mass grave in order to study the remains of the victims. Because of these two problems, first-person accounts are the only source of information currently available to archaeologists that can shed light on the events of that day.

Document Analysis

Language is the most advanced means of communication used by humans (Olsson 2004:3). The complex nature of language allows it to be studied in various ways. The term “forensic linguistics” was coined in 1968 by Jan Svartvik, who worked to develop ways to analyze statements for their validity (Olsson 2004:3). “Witness psychology,” pioneered by psychologist Arne Trankell, is another field that works to find ways to detect the validity of statements (Olsson 2004:121). Determining the validity of statements is critical in criminal

investigations, and multiple observations and procedures have been recognized as ways of determining if people are telling the truth when they give statements.

Statement Validity Analysis (SVA) is one technique used to determine if a person is being honest. The main proposal of SVA is that “memory-based experiences and fantasy-based experiences differ from each other,” and these differences can be detected (Undeutsch 1967 in Olsson 2004:121). One observation made about statements is that, “if we do not believe what we are saying or if we do not believe *in* what we are saying...we will be hesitant and non-committal, and even the sequence of events we are describing will most likely be somewhat disordered” (Olsson 2004:124).

When examining a document, forensic linguists focus on three main questions: who wrote the document, how the document was created (handwritten, typed, etc.), and if the sections of the document are stylistically similar. Linguistic style refers to the way a person uses language and has been recognized as both a conscious and subconscious process (Olsson 2004:34-35). Linguistic style should not be confused with linguistic genre which is “a type of text arising from a specific set of communicative requirements” (Olsson 2004:35). It is important to understand the genres of documents because the genre can affect the way the account is given. Letters and memoirs are two examples of linguistic genre that convey accounts differently than a court testimony or legal statement would. Detailed descriptions are rare in fact-narratives, but can be common in accounts of events that are written for the general public (Olsson 2004:131).

The techniques used by forensic linguists can be applied to historic documents to determine if given accounts are credible. The first-person accounts of the Whitman Massacre differ in multiple ways, implying that some of the accounts are inaccurate or untruthful. Comparing the different accounts in respect to pre-established questions allows similarities and differences in recollections of the massacre to be determined. A comparison of the documents does not just involve examining the content of the accounts, but also the way in which the content is conveyed. Keeping in mind genre and signs of deception in the statements will allow the reliability of the person giving an account to be determined. The reliability of the narrators is important in determining what happened during the Whitman Mission Massacre; if the narrators are unreliable than little to no weight can be given to their accounts.

First Person Accounts of the Whitman Mission Massacre

Seventy-four people were living at the Whitman Mission when the massacre took place, and there are approximately 25 accounts in varying formats of the massacre (National Park Service 2011a). This paper will compare seven of these accounts in an attempt to determine how the massacre occurred. The accounts used for comparison are those of Eliza Hall, Josiah Osborn, Eliza Spalding, and Elizabeth, Matilda, and Catherine Sager.

Eliza Hall was 31 years old and with her husband and five children at the Whitman Mission in November of 1847 (Cannon 1915:106). Hall's account of the massacre is taken from the *Bill of Exceptions*, a court document from the Whitman Massacre trial that took place on May 13, 1850, three years after the massacre occurred (Lansing 1993). Hall's age when the massacre occurred, as well as the fact that she gave her account under oath, lends credibility to her recollections of the event. One weakness of Hall's account is that it is limited in scope. The information in the court document is limited to information Hall gave specifically on the death of Marcus Whitman; the account does not focus on the entire events of the day. Because of its limited scope, while it can be assumed that Hall was honest in her account, not enough information is given to fully understand the massacre.

The second account used in the comparison is that of Josiah Osborn. Osborn had come to the mission with his family, at Marcus Whitman's request, to build two mills (Littell 1848:66). Osborn's accounts of the massacre include a letter written to his family on April 7, 1848, as well as his statements in court during the Whitman Massacre trial. Osborn's letter to his family is the first known account of the massacre given, which lends it strength because it would not have been influenced by previously published accounts (National Park Service 2011a). However, the letter was written five months after the massacre and conversations with other survivors influenced the information given in the letter.

When the massacre started at the mission, Osborn hid with his family under the floorboards of one of the buildings (Lansing 1993:108). While he was able to hear the massacre take place, Osborn was not an eye witness to the majority of the events that occurred. The Osborn family managed to escape from the mission the night of the massacre, and after a long journey made it to Fort Walla Walla (Littell 1848:67). In Osborn's letter to his family, he describes events that he could not have witnessed during the massacre, proof that his account had been influenced by others who were at the mission that day. The

court testimony given by Osborn does not include many of the details that he gave in his letter, and thus can be considered a more reliable source of information. While the letter written by Osborn to his family was influenced by other accounts of the massacre, both his letter and court testimony will be used in the comparison.

Eliza Spalding was only ten years old when the Whitman massacre took place. Eliza was the daughter of Henry and Eliza Spalding, the two missionaries who accompanied Marcus and Narcissa Whitman to the Oregon frontier. Spalding was at the mission to attend school, and was the only person held captive after the massacre who was fluent in Nez Perce and able to fully understand the Indians who held the women and children captive (National Park Service 2011a). Eliza Spalding's account comes from a memoir she wrote 69 years after the massacre occurred (Warren 1916). The long amount of time between the event and her account, as well as her age during the massacre, has a strong effect on the information she conveys.

