

TAHPDX: Great Decisions in U.S. History

Teaching American History: A partnership between Portland State University and the Beaverton, Hillsboro and Forest Grove School Districts (funded by the U.S. Department of Education)

HISTORY TOPIC: From the Oregon Country to the State of Oregon



***Attention:** This is one of twenty-four topic summaries included in the TAH program and is designed to orient readers to the breadth and depth of the subject. These summaries are by no means exhaustive. Each one is a brief overview of a complex historical topic. Because of the informal nature of a summary, they are not necessarily based on primary sources nor do they employ the full range of scholarly techniques, such as foot- or endnotes. This style of presentation is merely one of the varieties of historical writing that readers will encounter as they explore history.*

***Abstract:** There was nothing natural or preordained about the “Oregon” that Congress admitted as the nation’s 33rd state in 1859. The decision to draw a particular set of boundaries along the vast northwestern coast of North America was the result of a complex interaction of geography, economics, technology, and*

international politics. The transition from settlement frontier to a state with a particular set of political arrangements was conditioned by the interplay of national politics, partisan conflict, and the values that different Oregonians had carried westward from Massachusetts and Missouri. This topic therefore emphasizes both the historical geography of the Northwest and the competing cultural and political values that were leading the entire nation into irreconcilable conflict.

SUBTOPICS:

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1. Dividing the Oregon Country

Early Exploration and the Definition of an “Oregon Country”

Spain was the first of the Atlantic imperial powers to explore the Northwest coast, leaving place names but little permanent mark. Britain and the United States arrived simultaneously, with American merchant Robert Gray identifying the mouth of the Columbia River in 1792 and British naval captain George Vancouver exploring the coast much more extensively in the same year. James Broughton, a member of the Vancouver expedition, took a small boat roughly 100 miles up the Columbia (something Gray did not attempt) and named Mount Hood. Lewis and Clark traversed the Columbia river basin in 1805-1806, but so did David Thompson in 1807-1811, formally staking a claim at the junction of Snake and Columbia in July 1811 for Britain and North West Company. As a representative of British interests, Thompson had been preceded by Alexander McKenzie, the first European to cross the continent north of Mexico in 1793, and by Simon Fraser in 1805.

At this point it was essentially a tie between Britain and the United States, as Spain recognized in ceding claims north of the 42nd parallel in 1819 and Russia in ceding its claims south of the 54th parallel in 1824. The upshot was a distance standoff, with the U.S. and U.K. agreeing to jointly occupy the area between the 42nd and 54th parallels and west of the crest of the Rocky Mountains. In effect, each nation could do what it wanted and what it was able, without interference from the other. The area was isolated and nearly unsettled, and neither nation had the inclination or resources to make political ownership into a big deal.

See a map of the northwest coast prepared by the U.S. Wilkes Expedition in 1841 at <http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/timeweb/docimage.cfm?id=000E7F40-CFFB-1DBD-BB3880B05272FE9F> and a map of the region showing boundary claims at http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/61/Arrowsmith_Oregon_Country.jpg.

Rival Economic Systems (1820 and 1830s)

In the first years of joint occupancy, it turned out that the British were substantially more active and far better organized than Americans, with the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) functioning in effect as local government.

The British economic presence in the Oregon Country revolved around the fur trade, which had been the mainstay of the Canadian economy for two centuries—which meant that Canadians and firms based in British North America were good at it. When the No. 1 Hudson’s Bay Company absorbed the No. 2 North West Company in 1821, the result a regional economic powerhouse that in 1824 located the base of operations for its “Columbia District” at Fort Vancouver (there was also a “New Caledonia District” further north in what is now British Columbia).

Under the leadership of John McLoughlin, the new settlement was the focal point of a Columbia Basin trading network extending hundreds of miles into the interior. At its peak, Fort Vancouver was the center for a system of outlying fur posts and farming settlements. It was a cosmopolitan settlement—officials in 1827 counted 157 “whites and half breeds,” 20 “owyhees” from the

Hawaiian Islands, 13 “natives,” and 4 “Iroquois” or Indians from eastern Canada. At its peak it managed 34 outposts, 6 ships, 600 employees. Supplies came by sea and also by overland from Hudson Bay by York Factory Express route (see map at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:York-Factory-Express.png>).

The American record was far less impressive. Astoria had failed quickly as an American trading post (1811-12) and had been sold to the British Fort William, a rival trading post built on Sauvie Island by the independent American fur trader Nathaniel Wyeth, lasted only two years from 1835 to 1837 before the Hudson’s Bay Company turned the abandoned site into a dairy farm. Most American fur traders, operating from St. Louis as home base, worked the territory of the Missouri River and the central and southern Rocky Mountains, and the Santa Fe trade seemed more lucrative and enticing.

