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Using Artifacts to Study the Past

Early Evidence for John Day Exploration

Dedicated to Keith Clark

“Was there ever an undertaking of more merit, of more hazard and more enterprising, attended with a greater variety of misfortune?”

— John Jacob Astor, letter to Ramsey Crooks,
reflecting on Astor’s expedition to the Pacific Northwest,
September 14, 1814¹

The Oregon Historical Society has recently acquired a basalt rock that may represent one of the earliest pieces of physical evidence of non-Native exploration in Oregon. Inscribed with the date “1811” and a cross, the light gray rock is triangular in shape, about twice the size of a basketball, and weighs about 120 pounds. In my judgment, this rock probably marks the nadir of what was already a star-crossed endeavor: the overland journey of the expedition sponsored by John Jacob Astor and led by Wilson Price Hunt in 1811–1812. The artifact, if genuine, could place some members of Hunt’s expedition about fifty miles farther west than previously thought and could teach us more about early Oregon exploration in general and the overland expedition of the Astor party in particular. The rock may also provide additional evidence that links John Day, a hunter with the expedition, with the river and region that bear his name.

I learned of the rock’s existence in early 1995 through a series of conversations with historian Keith Clark of Redmond. We talked about the propensity of explorers and pioneers to carve their names and the date in stone or wood. Clark



When a young boy found this rock near Bates, Oregon, in the mid-1940s, he may have stumbled on an artifact of early exploration.

told me about what he called “pioneer petroglyphs” in central Oregon and about those that have survived as powerful testimonies of the past. Two specific sites — one near Grizzly Mountain and the other near Paulina — are pioneer and cowboy registries carved in stone, with names and dates going back at least to the 1870s and continuing in some instances nearly to the present.²

Clark then gave me a black-and-white photograph of what he called a mystery rock, etched not with a name but with a date and what appeared to be a cross. From historian Lowell Tiller — Clark’s co-author of *The Terrible Trail: The Meek Cutoff, 1845* — he knew the general location of where the rock had been found, but there was little specific information. No one at the Oregon Historical Society knew about the rock or the photograph, and even the rock’s existence could not be verified. The trail was decidedly cool. After a number of phone calls, however, I finally located the family who had the rock and from them I was able to learn the story of its discovery.

Sometime around the summer of 1944, near the tiny mill town of Bates, Oregon, a ten-year-old boy was exploring the edge of a small pond adjacent to the headwaters of the Middle Fork of the John Day River. A smooth, light-colored rock, mostly covered in duff and pine needles, caught his eye. Upon closer in-

spection, the rock appeared to have writing carved into its surface. After cleaning the rock off with pond water, the boy saw a chiseled date and cross on the rock's surface. He apparently did not see any significance to the rock, and it was not until about twelve years later that the boy told anyone about his discovery. He and his father then moved the rock from its original location to their home in Bates, and it remained in the family's possession until the summer of 2003 when they donated it to the Oregon Historical Society.

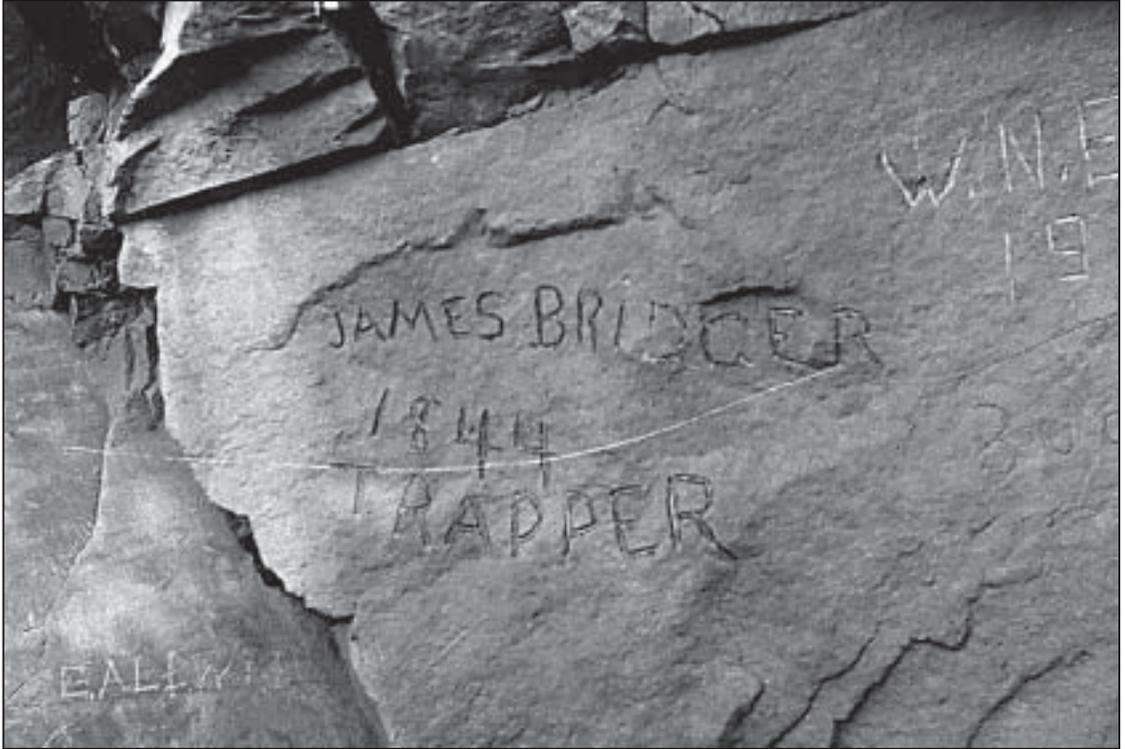
Realizing the potential significance of such a find, I wanted to answer the obvious questions of origin and motive: Who had carved the rock and why? Assuming that answering the first question might go a long way toward solving the second, I knew it was essential to take stock of just which explorers might have been in the upper John Day country in 1811. First, however, I wanted to investigate the likelihood of forgery and whether the John Day rock fit any accepted patterns of carvings made by explorers and pioneers.³

