

Memorialized on Maps, Yet Forgotten

The Saga of Jacques Finlay

By Rick Hull



Display at Spokane House, the final resting place of Jaco Finlay.

Photo by Rick Hull

Most of us know something about the early explorers and fur traders who left their legacy on our geography. Lewis and Clark, David Thompson, Angus McDonald and John Mullan all have their names scattered across Montana and the Northwest.

But one person who stamped his name on local features is virtually unknown. His gravesite wasn't discovered until 1950 and his bones spent 26 years in a box at a museum.

Jacques Raphael Finlay, also known as Jaco Finlay, gave us the Jocko Valley, the Jocko River and the likely the misspelled Finley Point on Flathead Lake. There is also a Findlay Creek in British Columbia and a Findley Road in Idaho.

Part of the problem is Finlay left no journal, even though he was literate. Most of what we know about him is from references in other's accounts. Another issue is Finlay was of mixed race, with a Chippewa mother. But he was a respected employee of the North West Company, and paid as much as European-born fur traders.

Jaco Finlay was born about 1768 at a trading post established by his father, James Finlay, along the Saskatchewan River. Born in Scotland, James Finlay

already had a wife and family in Montreal, and his relationship with the woman of the Saukteaux tribe was never formalized.

Like many Canadian explorers, Jaco Finlay began his career as clerk in the fur trading business, working for the upstart North West Company. In 1794 he was stationed at the company's Upper Bow House in present Alberta, when the outpost was attacked. Finlay organized the defenders, driving off the attackers. "Our fort was in the charge of one Jaccot Finlay, a man of courage," was a later account of the fight. Jaco was 26 years old at the time.

His knowledge of the country and native languages was put to use in 1806 when he was sent to clear trail and prepare canoes for David Thompson's party. He sketched out a map of the area that later surfaced in Hudson Bay's Company archives – another document along the slim paper trail of his life.

By this time he was married with children. And he adopted another four when their mother died.

Thompson wasn't particularly happy with Finlay's trail blazing and canoes, complaining in a letter to

his superiors. Thompson may have been jealous, since he and Finlay were being paid the same.

In 1808 Thompson sent Finlay to build some more canoes and again criticized his work.

Relations improved when Finlay and his family found himself on foot when his horses were stolen. He guided Thompson's expedition down the Kootenai River into northern Idaho and western Montana.

It was then that Finlay settled in with the Flatheads for the winter in what would become his namesake territory. He saved the starving Thompson at Saleesh House near Thompson Falls with a gift of beaver tails and other meat.

Thompson put Finlay back on the payroll and sent him to build a new trading post, Spokane House, at the junction of the Spokane and Little Spokane Rivers in Washington. Finlay operated the trading post for six years and a hand-written receipt with his signature indicates that he was literate. He was being paid more than White clerks.

By this time his sons – known for their blue eyes – were spreading out in the fur trading business, while Finlay stuck close to Spokane House. One visitor was famed naturalist David Douglas, who has a tree bearing his name. Douglas's journal account was another piece of Finlay's paper trail.

Finlay died at Spokane House in May 1828. He was about 60 years old.

A later visitor to the trading post noted that the buildings had been burned for firewood, except for one bastion which was said to be the burial site of an early clerk. That was clue for archaeologists, who began excavating Spokane House in 1950. They found a wooden coffin with a few remaining bones. Among the items buried with body was a clay pipe with the marking “JF”.

The bones were stored in a box at the Eastern State Historical Society Museum during discussions about a proper burial.

The former trading post eventually became Spokane House State Park. A reburial at the state park was scheduled for July 25, 1976. But a last minute glitch developed, because it wasn't an official cemetery. It took a judge's quick approval and some paperwork to designate a spot as a cemetery. In a funeral ceremony, the bones of Joco Finlay were returned back exactly where he had originally lain.

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