American Visions

Lack of results did not mean lack of Oregon aspirations from the American side.

Perhaps the most prominent voice belonged to Thomas Hart Benton, a Missouri newspaper editor who served more than two decades in the United States Senate. Benton repeatedly urged the American settlement of the Oregon country, which he saw as valuable in itself and as the gateway to “India” (his shorthand for the markets and resources of Asia). In concert with his fellow Missouri senator Lewis Linn, he argued that Americans should head westward to Oregon and that government would follow. *“Let the emigrants go on, and carry their rifles. We want thirty thousand rifles in the valley of the Oregon; they will make it all quiet there, in the event of war with Great Britain for the dominion of that country. . . .Thirty thousand rifles on the Oregon will annihilate the Hudson Bay Company.”*

Hall J. Kelley, an eccentric Boston schoolteacher, also dedicated his life to fervently boosting Oregon. Without visiting and copying from previous reports, he published *A Geographic Sketch of that Part of North America called Oregon* in 1830. He used every glowing adjective in the dictionary to depict Oregon as a New Eden and organized the American Society for Encouraging the Settlement of Oregon Territory. In one of his writings, he proposed to establish a “commercial town . . . about two miles square” at the juncture of the Willamette and Columbia. According to his crudely sketched map, the city was to run across the North Portland peninsula from Smith Lake and the Columbia Slough to the St. Johns neighborhood. We are scarcely surprised that the proposal sank without a trace, since Kelley had picked the site years before his brief and highly unsuccessful visit to Oregon in 1834 and 1835.

Missionaries became a significant presence in the 1830s. Jason Lee established a mission at what is now Salem in 1835. Presbyterians Henry and Eliza Spalding set up missionary work at Lapwei near what is now Lewiston, Idaho in 1836, the same year that Marcus and Narcissa Whitman undertook their work at a mission near the present Walla Walla. Two years later, Father Francois Blanchet arrived to represent the Roman Catholic church throughout HBC territory, while Pierre-Jean De Smet traveled extensively through the modern Montana, Idaho, Alberta, and British Columbia. The Methodist and Presbyterian missions in particular attracted

attention and support from co-religionists in the East, who saw an American Oregon and a Protestant Oregon as closely and necessarily dependent on each other.

Rival Economic Systems (1840s)

The balance between Britain and the U.S. shifted dramatically in the 1840s. The HBC had followed the policy of “trapping out” the lands south of the Columbia to create a “fur desert” to discourage American trappers and traders. In effect, they goal was to create a sort of fire break that would divert American trappers southward. The plan also implied that the lower Columbia corridor would gradually decline in importance relative to the Columbia headwaters, the Fraser River valley, and the coast of the Salish Sea (Puget Sound and Straits of Georgia). Indeed, the HBC would relocate operational headquarters to Fort Victoria on Vancouver Island in the mid-1840s.

The British system also depended on a “middle ground” in which British and Indians were partners in the fur trade. The devastating impacts of disease on native peoples, especially in the 1830s, undercut this partnership. Among the world's most isolated peoples, the Indians of the Northwest Coast were easily susceptible to new diseases that arrived with Europeans. Smallpox had come upriver in 1780, 1801-1802, and 1824-1825 and already reduced the Indian population. Now the “Cold Sick” or “Intermitting Fever” appeared in Chinook and Kalapuya villages in 1829-30 and raged for the next three years. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the disease was malaria brought from the tropics by traders. The Cold Sick spread outward from an infection epicenter at Sauvie Island and Fort Vancouver. It killed half in some villages, 90 percent in others, leaving a few hundred Native Americans and a virtually unoccupied Lower Columbia and Willamette Valley landscape.

The open landscape was especially attractive for American settlers, many of them already primed by Benton and Kelley. In 1841, there were perhaps 150 Americans in the Oregon Country compared to .600 Canadians (including British and French-Canadian-Indian individuals). Over the next few years, American settlers became “as thick as mosquitoes,” especially after the “great migration” of 1843.