Early non-native explorers often marked their place on the western landscape. The journals of Lewis and Clark, for example, chronicle several instances in which expedition members carved their names for posterity. William Clark was the Corps of Discovery's most frequent artificer, carving his name at least twice on trees and, most famously, on Pompey's Pillar near present-day Billings, Montana, on July 25, 1806. On November 23, 1805, the entire party carved their names or initials into trees at Station Camp, across the Columbia River from present-day Astoria. They also memorialized their presence by carving their names into the logs of Fort Clatsop as they began their long journey back to the United States.⁴

Barely four years later, in the summer of 1810, Andrew Henry and a party of trappers in the employ of the Missouri Fur Company were chased westward across the Continental Divide by Blackfeet warriors. After building a collection of shelters that were later euphemistically termed "Fort Henry," this group apparently also carved reminders of their stay in present-day Idaho. One rock near St. Anthony is inscribed with the date 1811 along with some nearly indecipherable writing. Another rock, some twenty miles east near France Siding, appears to carry the date "SEPT 1810," along with what appears to be the words "CAMP HENRY."⁵

During the great western migration of the next generation, many overlanders recorded in stone their passage and presence in the West. Two of the best known and documented sites are Names Hill, a series of rock cliffs in Lincoln County, Wyoming, adjacent to the Oregon Trail, where over 2,700 inscriptions are recorded, and Independence Rock on the Sweetwater River, called by Father Pierre Jean De Smet "the register of the desert."⁶ Both sites contain inscriptions from early trappers and explorers, as well as later carvings from pioneer emigrants.

We can conclude, then, that it was common for early travelers to inscribe on rocks to record their presence, but what about carving crosses, such as the one that appears on the John Day rock? While not common, there are a number of



From early explorers to Oregon Trail pioneers, European Americans who traveled through the West often carved their names on natural features along the way. Names Cliff, forty miles north of Kemmerer, Wyoming, is inscribed with the names of Jim Bridger and many other emigrants who stopped to record their presence.

documented instances of rock carvings that use the cross motif. One found near Parowan, Utah, for example, includes a cross, some initials, and the date 1831. There are also what appear to be two weathered Christian crosses carved into the walls of Travertine Rock, near the Salton Sea in southern California.⁷ Kit Carson and John C. Frémont carved a cross in 1843 on what is now Fremont Island in the Great Salt Lake, and Frémont carved another cross on Independence Rock on the Sweetwater River in Wyoming.⁸ There is also a large, weathered cross pecked into the lava rock of Witch's Pocket in northern Arizona, perhaps left by Franciscan friars in an 1776 expedition north from Santa Fe.⁹ Thus, there is evidence that early explorers carved dates and crosses on rocks such as the one found at John Day.

Keith Clark had already speculated in print that a scouting party of John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company was responsible for inscribing a large boulder found along the Deschutes River south of Bend. Carved with the date 1813, along with many sets of initials and symbols, the boulder is now in the possession of the Deschutes County Historical Society. While not attempting to give a

definitive analysis, Clark suggested that a party led or sponsored by Astorian Donald McKenzie left their winter quarters on the Willamette River, crossed the Cascades near present-day McKenzie Pass into central Oregon, and marked their adventure by inscribing the large rock along the banks of what they called *La riviere deschutes*.¹⁰

Because only a date and a cross were carved on the John Day rock, it is doubtful that a stylistic analysis of the carving can date the artifact with any certainty. Nonetheless, the simple style of the carving is consistent with the form of writing found on pre-1840s rock carvings at other sites — extremely simple styles for numerals and symbols, not the block or cursive styles commonly used by later pioneers.¹¹ Employing archaeological techniques, the rock's inscription is difficult to date with any certainty. Both the date and the cross exhibit a fair amount of weathering and do not appear to be of recent origin. In corresponding with several archaeologists, I did learn that there are ways to determine the presence of tungsten in a petroglyph (tungsten is an alloy that hardens modern metals, such as steel), an indication that would indicate that both the carving implement and the petroglyph are of fairly recent origin. One archaeologist, however, made the point that the absence of tungsten would prove nothing, as the natural weathering process could have easily removed traces of the metal.