Parts of Spalding's account are not in chronological order. One example of errors in Spalding's account is that she states that the massacre took place in 1847 in some places, and 1857 in others (Warren 1916:11, 23-24). The massacre is known to have occurred in 1847, so the errors made by Spalding are either due to an error in the memoir that went uncorrected, or to confusion brought on by the long amount of time between the massacre and her account. Despite the errors in the date of the massacre, Spalding's account is used as a comparative document because it is likely that the key details, such as who was killed and how they were killed, are accurate because of the impression they would have made on Spalding.

Seven of the 74 people living at the Whitman Mission in November of 1847, were the Sager children. Elizabeth Sager was one of the children living at the mission and was ten years old when the massacre took place. Elizabeth Sager's account of the massacre comes from the Whitman Massacre trial and is found in the *Bill of Exceptions* (Lansing 1993:101-102). The account given by Elizabeth Sager can be assumed to be truthful because she was under oath when the document was written, and her account was given only three years after the event. While her account is helpful because it names some of the Cayuse who participated in the massacre, her statement is limited in scope due to its presentation being shaped by the questions asked of her in court.

Matilda Sager was another of the Sager children adopted by the Whitmans, and wrote about the massacre in an autobiography published in 1920, 73 years after the event took place (Delaney 1920). Matilda was nine years old when the Whitman Mission Massacre occurred (Delaney 1920:9). Despite the passage of time before giving

her account and her young age when the event took place, Matilda's recollection of the events on the day of the massacre are very clear. Unlike other survivors Matilda gives explanations for why she believes things occurred certain ways, and admits that in some places her account is different from how others remember the event. While her explanations give strength to her descriptions, her account is clearly influenced by stories she heard after the massacre. There are several places in her autobiography where she writes about events that she did not witness, and only once does she state that one of the stories came to her from another source. The stories that she gained from other sources are easily detected in her account because they come across jumbled and chronologically out of place. Despite the potential errors that the inclusion of information from other sources presents, Matilda Sager's autobiography can be used as a good first-person account of the massacre, so long as care is taken to avoid including information she clearly gained from other sources.

The final first-person account that will be used to determine the events of the massacre was written by Catherine Sager in 1860, 13 years after the event, as part of a memoir of her family's journey west in 1844. Catherine Sager was the first of the Sager orphans to write an account of the massacre, and was the eldest Sager daughter, at 13 years old, when the massacre took place (Cannon 1915:106). Because several years had passed before Catherine wrote of the massacre it is possible that her recollections of that day were influenced by stories she heard from other people. As one of the older children at the mission in 1847, Catherine's memories of what happened may be clearer than some of the other accounts given by children, and may have been less affected by the amount of time between the event and her memoir.

It is important to note that the massacre killed relatives of many of the survivors, took place at a mission, and was performed by people that many considered to be savages, all of which likely influenced the way that the event was recalled. It is probable that many of the accounts exaggerated the brutality of the Cayuse in order to make them appear as inhuman as possible. Although the accounts may be exaggerated many of the basic facts, for example if somebody was shot and where they were when they were killed, are likely to be true.

In an attempt to determine the actual events of the Whitman Massacre, the accounts have been used to answer seven questions related to the event. These questions are: 1) What date and time did the massacre take place? 2) Where did the massacre start? 3) What weapons were used in the massacre? 4) Where was Marcus Whitman when he was attacked, who attacked him, and what weapon was used? 5) Where was Narcissa Whitman when she was attacked, who attacked

her, and what weapon was used? 6) How many people died in the massacre? and 7) Who died in the massacre? Answering these questions will help create a better understanding what took place during the Whitman Mission Massacre.

When Did The Massacre Take Place?

One of the most basic questions that can be asked of the massacre is the date and time that the event took place, as well as what was going on at the mission before the massacre erupted. Five of the seven first-person accounts state that the massacre occurred on November 29, 1847. The two accounts that differ are that of Eliza Spalding who gives the date as both November 29, 1857, and November 29, 1847, and Elizabeth Sager who stated in court that she did not recall the date of the event (Warren 1916: 23, 11; Lansing 1993:102). The two dates given by Eliza Spalding is likely the result of an error in her memoir that was not caught before the book was published. The massacre could not possibly have occurred in 1857, because the trial for the murder of Marcus Whitman took place in 1850. The majority of the accounts state that the massacre took place on November 29, 1847, and the consistency of this date is reason to believe it is accurate.

In addition to knowing the date of the massacre, it is important understand what was going on at the mission that day. Knowing the atmosphere at the mission on the day of the massacre may give insight into how the events unfolded and who took part in the killings. Almost all of the first-person accounts mention that at the time of the massacre several people at the mission and in the surrounding area were sick with measles. Eliza Hall stated that “measles prevailed amongst the Indians and...many of them died” (Lansing 1993:102). Josiah Osborn also recalls that measles were present at the mission and on the day of the massacre “Indians convened for the purpose...of burying their dead,” at the Indian graveyard located near the mission (Littell 1848:66).