The effects were obvious at Oregon City, which had begun with a single HBC sawmill in 1831. It added a Methodist mission in 1840 and a few more buildings by the start of 1843. By the end of the year, it had boomed to 75 buildings. By 1845 Oregon City had maybe 100 buildings, 2 churches, and 300 people. HBC official John McLoughlin directed American arrivals southward rather than up the Cowlitz River and tried to attract Canadians to settle north of the Columbia, but the numbers few compared with the Americans. The white population of Willamette Valley was 1500 in 1843, 6000 in 1845, 13,294 according to the 1850 census, and 52,000 in 1860. Meanwhile the native population of Valley had dipped below 1000 by 1850.

Boundary Debates

The whole of Oregon was not an issue as the boundary debate worked its way through diplomatic exchanges. McLoughlin’s policy of creating a fur desert south of the Columbia and pushing Oregon Trail pioneers into the Willamette Valley had already sealed a tacit deal that the

U.S. would get the area south and east of the Columbia. At the same time, the U.S. had previously agreed to the 49th parallel as its northern border from Lake Superior to the Rockies, so it was hard put to argue for a more northerly border on the far side of the mountains. Moreover, there were no American forts or fur posts north/west of the Columbia.

There were actually four questions. (1) Who would control the area between the northern and/or western bank of the Columbia River and the 49th parallel. (2) If the 49th parallel boundary were chosen, would it extend across Vancouver Island? (3) Might the Olympic Peninsula be split off from the remainder of the Puget Sound area and allocated to the United States to give it a foothold on Puget Sound while Britain retained the rest of the area north of the Columbia? (4) Would navigation of the Columbia be open to citizens of both nations, wherever the boundary was drawn? (see maps showing different proposals for dividing the region at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:1846_Oregon_territory.jpg and at wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/thumb/c/c0/OrBoundaryMapDetached.jpg/633px-OrBoundaryMapDetached.jpg).

The slogan “54 40 or fight” makes a great textbook moment but it was a fringe sentiment. In the election of 1844, the Democratic Party platform declared that US had “clear and unquestionable” title to “the whole of Oregon” but the Oregon issue was less important than the question of whether the U.S. should absorb the Republic of Texas. President James Polk quoted the party platform in his inaugural address but he was a realist who didn’t want a second war when he was scheming to attack Mexico. Britain had overwhelming naval power that it could apply in the Northwest if need be. In addition, in any war, the American east coast would be as vulnerable as in 1812-15, especially if the nation’s army was engaged with Mexico.

Neither did Britain want to fight over region with diminishing economic value, especially when Britain needed American wheat during the Irish famine.

Nevertheless, domestic pressure on Polk increased during 1845. John O’Sullivan in NY Morning News Dec 27 1845 argued that US should claim all of Oregon “by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and possess the whole of the continent.” The slogan “54 40 or fight” appeared in January 1846, driven by expansionist newspapers and politicians. The slogan appeared to northerners who were unhappy about Polk’s full throttle pursuit of Texas and Mexican territory. In effect, wanted northwestern territory to balance the potential slave state expansion into the Southwest and northern Mexico. Historian David Pletcher notes that the slogan was directed at southern aristocracy as much as the UK.

Polk on December 2 1845, recommended giving the required one-year notice to end the joint occupancy agreement. His interest, again, was diplomatic settlement and not war. Eventually in April 1846, Congress agreed to end joint occupation, but with a mild rather than war mongering resolution. Negotiations quickly followed with the decision on the current border, plus navigation rights on the Columbia for British subjects. Senate approved treaty 41-14. The key for the British was the retention of all of Vancouver Island, not only because it had Fort Victoria but because navigation into the Salish Sea would be secure for both nations.

Left unresolved was the status of the San Juan Islands, since the treaty said that border would follow “the deepest channel” outward from the continent to Strait of Juan de Fuca. The United States and Britain disagreed on which body of water constituted that channel and came close to blows in the so-called “Pig War” of 1859. The issue was finally resolved by arbitration of the German Emperor in 1872—hence sailboats clear U.S. customs rather than Canadian customs at Friday Harbor. During the Civil War, some British authorities tried to convince London to take back Puget Sound while the United States was distracted, but no one back in the British Isles was much interested.

2. Dividing the U.S. Territory

Why is Oregon an east-west state rather than a north-south state? In other words, why was the Columbia River chosen as the most logical boundary within America’s northwestern territories rather than the crest of the Cascades?