Finding that such a test could never prove the rock genuine, coupled with the significant expense involved, prompted me to examine other criteria that might speak to the rock's authenticity. For example, the John Day rock has an uncomplicated, almost easygoing provenance, which seems in character with a genuine historical artifact. The person who discovered the rock in 1944 told the same story of the rock's discovery throughout his life. When he died in the mid-1990s, the rock stayed in the family, passing to his sister who lives near John Day. In addition, there is none of the outrageous provenance of the Kensington Stone, for example, the rock tablet that purportedly chronicles Viking explorations of North America in the late Middle Ages. The John Day rock presents no claims of ancient civilizations or aliens touching down in the New World. Finally, neither the finder nor his family sought notoriety or fame for themselves or the rock. In fact, it took a fair amount of sleuthing to track the rock down at all.¹²

The location of the rock's discovery — near Bates, Oregon — seems to be another argument for the authenticity of the artifact. Members of the Wilson Price Hunt expedition did cross the Blue Mountains more or less along the route of what would later become the Oregon Trail (paralleling present-day Interstate 84). The location of the rock's discovery is far enough from Hunt's known route to be historically intriguing but not far enough away to rule the rock a forgery. Thus, when all the factors concerning the John Day rock are taken into account — the inscription, its fit in the overall category of such inscriptions, its provenance, the surrounding geography and history — it does seem as if the rock might be genuine. Still, John Jacob Astor was not the only person interested in the Pacific Northwest in 1811.

It is helpful when trying to identify who might have carved the John Day rock to engage in a process of elimination, that is, to look at which nations may have sent explorers into the region in 1811. As Sherlock Holmes was fond of remarking, “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.” Despite the fictional nature of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s detective, examining the known possibilities can be very helpful in narrowing the field of candidates. The catch, of course, is to identify all the possible parties.

A number of nations had cast covetous eyes toward the Pacific Northwest for some time, but desire had not translated into much action and only a few countries had sent explorations into the field. Early in the nineteenth century, Russia wanted to expand its trading interests south from Alaska and planned to colonize both Bodega Bay north of San Francisco and the mouth of the Columbia River. The Russians’ initial reconnoiter in the fall of 1808 failed, however, when the brig *Saint Nicholas* shipwrecked on the central Washington coast, spilling both cargo and passengers into the frigid surf. The survivors were eventually ransomed in 1810, effectively eliminating the possibility that Russians traveled into the John Day region the following year.¹³

Two other nations could have sponsored an expedition to the Oregon interior during 1811: Great Britain, which sent an expedition headed by the North West Company’s David Thompson, and Catholic Spain, which had sent various parties into the American West (the cross on the rock does temptingly suggest a religiously affiliated venture). There was also one private enterprise — the Hunt expedition, sponsored by American industrialist and fur-trade mogul John Jacob Astor.

To take them in turn, there is no indication that Thompson’s 1811 canoe voyage down the Columbia River — his “Journey of a Summer Moon” — deviated from the river’s course, nor is there evidence that he made any forays into Oregon’s Blue Mountains from his post on the Spokane River. Thompson confined his southern interior explorations to journeys across the bunchgrass steppes of what is now eastern Washington, as a shortcut to Spokane House.¹⁴

Spain had its chances to extend its influence into the Pacific Northwest and wanted to hold onto its claim between Nootka Sound on the British Columbia coast and the desert regions of present-day New Mexico, but its days of glory and power were fading quickly. By the early nineteenth century, Spain had spread its colonial resources too thin to mount a serious expedition to the interior of the Pacific Northwest. Thomas Jefferson, in fact, worried that Spain might be “too feeble” to hold the territories they did have until the United States could gain them piecemeal. As Bernard DeVoto put it, “The Spanish Empire was dying and Spain was very sick.”¹⁵

Spain was not quite ready to concede its western claims, however. The Spanish crown wanted to stop the expedition of Lewis and Clark, believing — quite rightly, as it turned out — that Jefferson and the United States government ex-

pected more from the Corps of Discovery than the classification of exotic plants and animals. In a close study of the relevant archives, Warren Cook concludes that Spain dispatched no fewer than “four successive expeditions from Santa Fe” to try to stop the captains, coming within 140 miles of the expedition’s route in what is now Nebraska. These efforts sapped the remaining strength of the Spanish presence. The intercepting forces were large, cumbersome, and expensive and were hampered by desertions, lack of supplies, horse thieves, and uncooperative Natives.¹⁶ It seems clear that Spain did not have the resources or the energy to mount an official expedition to the John Day country in 1811.

There is one Spanish account that, although it straddles the line between history and legend, is intriguing enough to mention. In 1821, adventurer William Davis Robinson claimed that while in Mexico he had been shown a manuscript that chronicled two friars’ exploration up the Colorado River during 1810–1811. After reaching the headwaters, the friars supposedly ventured west to a “spacious lake” from which issued “two fine rivers.” They descended the larger of the two — describing it as “deep, and in many places, a mile in width” — to the Pacific. Because of the friars’ utterly fantastic descriptions of the flora and fauna in the Colorado drainage and the harsh geographic realities of the region (sheer distance and cruel topography), even Robinson admitted that “some portion” of the tale might not be true. Nonetheless, he was convinced that Spanish friars had made some sort of expedition from the upper Colorado to the Pacific, and he had “no doubt” that they emerged on the coast at about 43°30’ north latitude.¹⁷ There exists no major stream on the Oregon coast at that position, however; that location is actually between the Rogue and Umpqua rivers. In terms of a “spacious lake,” both Crater and Klamath lakes are somewhat close, but Crater Lake has no river outlets and the outlet for Klamath Lake empties into the Pacific far south of the friars’ supposed location. Despite the fascinating possibility of religious mendicants carving crosses in their wanderings, the available evidence simply cannot be made to fit with the geography and topography of the upper reaches of the John Day.