Another event that was taking place at the mission on the day of the massacre was the dressing of a steer that had been killed. All of the accounts, with exception of those given by Eliza Hall and Elizabeth Sager, mention that on the day of the massacre a group of men were gathered around a steer that was being butchered and dressed. Matilda Sager wrote that, “Joe Stansfield went out that morning to drive in a beef animal from the range to be killed and brother Frank was the one to shoot it down” (Delaney 1920:14). Catherine Sager wrote that, “three or four men were dressing [the beef] near the grist mill” (Pringle

1860). Because multiple accounts mention that a steer was being butchered that morning this event can be assumed to have occurred.

Catherine Sager also mentions that on the day of the massacre, “the grist mill, which was running, [was] grinding grists for the Indians,” an event that may have drawn Indians to the mission (Pringle 1860). The Cayuse burials and the butchering of the steer drew in numerous Indians, however the large number of Cayuse would not have been considered unusual.

While the date of the massacre is agreed upon by almost all of the survivors, the time at which the massacre started is remembered differently by each of the authors. Josiah Osborn states that the attack began at “[a]bout one or two o’clock,” and Eliza Spalding recalls that the massacre started on “Monday evening” (Littell 1848:66; Warren 1916:23). Of the Sager children, only Matilda comments on what time the massacre started, and of all the descriptions hers is the only one that includes an explanation for why she remembers when the event began.

Matilda Sager recalls that the massacre took place while the boys attending school at the mission were at recess. School girls at the mission had their “forenoon recess” first, and when they returned to the classroom the boys had their recess. When the boys left the classroom they went to watch the beef being dressed, and it was at this time that the massacre started. The massacre, according to Matilda’s account, began between eleven and twelve o’clock because she had already had her recess but had not gone to help her brother wind twine for brooms, a task which she promised to help with at noon (Delaney 1920:14-15).

Another reason Matilda Sager recalls the massacre starting slightly after eleven o’clock that Monday is because:\

One of the fixed rules of [Marcus Whitman] was the hour of the day we took our baths, both summer and winter – eleven o’clock in the morning; and as we did not get our usual baths on the Saturday previous on account of the sickness of so many of the children, Mrs. Whitman was bathing a part of them this Monday morning. [Delaney 1920:16]

Catherine Sager also mentions that the children were taking a bath that day because when she heard an explosion in the kitchen, “children rushed out doors, some of them without clothes, as we were taking a bath” (Pringle 1860). The regularity of the time that the children were bathed as well as the fact that two accounts state that children were being bathed when massacre began helps to place the time of the event at shortly after eleven o’clock.

Determining the exact time of the massacre is difficult because each first-person account gives a different hour for the attack. Of the various times given, the massacre most likely occurred around noon, as stated in Matilda Sager's account. The reason why this account is favored over the others is because the time is explained in relation to events that would have occurred at the same hour every day. In her account Matilda writes, "When the hour for the forenoon recess had come..." (Delaney 1920:14). The wording of this statement implies that recess always occurred at the same time, and because the massacre began during the recess it is likely that Matilda was able to correctly recall when the massacre started because it was framed in the context of something she was very familiar with.

Where the Massacre Started

Another question which is important to answer in order to understand how the Whitman Mission Massacre unfolded is where the massacre began. The starting place of the massacre varies with each first-person account. This is likely due to the survivors being in different locations when the massacre erupted which resulted in their learning of the massacre in different ways. In the *Bill of Exceptions*, Eliza Hall is recorded as stating that, "the first she saw of the affray [was] Tilikit...striking Marcus Whitman in the face with a hatchet...Whitman was on the ground at the time and about six feet from the mission house" (Lansing 1993:101). The statement by Eliza Hall therefore holds that the massacre began outside of the mission house.

In the letter written by Josiah Osborn, he states that "The Indians commenced on all at nearly the same moment. They killed the doctor and wounded the three men at the beef" (Littell 1848:66). Josiah was in his room at the mission when the killing began and soon after it was clear a massacre was occurring he "lifted up the floor and [he and his wife] got under, with [their] three children, and put the boards back in their place" (Littell 1848:67).

Eliza Spalding's memoir states that the massacre began with the killing of Marcus Whitman, which took place in "the outer room." Eliza writes that the doctor was in the mission sitting room when an Indian came to ask about those sick with measles; Marcus left the sitting room and entered "the outer room" in order to hold the conversation (Warren 1916:23). Elizabeth Sager's court statement did not address where the massacre began, but the accounts written by her two sisters do mention where the killings first started.

Matilda Sager wrote that she learned about the massacre from the boys who had gone to watch the beef being dressed during recess. Her account also states that the massacre began in the kitchen of the mission house with the killing of Marcus Whitman, before those who killed Marcus “joined those around the beef and the general attack immediately began” (Delaney 1920:15). According to Catherine Sager, the massacre started almost simultaneously at both the mission house and the location where the beef was being dressed. Catherine was in the mission house with the Whitmans when an Indian came to speak with Marcus Whitman. After Marcus had entered the kitchen and shut the door behind him, Catherine recalls that the people in the mission house “were all startled by an explosion that seemed to shake the house,” and that soon after this, “a man from the beef came in...[and] said, ‘Mrs. Whitman, the Indians are killing us all’” (Pringle 1860).

