Oregon Story of Statehood

ON A COOL MARCH DAY in 1856, Yakama, Klickitat, and Cascade Indian raiders burned Fort Cascades on the Columbia River's north shore near present-day Stevenson, Wash., and killed fourteen settlers and three soldiers. The attack shockd the gorge's pioneers and seemed to underscore their need for military protection. But it also was not surprising that once powerful Indian groups, marginalized to the outermost fringes of ancestral rangeland they had occupied for millennia, would in desperation resort to violence against the newcomers and the men the United States sent to defend them.

Fort Cascades was one of three U.S. Army forts built between Stevenson, Washington and North Bonneville beginning in 1855, the same year that U.S. Indian agents brokered treaties with Columbia River Indian people, removing them to remote reservations. The nearby Cascade Rapids had long been a site of conflict between fur traders and settlers and the band of Cascade Indians that demanded compensation from travelers who portaged them. But non-Native fur trappers and settlers often defied Indian supremacy. The takeover at the Cascades was an effort to reassert authority over a land that, in a few short decades, had ceased being in the control of Native people.

One year later, in 1857, Willamette Valley American settlers would hold the Oregon Constitutional Convention, and voters would adopt a state constitution. The proximity of these events is important. Between 1809 and 1859, Oregon's Indian people found their cultural, economic, and political influence diminishing inversely to the rising influence of the region's newcomers. By 1850, moreover, historians estimate that between 50 and 90 percent of Indian people in Oregon had died from disease compounded by an American rush for land and gold. The attack on Fort Cascade could not slow or reverse the conquest of American power, enshrined in a state's constitution the following year. Americans, who had no reason to assume that Oregon Country would make its way into the union in 1809, had a secure grasp on the territory by 1859.

In 1809, the most prominent buildings in what is now Oregon were the massive Chinookan plankhouses that lined the Pacific coast and lower Columbia River. Coastal Indians were wealthy, given the abundance of food in the estuaries and woodlands that surrounded them; anthropologists often refer to them as "affluent foragers." Communities were hierarchically organized into chiefs and their families, commoners and slaves who were often captured from neighboring tribes. A Clatsop village at Point Columbia, where the Columbia River empties

into the Pacific Ocean, boasted eight magnificent structures that housed a thriving community of 100, including a Clatsop leader named Coboway. Like many of the region's Indian leaders, Coboway was a consummate businessman who found increased prosperity in his dealings with American and British traders. He forged relationships with the men of the Lewis and Clark expedition when they wintered at Fort Clatsop in 1805-1806. When American entrepreneur John Jacob Astor sent his Pacific Fur Trade Company employees to construct the first American fort in Oregon Country at the site of present day Astoria in 1811, their arrival meant possible increased wealth for Coboway, not a reversal of fortune for his people. Peaceable relations, including marriages between Indian women and fur trading men, characterized the fur trade era. It was a new economy that was an extension of a Native trade economy in many ways. Unlike the missionaries who would arrive in a few short years, fur traders had no interest in fundamentally altering Native social or political practices.

When the British Hudson's Bay Company established its Columbia District headquarters near the confluence of the Willamette and Columbia rivers in 1825, fur traders and their Indian allies governed the Oregon Country with an eye toward profit. They integrated the region into a global trade network that revolved around turning abundant Pacific Northwest beaver pelts into fashionable top hats. Overseeing 600 employees at 34 outposts was Columbia District chief factor John McLoughlin, arguably the region's most powerful man. International treaties in the 1820s secured the region from Spain and Russia for Great Britain and the United States who signed a joint occupation agreement in 1818. The agreement was renewed until 1846, when the British finally relinquished their interest in the land south of the 49th parallel.

The Hudson's Bay Company relocated north to Vancouver Island as changing fashions and diminished beaver populations reduced worldwide demand for Pacific Northwest fur. But Great Britain lost control of the Oregon Country for other reasons as well, foremost among them the rising tide of the American settler population in the 1830s and 1840s. The HBC valued the region for its natural resources, not as a site of permanent agrarian settlement. The company encouraged its retirees to relocate to its Red River colony in Manitoba. American missionaries, on the other hand, quickly assessed the value of the region's farmland.