Having eliminated Great Britain, Russia, and Spain from consideration, then, it seems most likely that someone in the Astor party carved the date and cross on the rock. Out of the dozens of men who struggled up the Missouri River, down the Snake, and then over the Blue Mountains, who are the most likely candidates?

When John Jacob Astor decided to finance both a land and a sea expedition to the northwestern reaches of the continent to put a stranglehold on both the North American fur trade and the trade routes to China, prospects could hardly have been brighter for success. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark had just returned from the Pacific Northwest and reported large numbers of beaver and friendly Natives; and Astor was successfully luring experienced men away from the North West Company to be part-

ners and clerks in the new venture, bankrolling the project to the tune of \$400,000 (about \$4.5 million in today's dollars).¹⁸ Astor could be forgiven if he envisioned himself as a modern-day Colossus, with one foot in the lucrative Northwest and the other in the Orient. The great first step of the enterprise was a two-pronged expedition to the Northwest: the brig *Tonquin* would sail around the Horn to supply the nascent settlement at the mouth of the "Great River of the West," and Wilson Price Hunt would lead an expedition up the Missouri and over the Rocky Mountains, introducing trapping to the Natives who lived inland from the Pacific Ocean.

From the first, however, there were cracks in the foundation, some of which widened dangerously with time. Astor had chosen the irascible Captain Thorn to guide the *Tonquin*, and his temper would contribute to the ship's later demise off the coast of present-day British Columbia. Wilson Price Hunt had little frontier experience and was probably not the best choice to lead a rigorous overland expedition. Hunt's ultimate westward route over the Rockies and beyond was ill-chosen, mating canoe-savvy voyageurs with a wild, unknown river that utterly defied their efforts. Finally, the already simmering tensions between the United States and Great Britain would erupt into a war — hardly foreseeable even by the great Astor — making it a dubious plan to have British subjects watching out for his decidedly American interests a continent away. All four of these factors would contribute to the eventual failure of Astor's grand plan.¹⁹

With the aid of hindsight, former Astorian and clerk Alexander Ross not surprisingly labeled the entire Astor enterprise an "ill-omened" undertaking. Although the Astor expedition was responsible for such important developments as helping to solidify American claims for the Oregon Country and the discovery of South Pass, the loss of life was appalling: out of the 144 people who comprised the Astorian venture, 27 would die on either land or sea. When 38 additional fatalities are taken into account — from sailors on the two doomed ships that either transported Astorians or supplied the post — it may have felt as if a divine curse hovered over the expedition. Certainly, members of Hunt's overland party had every reason to think so when the venture sputtered to a halt on the Snake River in present-day southern Idaho on November 1, 1811.²⁰

The Snake and its basalt-toothed rapids were a far cry from the woodland rivers of the East, defying every attempt at navigation. Upon encountering what some Canadian voyageurs had already labeled *La maudite riviere enragee*, "the accursed mad river," Hunt's party realized that it had been a horrible mistake to exchange their horses for canoes. Ramsay Crooks was quickly dispatched up the river to recover the animals. An intelligent and ambitious young man, Crooks had been a great catch for Astor and would later dominate the North American fur trade for half a century. But in November 1811, his mission was horses. When he returned to the group on November 4, he reported that the mountainous terrain and cruel winter weather had rendered it impossible for him to reach their horses on foot.²¹



At Cauldron Linn, near present-day Burley, Idaho, the Astor expedition came to grief and gave up attempting to navigate the Snake River by canoe.

Thus, near Caldron Linn, the frothing maelstrom just below some of the worst rapids, the Astor expedition splintered into five separate parties, all desperately trying to reach the Columbia River on their own. Their subsequent lines of march serve to eliminate three of the groups as inscribers of the rock found in the upper John Day. Separate groups headed by John Reed, Donald McKenzie, and Robert McClellan left the Snake at this point, rejoined farther downstream, and struggled through the mountains of Idaho. They bypassed northeastern Oregon altogether, taking the Clearwater River to the Snake and eventually the Columbia and arriving in Astoria in January 1812, lucky to be alive.²² Because this group never crossed Oregon's Blue Mountains and were never close to the rock's location, they can be eliminated as the inscribers of the rock.

Therefore, we should look for the rock carver in either the party headed by expedition leader Wilson Price Hunt or the party led by Ramsay Crooks. Both groups started downstream on foot on November 9 — Hunt's group (consisting of twenty-two people) on the right bank and Crooks's (consisting of nineteen people) on the left. From this point forward, the record gets murkier, and our historical judgments and analyses must become less certain. Extant diaries and firsthand accounts sometimes conflict and are often maddeningly vague regarding crucial geographical details.

Hunt's party struggled down the riverbed of the Snake and did not cross over to the left bank (the side of the river in present-day Oregon) until December 23, 1811, where they picked up most of Crooks's group, who had also kept "as near to the banks as possible."²³ When Hunt left the Snake for good on Christmas Eve, somewhere near present-day Weiser, Idaho, he also left behind Ramsay Crooks, John Day, and four Canadian voyageurs — Dubreuil, Turcotte, La Chapelle, and Landry.