In quick review, these are the steps

- 1848-53: A single Oregon Territory is designated south of the 49th parallel.
- 1853-59: Oregon Territory included the future state plus Idaho south of 46 degrees, with a new Washington Territory established to the north.
- 1859-63: After Oregon statehood, Washington Territory included Washington, Idaho, and western MT.
- 1864: Idaho Territory splits off from Washington Territory

The reason for these geographical decisions has to do with the technologies of transportation. In the 1840s and 1850s, there were few no railroads in the northwest and few roads—and those to be found were rough, hazardous, and painful to travel. Everyone wanted to be close to water. Towns were laid out at dry spots along the Columbia and Willamette and on tributary streams like the Yamhill (see map of early Portland area townsites at <http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/timeweb/docimage.cfm?id=000AA3B1-3458-1E6E-891B80B0527200A7>) . Settlers who expected to farm chose land with flowing streams and good access to water transportation, and federal land surveyors focused there early efforts on the valley from Albany to Portland (see map at http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/historical_records/popup.cfm?doc_ID=A4CD42E2-E29D-5043-FDCAF96F6E6A9FB5) . In the environs of Portland itself, Johnson Creek, Fanno Creek, the Clackamas River, the head of Sullivan’s Gulch, and the Columbia Slough all attracted clusters of claims while higher tracts were less popular.

Because people traveled by preference by water, not land, Puget Sound was accessed from Victoria (the new HBC headquarters), New Westminster, and Port Townsend. Oregon was accessed by the Columbia and Willamette, as was Idaho after gold discoveries around 1860. The consolidation of small transportation lines into the powerful, Portland-based Oregon Steam

Navigation Company in 1860 confirmed the role of the Columbia as the major artery of trade and the economic logic of the east-west political division (MAP of 1852 Land Surveys)

3. Divided Oregon

Oregonians in the 1850s were a far more divided people than the image of Oregon Trail pioneers might suggest—divided by regional origins, by the cultural values associated with those origins, and by local and national politics.

Some Oregonians were Yankees--Northeasterners from New England, New York, and New Jersey. These were, in many cases, the articulate opinion makers—merchants, missionaries, lawyers, newspapermen. They gave the territory what passed for “New England” soberness and propriety. They brought Yankee names for many of the new towns like Portland, Albany, Salem, Monmouth, Lebanon, and Dayton and names that referenced Puritan virtues like Amity, Sublimity, and Independence.

The majority of Oregonians, however, came from the central Mississippi Valley. They were from the slave states of Kentucky and Missouri or from southern Illinois and Indiana, areas where southern values and connections were strong. These were the farmers who filled the Willamette Valley. They were attracted by abundant land, and it is hard to overemphasize the attraction that free, fertile land held for rural Americans in the 1830s and 1840s. At the same time, several factors pushed migrants from their previous homes. These included several years of bad flooding that damaged their farms in the Mississippi Valley, a weak farm economy in the late 1840s, and the problem of endemic diseases such as malaria along Midwestern waterways. When they arrived, they picked county names that honored southerners: Washington (Virginia), Polk (Tennessee), Marion (South Carolina), Linn (Missouri), Benton (Missouri), Douglas (from Illinois, but sympathetic to the South).

In part because of regional origins and allegiances, Oregon settlers were deeply divided by partisan politics. The divisions reflected the different regional origins of the population and the political chaos of the decade when the Democrats were increasing split between northern and southern wings, the older multi-sectional Whig party was collapsing, and the new sectionally based Republicans were emerging.

Party politics was fought out in newspaper editorials that were astonishingly vituperative. Asahel Bush ran the Salem *Statesman* in favor of Democrats and Thomas Jefferson Dryer ran Portland's *Oregonian* for the Whigs and then Republicans. The papers battled over political appointments, the location of the territorial/state capital (Portland? Oregon City? Salem?), statehood, and slavery. Opponents called Bush “Ass of Hell” while Bush accused Dryer of spewing “the grossest personal abuse, the most foul-mouthed slander, groveling, scurrility, falsehood, and ribald blackguardism.”

4. Creeping Toward Statehood

An assembly of early settlers created a Provisional Government in a meeting at Champoege in May 2, 1843, by a very close vote of 52 to 50. One of the underlying tensions was religious difference and competing missionary efforts. Jason Lee led the Methodists. Father Francis Blanchet led the Roman Catholics. The longer-established French Canadian settlers supported the Catholics; the majority of newer settlers were Protestants. Still a powerful regional presence, the HBC favored the Catholic side and disliked the increasing Methodist presence. John McLoughlin reported to HBC officials on the tension: “*The American Citizens of Wallamette called on the Canadians to join them and organize a government for themselves. The Canadians refused last year, yet seeing the increasing number of Americans, and that it would be impossible to maintain peace and order in the Country without organizing themselves, the Canadians consented.*”

Territorial status came in 1848. It was delayed because the US was caught up in the Mexican War and debates about the future of slavery. The act creating the territory prohibited slavery by referencing the anti-slavery provision of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which had provided the basis by which Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin became states.

