

The Treaty Trail: U. S. - Indian Treaty Councils in the Northwest

TIMOTHY (TAMOOT SIN) CHIEF OF THE NEZ PERCE 1808-1891



This portrait of Timothy was created by Gustav Sohon.
Notice the cuffed shirt he wears.
Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

Timothy, or Tamootsin as he was known to his people, was a mild-mannered, sensitive man who holds the distinction of being the first Christian convert among the Nez Perce.

Arrival of the Missionaries

When Henry Spalding, missionary to the Nez Perce, arrived in Lapwai Valley in 1836, he quickly learned that in order to bring the natives to Christianity, he would have to encourage them to leave their semi-nomadic lifestyles behind. To accomplish this, he distributed seeds and hoes, and encouraged them to develop more agrarian lifestyles. Timothy was very receptive to this approach, and moving from his traditional home on Alpowa Creek to Lapwai, readily took up farming. He was taught to read and write in his native language by the missionaries.

Timothy was married to Tamer, a sister of Joseph the Elder, another Nez Perce Chief, who was baptized on the same day as Timothy. Joseph would later turn away from the white's religion, but Timothy remained a devout Christian for the rest of his life. He and a number of other warriors were responsible for the capture of the perpetrators of the Whitman Massacre of 1847.

The Walla Walla Treaty Council of 1855

In 1855, at the Walla Walla Treaty Council, Timothy and several other Nez Perce, meticulously recorded the words spoken. At one point in the proceedings Timothy states:

While we were assembled here yesterday, we heard that lands were staked off and white men were taking our homes. We tell you that this must stop. The country is still ours and our children's. What Lawyer has said is the heart of all the people.

The notes taken by the Indians never made it to the public record, however, and it is believed that Timothy's notes may have been ceremonially burned following his death.



This detail of Gustav Sohon's "May 1855, Walla Walla Council" painting shows one of the Nez Perce writing during the proceedings. It is believed that this image may be of Timothy acting as recorder for his tribe.
Courtesy Washington State

The Lapwai Council

At the Lapwai Council of 1863, when the Nez Perce chiefs came together once again to negotiate with the American government, Timothy was the only chief to sign the treaty whose lands lay outside the boundary set for the new reservation. Other chiefs whose lands were not in the new reservation, such as Joseph, refused to sign the agreement.

By Steamer to Washington, D.C.

Years went by, and still the Nez Perce did not receive any of what was owed them by the treaty terms. In 1868, government officials again wished change the terms of the treaty to provide some of the reservation lands to military forces. This time, rather than sending a delegation west to the Nez Perce, four chiefs - Lawyer, Timothy, Jason and Utsinmaliquan- were taken by steamer to New York City. Utsinmaliquan reportedly became ill, and died the day after they arrived in Washington, D. C. The remaining three chiefs signed a supplementary agreement giving reservation land to the military, in exchange for a promise from Congress to restore school funds that had purportedly been wasted by a series of Indian Agents.

Timothy, Lawyer and Jason returned to Idaho on the overland route, boarding a train on August 26, 1868. The train in which they rode crossed the Continental Divide on September 6th, and left its Nez Perce passengers at Bitter Creek, about sixty miles from the Green River. The remainder of the journey was made by stagecoach, and the chiefs arrived in Walla Walla on September 19th.

In the latter part of his life, Timothy appeared to live the life of a white man on his homestead outside the reservation. He died in 1891, an old man of more than eighty years.

Postmortem Honors

As a Nez Perce man who adopted Christianity and helped the U.S. Army, Timothy is more visible in mainstream history than many other Indian people.

In 1914, Chief Timothy of the Alpowa Band of Nez Perce was honored for his service to Steptoe and his men by the construction of a tall granite monument above the town of Rosalia, in Whitman County. The Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission also set aside 145 acres for a park named to honor the Nez Perce chief-Chief Timothy State Park-with a nearby Interpretive Center featuring an exhibit about Timothy's role in the Treaties of 1855 and 1863.

Sources:

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Joseph, Alvin M. *The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997.
Alcorn, Rowena L. *Timothy: A Nez Perce Chief, 1800-1891*. Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1985.



The image above shows an "Indian ticket" from the Northern Pacific Railroad issued in 1886. Such tickets were issued to Native Americans traveling by train. Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