As Hunt's party plodded through the snowy Blue Mountains, there is one event that might have prompted the men to carve a date and a cross on the rock: the death of the week-old child of Marie Dorion, the wife of Pierre Dorion. Marie Dorion was responsible for two additional children (aged two and four), and she had won the admiration of the hardened men with her stoic fortitude. It is certainly plausible that even explorers in a hurry would take the time to carve a simple marker for the infant, but both time and place are against it. According to Hunt, the Dorion baby died on January 7, 1812, near present-day North Powder, far to the northeast of the upper John Day.²⁴

Could the rock have been inscribed to commemorate the infant's birth on December 30, 1811? Although the date on the rock fits, such a conclusion would call for a fairly dramatic re-working of Hunt's route through the Blue Mountains. When comparing Hunt's journal with both topographic maps and my own on-site observations, it seems that his party stayed close to what would become the Oregon Trail. This is the conclusion of both Philip Ashton Rollins, who edited the journals of Astorian Robert Stuart, and Stuart himself.²⁵ Unless more



In the Burnt River valley at Durkee — shown here looking west — Ramsay Crooks and John Day went up the valley instead of taking the Native trail, which breaks off of the river to the northwest.

detail comes to light on Hunt's precise route through the Blue Mountains, it is difficult to place any of his party near the headwaters of the John Day River.

We know that the four Canadian voyageurs ended up on the east bank of the Snake River when Hunt began his trek and that they were picked up on that side the following season, never having risked a trip through the Blue Mountains in 1811. That leaves Ramsay Crooks and John Day. The pair is unaccounted for from December 11, 1811, until April 15, 1812, when they appeared on the Columbia near the mouth of the Umatilla River. Washington Irving claimed that Crooks "remained twenty days" along the Snake, after being last seen by Hunt on December 11. If this account is accurate, then Crooks can be eliminated as an inscriber. But Irving is merely repeating the account of naturalist John Bradbury, who never crossed the Rockies on the expedition, and Bradbury's story lacks the voice and

specificity of a firsthand narrative. His account reads more like a thirdhand summary *about* Crooks than a memoir *by* him.

Alexander Ross's account of the winter ordeals of Crooks and Day, however, speaks entirely in the first person, with all the immediacy and detail expected from someone who was there (Ross even labels it "Mr. Crooks' account").²⁶ In his *Adventures*, it is clear that only Crooks and Day are present, with Crooks repeatedly crediting "Providence" for aiding them at every turn. The Ross text also suggests that the pair may not have stayed as long near the Snake River as Irving claims.²⁷ Still, how would Crooks and Day have ended up on the upper reaches of the John Day River? It is possible that they simply missed the trail.

Having been told of the route by a group of Shoshones at the Snake River, Crooks and Day would have followed Hunt's footsteps along the Snake and up the Burnt River, probably making camp somewhere in the steep river canyon. Hiking up the river, they would have emerged from the canyon near present-day Durkee. It was there that they may have made a fateful mistake. At that location, the trail bends to the northwest, ascending Prichard Creek (and paralleling present-day Interstate 84); but if winter snows had covered Hunt's track, Crooks and Day easily could have missed the turnoff and stuck to the main course of the Burnt River. It would *seem* logical to assume that the trail would follow the main river rather than head up a minor creek.

Some support for this hypothesis is found in Hunt's journal. When Hunt's party reached the Grand Ronde Valley north of present-day Durkee on December 30, they were cheered to find six lodges of Shoshones and many horses taking advantage of the milder weather at the lower elevation. Crooks never mentions seeing lodges or horses, which makes sense if he and Day had mistakenly kept to the Burnt River drainage. The two men never would have seen them.

If this account is correct, then it may have seemed too late for Crooks and Day to do anything about their error when they finally realized they had missed the trail. They probably had no idea where they had gone wrong. Following the Burnt River upstream, they would have passed near present-day Unity, about seventy miles west from the Snake River where four streams come together to form the main channel. There, it would have seemed reasonable to ascend the West Fork, with its northwesterly course and surprisingly gentle grade over the summit into present-day Grant County. At that point, if the pair had walked nearly straight west, down what are now Road and Summit creeks, they would have been near the headwaters of the upper John Day River, where the rock was found. Therefore, if we accept the idea that Crooks and Day missed a rather obscure turnoff at present-day Durkee and followed instead the main course of the Burnt River, they would have had a straightforward trek to the location of the rock's discovery.

Depending on their precise route from the Snake River, Crooks and Day would have had to walk anywhere from eighty to ninety miles to the rock's location. Traveling an average of eleven to twelve miles per day — their average even while

Crooks was sick — they could have covered the distance in a little over a week. Assuming they stayed some ten days along the Snake before heading out, they easily had the time to make the distance during 1811. The question remains: What could have been the pair's motivation for carving the date and cross on the rock?