Oregonians themselves were ambiguous about statehood. Territorial government after 1848 gave them a measure of local control but without full responsibilities. In addition, slavery was an increasingly unsettled question in national politics. The Compromise of 1850 had admitted California as a free state but left the issue up to local choice (“popular sovereignty”) in Utah Territory (future Utah and Nevada) and New Mexico Territory (future New Mexico and Arizona). Oregon was still designated as a potential free state under the Missouri Compromise of 1820. However, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 repealed the Missouri Compromise by dividing the vast territory between the Missouri River and Rocky Mountains into Kansas Territory and Nebraska Territory with the status of slavery left to local preference. The result in the mid-1850s was “bleeding Kansas” as northerners and southerners competing to constitute a majority that would control the future state.

The situation grew even more complicated when the U.S. Supreme Court issues its decision in the case of *Dred Scott v. Sandford* in 1857. The Court made several sweeping pronouncements in its decision. It held that people of African descent for the purpose of slavery could not become citizens and therefore were not entitled to constitutional protections and that they could therefore not sue in court. At the same time, the Court held that Congress did not have the power to prohibit slavery in federal territories. In effect, this part of the ruling repealed the Missouri Compromise and laid the territories open to slavery.

What did all of this have to do with Oregon? The assumption in creating Oregon Territory in 1848 had been that it would evolve into a non-slave state, on the basis of the Missouri Compromise. Now three quarters of the pre-statehood territory was up for grabs. The majority of white Oregonians would have approved the first part of the *Dred Scott* decision and been appalled by the second part, since the general goal was a whites-only society. Would popular sovereignty be extended to the Oregon and Washington territories if southerners continued to dominate Congress? With slavery permissible in the territories, the only way to assure its

absence from Oregon would be to organize as a state. Would southerners allow Oregon to organize and enter the Union as a free state when the last three states (Iowa, Wisconsin, and California) had been admitted as free states and next likely candidates were Minnesota and Oregon?

Oregonians defeated three proposals for statehood conventions in the early 1850s. However, three months after the March 1857 *Dred Scott* decision they did agree to call a constitutional convention. The delegates met in Salem from August 17 to September 18, 1857 to write a proposed constitution, which would then be sent to Congress for approval along with statehood status, which came early in 1859. . Most of the provisions in the constitution were adapted from Indiana, Michigan, and Iowa (the latter state had already been the model used by the provisional government in 1845).

5. Dividing Up Oregonians

One of the basic questions that the makers of the new state tried to settle was who counted as an “Oregonian.” The provisional government of 1843 in effect defined citizenship in terms of the right to claim and hold land. Principles of democratic equality led to a limit of 640 acres for any individual. Citizens were white men, including “every free male descendant of w white man who has resided in the territory for 6 months,” thus including the sons of white men with Indian wives.

The same principle held in 1850 when Congress effectively ratified the provisional land policy with the Donation Land Claim Act. The law granted settlers who were in Oregon by that date the right to claim 320 acres. For a married couple, the wife could claim an additional 320 acres in her own right. Citizens arriving after 1850 could claim half as much (160/320 acres). The 1850 law granted the right “to every white settler or occupant of public lands, American half-breed Indians included, above the age of 18 years, being a citizen of the United States, or having made a declaration according to law, of his intention to become a citizen.”

In 1857, Oregonians voted on three propositions coming out of the constitutional convention:

	Yes	No
Do you vote for the constitution?	7195	3194
Do you vote for slavery in Oregon?	2645	7727
Do you vote for free Negroes in Oregon	1081	8640

According to the constitution, white males only could vote, including foreign residents but not resident military personnel and sailors (presumably because they had no permanent stake in Oregon). “Chinamen” and “negroes explicitly denied the vote. There was no mention of women and Indians.

6. Selected Readings

Peter Boag, *Environment and Experience: Settlement Culture in Nineteenth Century Oregon* (1992)

William Bowen, *The Willamette Valley: Migration and Settlement on the Oregon Frontier* (1978)

David A. Johnson, *Founding the Far West: California, Oregon, Nevada, 1840-1890* (1992)

Robert Loewenberg, *Equality on the Oregon Frontier: Jason Lee and the Methodist Mission, 1834-1843* (1976)

Dorothy N. Morrison, *Outpost: John McLoughlin and the Far Northwest* (2005)

David Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War*

William Robbins, *Landscapes of Promise: The Oregon Story, 1800-1940* (1999).