Protestant missionaries, such as Methodists Jason Lee and Henry Perkins, came to Oregon Country genuinely hoping to convert Indian people to Christianity. The Second Great Awakening, a religious movement that swept through the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century greatly influenced their generation. However, failing in their attempts to convert Indian people, many missionaries turned their efforts to American settlement. Missions in the Willamette Valley and near present-day The Dalles developed into the region's first American settlements as missionaries cleared farmland, built sawmills, and founded schools. Initially constructed to proselytize to Indian people, missions quickly became way stations for American settlers. Marcus Whitman, who founded the Waiilatpu Mission near Walla Walla in 1836 with his wife Narcissa, guided nearly 900 settlers to the Oregon Country in 1843 in "the Great Migration," the first sizable influx of American settlers into the Northwest. Conflicts related to American migration and an outbreak of measles between the missionaries and the Cayuse Indians eventually cost the Whitmans and 12 other mission residents their lives in 1847.

Thousands of emigrants arrived in Oregon in the 1840s and 1850s. Oregon's American born population reached 4,000 in 1847 and tripled to more than 12,000 by 1850. American

settlers were not eager to accept HBC political authority (although they did accept the company's economic help). Settlers began to chip away at HBC economic and political control by the early 1840s. Ewing Young, a former mountain man, guided the first herd of cattle from California into Oregon to break the HBC monopoly on cattle in 1834. Ewing, who settled on the Willamette near the mouth of the Chehalem River, opposite Champoeg, built the region's first sawmill and whiskey distillery independent of the HBC. When he died at the age of 31 in 1841, Young was Oregon's wealthiest pioneer. Because he died without a will and no apparent heirs, American settlers organized to disperse his property. Settlers organized again to raise funds for a predator bounty to protect their livestock from wolves, instituting Oregon's first tax. Young's death and the "wolf meetings" set the stage for the formation of a provisional government in 1843, a governing body that did not draw its authority from the United States, which still operated under the joint-occupation agreement.

In 1846, the United States and Great Britain signed the Oregon Treaty, which designated the 49th parallel as the international border, making it possible for Congress to create Oregon Territory in 1848. Congress often lagged behind Oregon's settlers who by June 1857 had already selected constitutional delegates. They began meeting in Salem to determine the framework for an American state in August. The majority of the constitutional delegates were Democrats who idealized an agrarian society comprised of free, white farmers. They were suspicious of corporations that could gain a monopoly in necessary economic sectors such as the nineteenth century railroad companies that controlled the transportation of the goods that farmers bought and sold. They also opposed slavery and sought to exclude free African Americans from settling in Oregon, as the provisional government had in 1844. Oregon's American settlers were influenced by the sectional conflicts of the states to which they had been previously connected such as Missouri and Kentucky and hoped that they could create a new home free from racial violence. The delegates used their knowledge of previous Midwestern conventions and constitutions to craft what later commentators viewed as a narrow-minded and generally unoriginal founding document. Oregon voters (restricted to white, male citizens) adopted the constitution by a margin of more than two to one in November 1857. Seventy five percent of the electorate rejected slavery and eighty-nine percent voted to exclude free blacks from the state, a provision that was generally not enforced but nonetheless influenced the state's demographics.

Slavery and the growing national conflict over it shaped the state's constitution as well as the congressional debates raging back East regarding Oregon statehood. Both congressional Democrats and Republicans on the other side of the continent had reason to object to creating a western state that had rejected slavery and free blacks at a time when the nation had turned its attention to Bleeding Kansas, the violent clashes between abolitionists and pro-slavery factions in Missouri and Kansas Territory that presaged the Civil War. After a delay of more than two years, Congress finally granted Oregon statehood on February 14, 1859.

By the time Oregon became a state, the 50-year effort to wrest Oregon from Native control had barely concluded. Oregon's Indian populations had been largely removed to the state's reservations, land holdings that would be further reduced in the coming decades as Oregon's non-Native population increased. Plank houses still stood, reminding Oregon's newest residents of the region's former occupants. By the 1840s, log homes peppered the landscape, especially in the fertile Willamette Valley. As quickly as possible, settlers replaced them with framed houses

built of milled lumber and imported glass windows. By 1859, Oregon had nineteen counties and more than 100 separate settlements. Residents griped about the lack of adequate roads and laborers but many of the necessities for town building – brickyards and tanneries, breweries and blacksmiths – were common. And the year marked an important first in a city that hoped to be the region's economic center, the founding of the Ladd and Tilton Bank in Portland.