Because each person who gave an account learned of the massacre in a different way it is understandable that they believed the massacre began at different places. The time lapse between when the massacre took place and when people wrote about the event may also have shaped the descriptions of where the massacre started because people were able to compare stories with other survivors before writing their accounts. Most of the accounts hold that the killings began almost simultaneously at both the mission and the site where the beef was being dressed. Because the dressing of the beef would have taken a long time, it is probable that the massacre began with the killing of Marcus Whitman, which could have served as a signal to begin the attack. While the massacre likely began with the attack on Marcus Whitman, the quick succession of the other attacks may have given many of the survivors the impression that the massacre occurred simultaneously throughout the mission.

What Weapons Were Used in the Massacre?

Another question regarding the Whitman Mission Massacre is what types of weapons were used in the killings. This question is different from the types of weapons used to kill individuals because it is broader in scope; it can help determine the validity of claims about weapons used on individuals by establishing if those weapons were present at the mission that day. All seven first-person accounts refer to guns being used in the massacre. The Cayuse would have had the opportunity to possess guns by trading with settlers or purchasing them from forts or emigrants. In addition to guns, three of the first-person accounts state that tomahawks/hatchets and knives were used during the massacre.

Eliza Hall mentions the use of a hatchet when describing the attack on Marcus Whitman (Lansing 1993:101). Josiah Osborn implies that hatchets and knives were used in the attack by recalling that Marcus Whitman's throat had been cut, and when his family fled from the mission that night they saw that some of the victims "had their heads split open" (Littell 1848:67). While Josiah would not have seen Marcus's body, his family would have passed by victims of the massacre and so his account of the heads of victims being split is possible.

Eliza Spalding refers to the use of hatchets and knives when describing the attack on Marcus Whitman and John Sager. When Eliza entered the mission kitchen during the massacre she saw, "Dr. Whitman on the floor, his head cut open...and near him, the oldest Sager boy...was lying in a huddled heap, his throat cut from ear to ear" (Warren 1916:24). Catherine Sager's account states that one of the victims, Mr. Rogers, "was shot through the wrist and tomahawked on the head" (Pringle 1860). Another victim, Mr. Saunders, is described by Catherine as "being seized by a savage who had a large butcher knife" (Pringle 1860).

The three accounts that exclude references to tomahawks/hatchets are those of the Sager children, and Catherine Sager is the only one of the family who mentions that knives were used during the attack. The fact that half of the first-person accounts of the massacre do not mention the use of tomahawks suggests that the use of the tomahawks was either limited during the attack or was added to stories of the attack to increase the horror of the massacre. Because most of the accounts state that Marcus Whitman and John Sager were attacked using a tomahawk and knife, these are the only two attacks which can be assumed to have occurred on the day of the massacre using these weapons.

In addition to the first attacks, two men at the mission were sick with the measles at the time of the massacre, and were killed approximately one week after the first attacks occurred. In her memoir Eliza Spalding writes:

The Indians began to think [the two sick men] were not going to die and were afraid they might skip out some night and so on the ninth day after they had done the first murder, they went in with their clubs where the men were in their beds and beat them. Then they dragged them out and threw them down by the door and finished killing them with an axe. [Warren 1916:27]

Matilda Sager also states that the two sick men, whom she names as being Mr. Bewley and Mr. Sales, were “attacked while on their bed, beaten with clubs and whips and finally killed” (Delaney 1920:23).

A comparison of the first-person accounts shows that the most common weapons used in the massacre were guns, although tomahawks, knives, and clubs were also used in a limited number of the attacks.

The Death of Marcus Whitman

All seven of the first-person accounts of the Whitman Mission Massacre mention the death of Marcus Whitman. While all of the survivors recall the death of Marcus, how they describe the attack differs not only in where he was killed, but how he was killed. Eliza Hall stated in court that she saw Marcus Whitman killed approximately six feet outside of the mission house, and that she was approximately 100 yards away from the attack. The location in which Hall places the attack on Marcus is the only account that states the attack took place outside. Hall is also the only person to name Marcus’s attacker, whom she says was an Indian named Tilikite (Lansing 1993:101-102). In her account of the massacre, Hall states that Tilikite struck Marcus in the face with a hatchet, and that Marcus was wounded in several places.

Josiah Osborn only describes the attack of Marcus Whitman in the letter he wrote to his family. The lack of description given in his court statement is most likely due to the fact that he did not witness the attack and so any information he relayed would be speculation and information gained from other sources. In his letter, Osborn says that Marcus Whitman was in the mission kitchen when he was shot by Indians, and that his “head was badly mangled and his throat cut” (Littell 1848:67). While the information given by Osborn on the attack of Marcus Whitman is similar to other accounts it cannot be given any weight in determining how the attack occurred because he was not able to see the attack.

Eliza Spalding’s account of how Marcus Whitman was attacked can also not be given much weight, because she was in the classroom and did not witness the attack. In her memoir, Spalding writes that “an Indian knocked on the door [of the mission house] and asked to see the Doctor about the sick, and wanted medicine. The Doctor [Marcus Whitman] stopped out into the outer room,” where several Indians were present, one of these Indians “whipped a tomahawk from under his blanket and buried it in the doctor’s head” (Warren 1916:23). Spalding later says that she saw the body of Dr. Whitman when the school children were led into the kitchen (Warren

1916:24). The fact that Eliza saw the body of Marcus Whitman in the kitchen is likely the result of the attack occurring in the kitchen, as the body is reported by several survivors to only have been moved once, from the kitchen to the living room. Although Spalding's account of *how* the attack occurred cannot be given much credit, the location of the attack can be assumed to be correct because she was able to see the body of Marcus Whitman after the attack occurred.