Four possibilities suggest themselves. First, in the early non-Native exploration of the West, carving or erecting a cross was the calling card of a cultural empire that saw itself as under a divine mandate. A wide spectrum of specific applications fit this type, ranging from overtly religious to more cultural expressions exhibited by laity. When Escalante recorded that Don Joaquin Lain cut two crosses in a cottonwood tree during their journey, for example, it was the sign of a new faith in a new land, announcing to the inhabitants that the Catholic Church had arrived.²⁸ People also carved crosses as part of a broader cultural custom, a way for laity to exhibit their faith within their own vocation. In that practice, the cross became more a reassuring presence than a representation of the “Church militant.” A story in the 1873 *Catholic Sentinel* describes two little girls lost in the woods who come across a large cross in a clearing. After praying at its foot, the girls find their way safely home. According to the accompanying article, crosses should be planted “along the public roads and mountain passes,” so that travelers might be “shielded from danger in their journey, or that the business on which they are traveling may be prosperous.”²⁹ The cross assumes a protective or supportive role, and carving a cross became a way to help assure the success of a difficult venture.

This may be what motivated John C. Frémont to carve a cross on Independence Rock in 1842. Exploring an unknown country, with both health and success in the balance, Frémont not only announced his presence to the world but also sought divine protection and guidance for his expedition. On August 23, 1842, near Independence Rock, Frémont wrote: “Here, not unmindful of the custom of early travelers and explorers in our country, I engraved on this rock of the Far West a symbol of the Christian Faith.”³⁰ This custom made room for both piety and worldly ambition and is one plausible explanation of why Crooks may have carved such a cross on the rock at John Day.

The second possible motivation for Crooks's carving a cross — related to the first — is that he was marking for posterity his belief that Divine Providence was protecting him and Day. The winter of 1811–1812 was a nightmare for the entire Astor overland expedition but especially for this pair. The lives of both men were despaired of along the Snake, and it must have seemed like the cruelest of torments to be left behind while Hunt's withered party continued on without them.³¹ When Crooks later related how he and Day survived their nightmarish ordeal, he made it clear that he believed it was only through God's help. “Divine Providence,” he said, sent two Natives to them who built a fire and gave them water and food. And even more telling, they prevented Crooks and Day from eating the poisonous roots they had gathered. Crooks later remembered: “If we



Crooks and Day should have followed Prichard Creek, which proceeds along the right side of this photograph. Instead, they headed straight up the valley toward the mountains in the background.

had a fire, those very roots would have been our first food, for we had nothing else to eat; and who can tell but the hand of a kind and superintendent Providence was in all this?”³² It is certainly possible that Crooks carved the cross to celebrate deliverance from death’s hand.

Third, the rock may represent a memorial of sorts, a last act of desperate men. It would seem, however, that such a context demands that the rock contain their names or at least their initials. That was the case when Astorian Ross Cox was lost and carved his name on rock cairns and also when the famous “Lost Wagon Train,” guided by Stephen Meek through Oregon’s High Desert in 1845 carved a record of their wandering in the branch of a large juniper. Inscribed “1845, Lost, Meeks” accompanied by what appears to be an arrow indicating direction, the juniper limb is a poignant reminder of that ill-fated train.³³

Fourth, Crooks and Day, despite their ordeal, may have taken the time to carve the date and cross on the rock to mark either Christmas or the passing of the year. Voyageurs, explorers, and trappers often celebrated holidays in the wilderness with gunfire and by doling out rations of any ardent spirits that might



This photo shows the pond near Bates, Oregon, where in the mid 1940s a young boy found a rock — inscribed with a cross and the date 1811 — that could provide evidence of early white exploration of the John Day country.

be present. The men of the Corps of Discovery, suffering through the rains and fogs of a Fort Clatsop winter, awakened Meriwether Lewis on January 1, 1806, “by a discharge of a volley of small arms” to mark the new year, but made to do with “pure water” to slake their thirst.³⁴ Even such minor revelry served — if nothing else — to remind the explorers that they belonged *somewhere* and that they could bring something familiar from the world they left behind. Such celebrations boosted morale.

In that horrible winter for the Astor expedition, we do not have to look far to see this very human behavior. Hunt’s journal records that even his beleaguered band, as it struggled along the frozen Grand Ronde River, insisted that they celebrate New Year’s Day 1812 by resting for the day.³⁵ Crooks and Day, huddled together some fifty miles to the southwest, could have done something similar, marking the end of what had been a very trying year. It is also worth noting that it is possible that the pair’s sufferings may have affected their ability to discern the precise dates of their wanderings. When telling his story later, Crooks admitted that the date of his and Day’s appearance at the mouth of the Umatilla River

on April 15 may not be precise but was “according to our reckoning.”³⁶ Such looseness in date-keeping is certainly understandable for men in their condition and would also serve to explain how a 1811 date might be carved on a rock during the first few days of 1812.

If Crooks and Day were in the upper John Day drainage during the last few days of 1811, it would help explain how the pair managed to wander “to and fro” throughout the Blues over the winter.³⁷ If they decided to walk due north from the rock’s location — guessing correctly that they were south of the trail — then they likely would have crossed Tipton Summit and then found themselves on the North Fork of the Burnt River, heading back the way they had come. Given the topography and elevation of the region, there is every likelihood that they wandered from drainage to drainage, blocked by steep, impassible canyons and with extreme weather limiting their days of travel. We do know that they made it to the “Umatallow” River, but we do not know whether they used McKay Creek to get there (as the traditional trail does) or another tributary of the Umatilla, such as Bear or Birch creek.