TIMELINE

1811	John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Trade Company establishes Fort Astoria, the first permanent American settlement in Oregon Country. The Astorians bring sheep and hogs with them.
1811	David Thompson (North West Company) finishes his survey of the Columbia River
1812	War of 1812 between the United States and Great Britain leads to the selling of Fort Astoria to the British North West Company, which renames it Fort George. British surrender Fort Astoria to the United States under the provisions of the Treaty of Ghent in 1814
1818	Anglo-American Convention establishes joint occupation of the Oregon Country by the United States and Great Britain
1825	The Hudson's Bay Company establishes Fort Vancouver in present-day Vancouver, Washington
1828	The Hudson's Bay Company builds the region's first grist mill. Former employees and independent fur trading families begin to settle farm homesteads in the Willamette Valley, disregarding the wishes of the Company.
1830–1833	Epidemics kill up to 90 percent of Indian people living in the Willamette Valley
1834	Joseph Lee travels to Oregon with his nephew, Daniel, and entrepreneur Nathaniel Wyeth to found a Methodist Mission
1842	Elijah White appointed sub-Indian agent in Oregon Country, the first federally appointed position in Oregon made before the resolution of joint-occupation with Britain
1843	Oregon Provisional Government established
1843	Migration: nearly 900 people move to Oregon Country, swelling the non-Indian population to 1,500
1846	The Oregon Boundary Treaty establishes the American border at the 49th parallel; the non-Indian population is 6,000
1846	The Barlow Road is established over Mt. Hood, giving emigrants an alternative to traveling down the Columbia River from The Dalles; the Applegate Trail offers a safer, more southerly route into Oregon Country than the Oregon Trail. The trail is used by Oregonians intent on traveling to California with the onset of the 1848 gold rush.

1847 After several years of conflict between Indians and missionaries worsened by a measles outbreak that decimates the Native population, Cayuse Indians attack the Waiilatpu Mission, killing Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, along with 12 other residents or visitors of the mission; 54 are taken hostage for a month until the HBC's Peter Skene Ogden pay their ransom. .

1848–1855 Cayuse War. The killings at Waiilatpu prompt Oregon's Provisional Government to raise a small volunteer militia, which travels up the Columbia River in pursuit of the Cayuse and other Indians with whom the Cayuse might form an alliance. The war prompts the Cayuse to turn over five men to be tried for the massacre at Waiilatpu. By 1855, the war concludes when the Cayuse are no longer able to stave off a militia augmented by the U.S. military.

1848 Gold is discovered in California, providing a market for Oregon agriculture and timber.

1849 Non-Indian population is 9,083; U.S. Army arrives in Oregon Territory Fort Dalles established, one of several military forts built along the Oregon Trail in Oregon Territory to protect emigrants and miners

1851 Commercial stagecoaches begin operating in the Willamette Valley.

1853 Washington Territory established; onset of the Rogue River War, a series of skirmishes between Rogue River Indians in southern Oregon, the state militia and the U.S. Army

1853–1855 Anson Dart, Joel Palmer, and Isaac Stevens negotiate treaties with many of Oregon's Indian tribes. Congress fails to ratify some of the treaties, notably those negotiated by Anson Dart among Oregon's western tribes. Others treaties establish the Umatilla and Warm Springs reservations.

Mid 1850s Oregonians start county fairs to showcase their agricultural goods and livestock.

1856 Several tribes of Indians attack Fort Cascades and white settlers, killing 14. Nine Cascade Indians are tried and executed.

1857 Delegates at the Oregon Constitutional Convention ratify the Oregon constitution; Oregonian voters exclude African Americans from the territory

February 12, 1859: The U.S. Senate passes a bill granting statehood to Oregon, which is signed by President Buchanan two days later; it takes nearly a month for the news—which was relayed by telegraph to St. Louis, by stagecoach to San Francisco, by steamer to Portland, and by messenger on horseback to Salem—to finally reach governor Joseph Lane.

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