In the court statement given by Elizabeth Sager, it was recorded that she "heard loud talking, she looked and saw guns pointed – heard report of the discharge thereof but does not know who shot the said Dr. Whitman" (Lansing 1993:102). While Elizabeth does not give an exact location for the attack she was recorded as stating that an Indian came to the door and asked for Dr. Whitman (Lansing 1993:102). While her statement places her in the mission house when the attack on Dr. Whitman took place, it is not clear if she witnessed the attack or only heard the gun go off.

Matilda Sager's account of the attack on Marcus Whitman, like the accounts of Osborn and Spalding, cannot be relied on overly much because she did not witness the attack. Matilda states that "Mary Ann Bridger was the only eye-witness of the attack on Dr. Whitman and John Sager" (Delaney 1920:15). Regardless of the fact that she did not witness the attack Matilda still described how Marcus Whitman was murdered. According to Matilda Sager, Dr. Whitman entered the mission kitchen to speak to some Indians about a sick man when one of the Indians "slipped up behind the good man, drew a tomahawk from under his blanket and sank it into the Doctor's skull" (Delaney 1920:15).

The accounts given by Matilda Sager and Eliza Spalding are very similar. Both accounts mention that a tomahawk was taken out from under a blanket before striking Dr. Whitman in the head, although neither Matilda nor Eliza witnessed the attack. The similarity of the accounts suggests that the two girls heard about the murder of Marcus Whitman from the same person, or that Matilda Sager used Eliza Spalding's account of the massacre to shape how she conveyed the story of the attack on Dr. Whitman, as Sager's account was published four years after that of Spalding.

Catherine Sager was in the mission house when the attack on Dr. Whitman took place. In her memoir she writes that Marcus and Narcissa Whitman were in the kitchen along with several loud Indians, and that the "boisterous manner" of the Indians caused Narcissa to run into the living room where another Indian asked to speak with Dr. Whitman. Marcus told his wife to bolt the door behind him, which she did. Shortly after this Catherine recalls that everyone in the living

room was “startled by an explosion that seemed to shake the house” (Pringle 1860). Narcissa went into the kitchen to see what had happened to her husband and discovered that he was “fatally wounded, but conscious...[and] blood was streaming from a gunshot wound in the throat” (Pringle 1860). Catherine Sager is the only person to mention that the gunshot which several people recall hearing was the result of Dr. Whitman being shot in the throat. Later in her memoir Catherine states that she learned of the manner of the attack from the Indians. The story Catherine heard from the Indians was that when Dr. Whitman entered the kitchen:

he took his usual seat upon a settee which was between the wall and the cook stove; an Indian began to talk to him in reference to a patient the doctor was attending. While thus engaged an Indian struck him from behind on the head with a tomahawk; at the same moment two guns were discharged, one at the doctor, and the other at brother John. [Pringle 1860]

Catherine is the only person who admits that she learned how the attack on Dr. Whitman occurred from another source.

A comparison of the accounts of the murder of Marcus Whitman leads to the conclusion that the attack took place in the mission kitchen because the majority of the accounts state that this is where the murder occurred. It is important to note that if Dr. Whitman was killed in the kitchen, none of the first-person accounts used in the comparison were given by people who witnessed his murder. The only two people who would have seen the attack were John Sager, who is stated by many as being in the kitchen at that time, and Mary Ann Bridger who Matilda Sager claims was also in the kitchen. John Sager was killed at the same time Dr. Whitman was, so he was never able to describe how the attack occurred. Mary Ann Bridger was only 11 years old at the time of the massacre, and while she may have told others what she witnessed she never gave a formal or published account of the massacre (Cannon 1915:107). Based on the first-person accounts given, the only conclusions that can be reached are that a gun and possibly a tomahawk were used in the attack on Dr. Whitman, and that the attack took place in the mission kitchen.

The Death of Narcissa Whitman

Another death that most of the first-person accounts refer to in detail is that of Narcissa Whitman, the only woman to be killed in the massacre. Compared to the accounts of the attack on Dr. Whitman, the

recollections of how Narcissa was killed are very similar. Most of the first-person accounts of the massacre state that Narcissa was wounded twice, first in the living room of the mission, and again outside of the mission house; it was the second attack which killed her.

Eliza Hall's account, as recorded in the *Bill of Exceptions*, states simply that "Mrs. Whitman the wife of said Marcus Whitman was shot" (Lansing 1993:102). Josiah Osborn's court statement only states that he heard Mrs. Whitman shot, but he gives more information on how she was killed in his letter to his family (Lansing 1993:103). In his letter, Osborn writes that Narcissa was in the parlor of the mission house, where she had moved her husband after he was attacked, when she was "shot in the breast" (Littell 1848:67). Later that day the Indians wanted to move people out of the mission house. When Mrs. Whitman left the house "the Indians fired several balls into [her], and kicked her bleeding body into the mud" (Littell 1848:67). It must be remembered that Osborn's account cannot be given too much weight because he was not an eye-witness to the attacks on Narcissa Whitman.