Looking at all of the evidence, it seems probable that it was Ramsay Crooks who carved the date and cross on the rock, with John Day right there beside him, fewer than two miles from the stream that would later bear his name. Unless more primary sources come to light, however, it cannot be stated with certainty.

Assuming the artifact is genuine, the inscribed rock remains a mute witness to the Astorians’ ordeal of 1811–1812 and to the torments of Ramsay Crooks and John Day, whose trials were not over even when they reached the Columbia. Unfriendly Natives downstream robbed them of all possessions and clothes, sending them naked back up the river. It is hardly surprising, then, that neither man had much of a taste for Oregon after that. Day went mad and Crooks resigned his partnership, his enthusiasm for Astor’s venture as broken as his health. In a very real sense, then, the John Day rock calls us to examine the heavy price that was paid for the exploration of the Oregon Country on *all* sides: madness, suffering, and death for those who came and the irreplaceable loss of culture from those who were here.

The rock is also a reminder of some essential virtues that Crooks and Day possessed. There is no question that the Astorians have left their mark on Oregon through their descriptions of the landscape, their accounts of expeditions, their courage in the face of physical and emotional difficulties, and their loyalty to each other. Theirs is a legacy worth remembering. The rock — if it is an artifact of Crooks’s and Day’s ordeal, as I think it is — serves as a poignant and personal reminder that even in the face of severe sickness, desperate hunger, and the abject misery of the biting cold, Hunt and Crooks would not desert each other. Artifacts such as the rock found in the upper John Day can put flesh and blood to sterile names on a page and tell us something about the character of the people who created them.

The rock can also act as a link between early non-Native exploration of the upper John Day and the land itself. The Astorians' story happened there, and the landscape can help us understand that story more fully. Historians have written a great deal over the last several years about the "power of place," and American Indians' beliefs have connected humans to the land for millennia.³⁸ Part of the lesson of the John Day rock comes from an acknowledgment that such a connection can be felt among the Ponderosa pines near a small pond in eastern Oregon. When we understand more about what happened *on* the land, we can understand more *about* the land. Even if definitive proof of the authorship of the rock carving continues to elude historians, the importance of the artifact — in teaching us more about the land and about ourselves — is secure for the continuing study of Oregon history.

Notes

1. Quoted in James Ronda, *Astoria and Empire* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), xiii.

2. It is possible that at least two dates at the Grizzly Mountain site are earlier, but erosion of the soft rock has made precise identification difficult if not impossible.

3. There have been numerous archaeological forgeries in America, including the infamous Kensington Rune Stone in Minnesota, which some have claimed was a record of an early Viking exploration to North America. Most archaeologists, however, have judged that the stone is a nineteenth-century forgery. Archaeologists have also debunked stones carved with Hebrew characters in Ohio, the Davenport Tablets found in Iowa, and the Grave Creek Stone in West Virginia, a rock carved with supposed Semitic characters at a burial site. See the book review essay by Ronald Hicks in *Archaeology* 44:4 (July–August 1991): 70–6.

4. Clark also carved his name into trees while exploring on his own. On November 19, 1805, he "marked" his name and date "on a Small pine," and on December 3, 1805, he carved his name and date on a "large Pine tree." See Gary Moulton, ed., *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 6:81, 70, 106–7.

5. See Miles Cannon, "The Snake River in History," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 20:1 (March 1919): 6–8. For bringing these additional rocks to my attention, I am grateful to archivist Geoffrey Wexler of the Oregon Historical Society, Ken Swanson of the Idaho Historical Society, and Darryl Reinke of Idaho State

University. The 1810 rock is *in situ* and is protected by a simple wooden shelter. Both artifacts are generally thought to be genuine.

6. See Don Southworth et al., *An Archaeological Inventory of the Names Hill Registry and Bureau of Reclamation Lands Adjacent to the Green River, Lincoln County, Wyoming*, vols. 1, 2, Technical Series no. 91-3 (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1991); Charles Kelly, "Autographs in Stone," *The Desert Magazine* 6 (June 1943): 9–12. Also see Robert Spurrier Ellison, *Independence Rock* (Fairfield, Wash.: Ye Gallean Press, n.d.).

7. Kelly, "Autographs in Stone," 12; Walter Ford, "Treasure at Travertine Rock?" *The Desert Magazine* 32 (February 1971): 10–12, 20. The two cross petroglyphs at Travertine may represent the "actual figure Quetzalcoatl" rather than the Christian cross. See Alex Pattersen, *A Field Guide to Rock Art Symbols of the Greater Southwest* (Boulder, Colo.: Johnson Books, 1992), 76.

8. Charles Kelly, "'We Cut a Cross' Wrote Kit Carson," *The Desert Magazine* 5 (February 1942): 22; Frémont, August 23, 1842, in *The Life of Colonel John Charles Frémont, and his Narrative of Explorations and Adventures, in Kansas, Nebraska, Oregon, and California* (New York: Auburn, Miller, Orton, & Mulligan, 1856), 173.