Eliza Spalding recalls that Mrs. Whitman was at one of the windows of the mission house when Joe Lewis, a "half breed" Indian, "seized a gun and shot her through the breast" (Warren 1916:24). Later Eliza says that the Indians wanted to move everyone from the mission house into the emigrant house. Mrs. Whitman was "faint" after seeing her dead husband, and so she was placed on a lounge and carried out of the mission house by Mr. Rogers and Joe Lewis. Once outside "Mrs. Whitman was shot again and beat over the face and head with a war club" (Warren 1916:25).

Elizabeth Sager did not make any comments on the death of Narcissa Whitman in the Whitman Massacre trial, however both of her sisters wrote about the death of their adopted mother in their memoirs. Matilda Sager states that Mrs. Whitman had brought her husband into the living room and was trying to use a towel and ashes from the stove to stop his bleeding. After Marcus Whitman died, Narcissa went to the "sash door and looked out to see what had become of those around the beef. She stood there watching, when Frank Iskalome, a full blooded Indian, shot her in the left breast through the glass" (Delaney 1920:16).

Matilda recalls being outside of the mission house when all of the people who had gone there for safety were lead outside. As the people in the mission house went outside Matilda states:

They were followed by Mr. Rogers and Joe Lewis bearing a settee with the wounded Mrs. Whitman on it...When they had gotten out of and a short distance from the house in an open space, Joe Lewis dropped his end of the settee. Mr. Rogers looked up

quickly and must have realized what it meant; but he was shot instantly and fell... Then an Indian came to Mrs. Whitman and took his whip and beat her over the face and head and then turned the settee over in the mud [Delaney 1920:19].

Unlike the accounts given by Eliza Hall, Josiah Osborn, and Eliza Spalding, Matilda Sager does not state that Narcissa was shot when she was carried out of the house.

Catherine Sager also recalls the death of Narcissa Whitman in her memoir. Catherine's account states that she was next to Narcissa Whitman and looking out of one of the mission's windows when "a bullet came through the window, piercing Mrs. Whitman's shoulder" (Pringle 1860). Catherine's memoir also states that later in the day the people taking refuge in the mission were told that if they did not leave the building it would be set on fire. The first people to leave the mission house, according to Catherine, were Mr. Rogers, Mrs. Whitman, and Joe Lewis. Mrs. Whitman "was placed upon a settee and carried out into the yard by Mr. Rogers and Jo Lewis. Having reached the yard, Jo dropped his end of the settee, and a volley of bullets" was shot at Mr. Rogers and Narcissa Whitman (Pringle 1860). Catherine's account is similar to most of the other first-person accounts in that she states that Mrs. Whitman was shot, but differs from most of them in that she does not mention Narcissa being beaten.

The accounts of how Narcissa Whitman was killed are most likely more accurate than the accounts of the death of Marcus Whitman because several of the people who wrote about the massacre were eye-witnesses to one, if not both, of the attacks on Mrs. Whitman. A comparison of the first-person accounts leads to the conclusion that Narcissa Whitman was in the living room of the mission house when she was shot in the breast from a distance, either through the door or window that she was looking out of at the time. The second attack on Narcissa occurred when the people in the mission house were being moved to the emigrant house. When Narcissa was carried outside she was shot again, and possibly beaten. Because two accounts name different people responsible for the first shooting of Narcissa, no conclusions can be made about who wounded her when she was inside the mission house.

The Death Count and Victims of the Massacre

The last two questions attempted to be answered through a comparison of first-person accounts of the Whitman Mission Massacre are how many people died, and what the names of these victims were.

Only two of the first-person accounts contain a statement on the exact number of people killed in the massacre. Eliza Spalding states that, “Dr. and Mrs. Whitman, with twelve of their associates were murdered,” and Catherine Sager recalls that after the massacre a “grave three feet deep and wide enough to receive the eleven victims was dug” (Warren 1916:11; Pringle 1860). The discrepancy in the number of victims in the massacre is not a phenomenon unique to the first-person accounts analyzed. Several history books and other references give varying numbers of people killed in the attack. One possible reason for the differences in the number of victims recorded is who was considered a victim of the massacre.

After the initial attack on the mission, the women and children were held captive for approximately one month before they gained their freedom. During this time period two men who were sick with the measles were beaten to death, and two children died from measles. Depending on how many, if any, of these dead are considered victims of the massacre, the death count can vary between 11 and 15 people. In order to better understand who were victims of the massacre the names of those recalled to have been killed were recorded for each of the seven first-person accounts.

Eliza Hall only mentions Mr. Hoffman, Mr. Whitman, and Mrs. Whitman as being killed in the massacre (Lansing 1993:101-102). The reason that Hall only lists three victims by name is probably due to the fact that her account was part of a court trial, and her statement consists of the answers she gave to questions asked of her. Josiah Osborn states in the letter to his family that Mr. Whitman, John Sager, Mr. Gillyean, Mr. Saunders, and Mr. Rogers were killed in the massacre (Littell 1848:66-67). In his court statement, Osborn also mentions that Mrs. Whitman was killed in the attack (Lansing 1993:103).

Eliza Spalding’s account of the massacre contains references to several people who were killed. Mr. Sanders, the eldest Sager boy (John), Mr. Hoffman, Mr. Sales, Mr. Rogers, Francis Sager, Mr. Whitman, Mrs. Whitman, and Mr. Himble, are all mentioned in Eliza Spalding’s memoir as having been killed in the initial attack. Spalding also mentions that nine days after the first attack, the Indians killed two men who were recovering from measles by beating them with war clubs (Warren 1916:23-24, 27). The total number that Spalding describes being killed is 11 people, three less than she states were killed in the massacre. This difference could either be an error in her memoir, an exclusion of the descriptions of three victims, or the result of counting the deaths of the children who died of measles and a man who disappeared after fleeing the mission as victims of the massacre.

In the statement that Elizabeth Sager gave during the Whitman Massacre trial only two victims are mentioned. Elizabeth states that she saw “Isiaashelukas... and Tom Sucky... attempting to throw down a Mr. Saunders” and that her brother was also killed in the attack (Lansing 1993:102). The reason that Elizabeth Sager’s statement in the *Bill of Exceptions* only mentions two victims is likely the result of her statement consisting of answers to questions asked of her. It is interesting to note that she does not refer to her brother by name and only mentions one of her brothers being killed that day. The mention of only one brother and the exclusion of his name could be due to an error in how her statement was recorded by the court.

The deaths of 12 people are described in Matilda Sager’s account: Mr. Sanders, Mr. Whitman, John Sager, Mrs. Whitman, Mr. Rogers, Frank Sager, Mr. Gillam, Mr. Kimball, Louise Sager, Helen Meek, Mr. Bewley, and Mr. Sales (Delaney 1920:15-22). Of those described in the account, Louise Sager and Helen Meek died of measles while held captive. Mr. Bewley and Mr. Sales were sick at the time of the first attack and were beaten to death once they started to regain their health, approximately one week after the first attacks. Depending on whether or not these four individuals are considered massacre victims, the number of massacre victims named by Matilda Sager can vary between eight and twelve people. If the two girls who died of measles are not considered to be victims of the Whitman Mission Massacre, the death count given by Matilda Sager is close to the number of deaths mentioned by Eliza Spalding.

Like the account of the massacre given by Eliza Spalding, Catherine Sager’s memoir describes the deaths of eleven victims. The massacre victims mentioned in Catherine Sager’s account are: Mr. Whitman, Mrs. Whitman, Mr. Hoffman, the miller, Mr. Hall, the tailor, John Sager, Francis Sager, Mr. Rogers, Mr. Kimball, and the teacher (Pringle 1860). Using other first-person accounts as references, the tailor can be identified as Mr. Gillyean, the teacher as Mr. Saunders, and the miller as Mr. Marsh (Littell 1848:66; Delaney 1920:15; Warren 1916:24). The account given by Eliza Spalding contradicts Catherine’s memoir concerning the death of Mr. Marsh, because Eliza states that “Mr. Marsh, at the grist mill, [the Indians] spared to run the mill for them” (Warren 1916:24).

It should be noted that Catherine never witnessed the death of Mr. Hall. In her memoir Catherine Sager writes that Mr. Hall wrestled a gun from an Indian before fleeing to a fort, likely Fort Walla Walla. Catherine continues to say that Mr. Hall, “was never seen or heard of afterwards, and it is surmised that he was murdered” on his way to the fort (Pringle 1860). Matilda Sager’s account also mentions Mr. Hall,

however she states that he had left the mission early in the morning on the day of the massacre to shoot ducks on the river, and “was never heard from or his body found, so no one knows his fate” (Delaney 1920:21). Because nobody witnessed the death of Mr. Hall, and it is not clear if he was at the mission when the massacre took place, he should not be considered a definite massacre victim. If Mr. Marsh and Mr. Hall are not included in the death count, Catherine Sager describes the deaths of nine victims, which is close in number to the total listed by Matilda Sager and Eliza Spalding.

A comparison of the first-person accounts of the Whitman Mission Massacre allows for a tentative list of the victims to be made. A list consisting of victims named by half or more of the first-person accounts includes eleven people: Marcus Whitman, Narcissa Whitman, Mr. Hoffman, Mr. Gillyean (the tailor), Mr. Saunders (the teacher), Mr. Rogers, John Sager, Francis Sager, Mr. Sales, Mr. Bewley, and Mr. Kimball. Mr. Sales and Mr. Bewley, the two men who were beaten to death approximately one week after the first attacks, are included in this list of massacre victims because their deaths were caused by the same Indians that committed the first attacks and held the survivors captive.

The deaths of Helen Meek and Louise Sager, the two girls who died of measles while in captivity, are not included in this list because it cannot be known if the stress induced by the massacre caused them to die rather than get well, or if they would have died regardless of the massacre. Finally, Mr. Hall and Mr. Marsh are not included in the list because the first-person accounts of the massacre do not agree if Mr. Hall was present at the time of the attacks or if Mr. Marsh was killed. The exclusion of Mr. Hall and Mr. Marsh leaves the combined death count of the massacre at eleven victims, which is very close to the number given in several of the first-person accounts. Variation in the number of massacre victims is most likely the result of including different people, such as Mr. Hall, Mr. Marsh, Mr. Sales, and Mr. Bewley, in the total number of victims.

Archaeological Applications of First-Person Accounts

Studying first-person accounts of the Whitman Mission Massacre has the potential to help archaeologists understand the mission site by providing details about how the mission buildings were constructed, and what each building was used for and who its occupants were. Additionally, first-person accounts can serve as supporting evidence for expected artifact locations and use, as well as a

guide for analyzing the remains interred in the mass grave at the mission.