9. The Escalante expedition is not to be confused with the later Spanish venture, mentioned later in this article. Escalante's extant diary records that his party carved other crosses — and places the party in the vicinity of the cross. For the carved cross attributed

to the Escalante expedition, see Earl Spendlove, "This Cross Found at Witches' Pocket May Be the Last Remaining Testimony of Escalante's Trek," *The Desert Magazine* 27 (June 1964): 17. For more information, see Bernard DeVoto, *The Course of Empire* (New York: First Mariner Books, 1998), 189–96, 594–5.

10. See Keith Clark, "Travelers at the Deschutes," letter to the editor, *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 77 (March 1976): 79–81. Neither the boulder in Bend nor the rock near John Day would mark the only instance that a member of the Astor expedition took the time to carve such a record. Ross Cox, an apprentice clerk with the company, created rock cairns and scratched his name in some of the rocks while he was lost in the desert in what is now eastern Washington. See Russ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River* (Portland, Ore.: Binford and Mort, n.d.), 38.

11. See Southworth et al., *Archaeological Inventory*, 1:46–7, then compare photo of an 1827 date on 2:E-7 to the date 1811 on the John Day rock.

12. My informant for the circumstances of the rock's discovery is a family member, who (along with another family member) also reports the consistency of the discoverer's story. Also, it is unlikely that a ten-year-old boy would have the requisite sophistication, historical knowledge, and motive to create such an artifact — only to land it fifty miles from where it should have been. Given that the Astor Company's route through the Blues had always been thought to have paralleled the later Oregon Trail, it would seem more likely that forgeries would appear where people *thought* they should appear, that is, near Baker City rather than Bates.

13. Warren L. Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire: Spain and the Pacific Northwest, 1543–1819* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1973), 500–501.

14. Jack Nisbet, *Sources of the River: Tracking David Thompson across Western North America* (Seattle: Sasquatch, 1995), 225–6.

15. Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire*, 446; DeVoto, *Course of Empire*, 427. See also Robert F. Jones, ed., *Astorian Adventure: The Journal of Alfred Seton, 1811–1815* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993), 10–11.

16. Cook, *Flood Tide of Empire*, 479, 485.

17. See "Spanish Friars in the Oregon Country, 1810–1811," *Washington Historical Quarterly* 10 (1919): 144–52.

18. Charles Gates, ed., *Readings in Pacific Northwest History: Washington 1790–1895* (Seattle, Wash.: University Bookstore, 1941), 41, quoting Kenneth Porter, *John Jacob Astor, Business Man*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931) 1:164ff.

19. Although Astor could not have foreseen the war itself, he knew, as all business and government leaders did, that political tensions dictated that it was a gamble to place American capital in the hands of British managers in disputed territory. He lost the bet. Historians have long debated whether turning over Astoria to the North West Company in October 1813 was a sellout or a "fire sale" making the most out of an impossible situation.

20. As Hunt says on November 1, the "situation became critical." See Philip Ashton Rollins, ed., *The Discovery of the Oregon Trail: Robert Stuart's Narratives of His Overland Trip Eastward from Astoria in 1812–13* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 292. All of Hunt's diary is found in the book's appendix.

21. *Ibid.*, 293.

22. See J. Neilson Barry "The Trail of the Astorians," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 13:3 (September 1912): 233; Washington Irving, *Astoria* (Portland: Binford & Mort, 1967), 292–4. Regarding more specific details of this party's route through the Seven Devils Range in Idaho, I have in my possession a 1922 letter and Idaho map, written by University of Idaho professor C.J. Brosnan, discussing several alternatives, all in Idaho and far from the upper John Day region.

23. Irving, *Astoria*, 267.

24. Rollins, ed., *Discovery of the Oregon Trail*, 301–2.

25. *Ibid.*, 81.

26. Alexander Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River, 1810–1813* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 189–90.

27. A close reading of the Ross text reveals that the "Snake Indians" "soon departed" from Crooks and Day, that they were then clearly alone (without any Canadian voyageurs), and that sequential events — following quickly upon each other — indicate they did not tarry by the banks of the Snake River. See Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers*, 189–90.

28. Spendlove, "This Cross Found at Witches' Pocket," 17. Catholic Fathers often erected large crosses in their missionary endeavors in the West as reminders of their religion for the Natives, sometimes to stand in for the priests themselves. For two such instances in the Northwest, see *The Catholic Sentinel* 9:1 (July 8, 1878): 1.

29. "The Cross by the Wayside," *The Catholic Sentinel* 4:15 (May 16, 1873): 6.

30. *Life of Colonel John Charles Frémont*, 173. Frémont and Kit Carson also carved a cross on what is now Fremont Island in the Great Salt Lake.

31. For Hunt's comments on Crooks and his own inner torments as his party disintegrates, see Rollins, ed., *Discovery of the Oregon Trail*, 195–300.

32. Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers*, 189–90.

33. See Keith Clark and Lowell Tiller, *The Terrible Trail: The Meek Cutoff, 1845* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1966): 103. The limb now resides in the Deschutes County Museum in Bend, Oregon.

34. Moulton, ed., *Journals*, 6:153.

35. Rollins, ed., *Discovery of the Oregon Trail*, 301.

36. Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers*, 190.

37. See *ibid.*, 189–90, for the complete account.

38. As James Ronda puts it, in an elegant tale about the lower Columbia, "The most compelling stories begin not with people but with places," found in "Cobway's Tale: A Story of Power and Places along the Columbia," *Power and Place in the North American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 3.