Since its establishment as a National Park in 1936, three archaeological investigations have been conducted at the Whitman Mission. Between 1941 and 1950, Thomas Garth studied the “First House, Mission House, Emigrant House, Grist Mill, and Blacksmith Shop...although very little evidence of the Blacksmith Shop was discovered” (National Park Service 2007). Garth’s work led to the discovery of the foundations of the mission building, a better understanding of the construction techniques used at Waiilatpu, and the recovery of over 2,000 artifacts including “medical supplies, china shards, and metal fragments” (National Park Service 2007). The next excavation of the Whitman Mission, conducted by Paul Schumacher, took place between 1960 and 1961. Schumacher’s work was focused on locating the Blacksmith Shop as well as the grave of Alice Whitman, the daughter of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, who drowned in the Walla Walla River when she was almost two years old. While artifacts associated with the Blacksmith Shop were recovered, Schumacher was unable to establish the outline of the building; the search for Alice’s grave was also unsuccessful (National Park Service 2007).

The last archaeological investigation at the Whitman Mission used non-invasive geophysical techniques to verify the accuracy of the current building outlines for the “Mission House...and First House,” as well as attempt to locate the Grist Mill (National Park Service 2011b). The geophysical work conducted between 2005 and 2006 revealed previously unknown buried structures near the Pioneer Cemetery (National Park Service 2011b).

Analysis of the first-person accounts of the Whitman Mission Massacre can benefit archaeological investigations and analysis by providing insight into where the buildings at the mission were located relative to one another. Descriptions of what was seen from one building can be used to estimate where another building or activity area was located. All three of the archaeological investigations at the mission site focused on locating mission buildings; first-person descriptions of the mission would not only help with this endeavor but also provide insight into how each building was constructed. First-person accounts of the massacre can also be used to analyze artifacts recovered during excavations. The accounts of the Whitman Mission Massacre include descriptions of activities normally conducted in different areas of the mission. Understanding what activity areas existed can help archaeologists by providing the context in which

artifacts were used, and possibly suggest who was most likely to have used the artifacts.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of using first-person accounts of the Whitman Mission Massacre concerns the analysis of the remains interred in the mass grave at the site. The remains of the massacre victims have been disinterred twice; once in 1897 for commemoration and reburial, and again in 1983 in order to conduct repairs to the burial vault (Cannon and Hartley 2008:6; Beal 1989:42). Despite the lack of clear understanding of what occurred during the massacre, the remains of the victims have never been forensically analyzed (Beal 1989:42-43). Due to the ethical concerns regarding disinterment of human remains it is unlikely that the remains of the victims will be made available for analysis unless the grave is repaired again in the future. Should an opportunity to study the remains of the victims become available, first-person accounts of the massacre will be highly valuable resources for forming hypotheses and analyzing the remains. First-person accounts of the massacre do not only list *who* was killed but *how* they were killed. Knowing how many individuals were killed during the massacre can help forensic archaeologists predict how many individuals should be found in the mass grave. Information regarding how victims were killed can also aid in the identification of individual remains. Finally, a forensic study of the mass grave at the Whitman Mission could be used to verify first-person descriptions of the massacre, and the death count, by providing concrete evidence on how the victims were killed.

Conclusion

First-person accounts are useful in determining how events in the past occurred. The availability of more than one account can make understanding an event easier in some regards, but can be problematic if the accounts contradict each other. The Whitman Mission Massacre is a good case study for how to use first-person accounts of an event that differ in the information conveyed. Document and statement analysis are useful in determining the validity of accounts because they give a set of standards and expectations that honest statements should meet. Taking into consideration how soon after an event an account is given, as well as who the statement was intended for, can help researchers determine the validity of a statement. The first-person accounts of the Whitman Mission Massacre are also useful in demonstrating how to explain differences between accounts. Using document and statement analysis to understand the validity of first-person accounts, and comparing different recollections of the massacre,

has resulted in the following conclusions about how the massacre occurred.

The Whitman Mission Massacre took place on November 29, 1847, and began in the early afternoon. Life at the mission was continuing as normal that day; a beef was being dressed, an Indian burial was taking place, the mill was running, and children were in school. Despite the normality with which the day started there was an undercurrent of tension at the mission due to rumors of an Indian uprising and a large number of people sick from measles. The massacre began with the death of Marcus Whitman, which took place in the mission house kitchen; Marcus was shot and possibly tomahawked. Shortly after Marcus was killed the massacre erupted throughout the mission. Narcissa Whitman was shot in the chest from a distance while she was inside the mission house, and was killed when she was carried outside towards the emigrant house. In total, 11 people were killed as a result of the massacre. Further research into how the Whitman Mission Massacre took place can be conducted by examining additional first-person accounts of the massacre, as well as attempting to answer other questions than those addressed in this paper.

Analysis of first-person accounts can aid archaeologists in planning and interpreting archaeological investigations. Documents can be used to predict where activity areas were located, who the people associated with these areas were, and what artifacts may be found in each area. While first-person accounts may not always be accurate, they provide a starting place for developing archaeological questions, planning investigations, interpreting findings, and can be used as a point of comparison between what was known prior to excavation and what archaeology reveals about a site.

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