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Prologue

Gateway to the Northwest

Our great-great-grandparents were quick to credit divine providence for the growth of their cities. The Creator, said one early Chicagoan, had marked the inevitable destiny of that city by rolling back the waves of Lake Michigan. The great bend of the Missouri River seemed a heaven-sent guarantee for the success for Kansas City. Whether Louisville or St. Paul, Toledo or Tacoma, every city seemed to have been foreordained.

In the case of Portland, the general idea was clear enough. There seemed no doubt that a major center of commerce would develop somewhere along the lower Columbia River between the Cascade Range and the Pacific Ocean. The only problem was exactly where that place would be. It was not until 1843 and 1844—after 50 years of Anglo-American exploration and thousands of years of occupancy by American Indian peoples—that a permanent settlement was founded at what would become the middle of downtown Portland, and it would take another decade for the new town to fight off local challengers along the Willamette and Columbia.

More than any of its larger West Coast rivals—Seattle, Tacoma, San Francisco, and Los Angeles—Portland is indeed “the city that gravity built,” to repeat the phrase of historian Glenn Quiett. It sits at the crossroads of two lowland corridors that the forces of geological change have stamped onto the landscape of western America. From north to south, more than two-thirds of the population of the Pacific Northwest is found along a 500-mile trough between the volcanic peaks of the Cascades and the string of coastal mountains that extends from the redwood country of northern California to the spine of Vancouver Island. South of the Columbia, the Willamette River flows through the trough. Farther north, the Cowlitz River extends the lowland through Washington State to Puget Sound, which connects in turn to the Strait of Georgia. A string of “Cascadian” cities runs
from Eugene, Salem, and Portland in Oregon, through Olympia, Tacoma, Seattle, and Bellingham in Washington, and on to Vancouver and Victoria in British Columbia.

The Columbia River crosses the lowland axis after breaking through the Cascade range 160 miles from the Pacific. The size of its drainage basin and volume of flow are a close match to Europe's greatest river, the Danube. As soon as the Columbia became known to eastern Americans, it entered their dreams as the sure route to the western coast—the “North American road to India” in the words of Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton.

Later Portland boosters talked as if the divine hand had not only pointed out the general location for Oregon's metropolis but had actually staked out its exact spot. In sober fact, as we have said, it took explorers and pioneers half a century to hit on the precise spot.

The English-speaking discoverer of the Columbia River was the American trader Robert Gray. His ship, the *Columbia Rediviva*, entered the river's mouth in May 1792, but Gray showed no interest in venturing upstream. Five months later, Lieutenant James Broughton of the British navy, sailing with Captain James Vancouver on the expedition that first mapped Puget Sound, directed the first actual exploration of the lower Columbia. In October 1792, Broughton took the 135-ton *Chatham* across the dangerous Columbia bar and spent three weeks exploring in small boats. He reached the Sandy River and claimed the region for England. Although he noted the confluence of the Willamette, he was more interested in enjoying the scenery and naming Mount Hood for a British admiral.

A dozen years later, Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and their companions on the transcontinental expedition of 1804–06 missed the mouth of the Willamette not once, but twice. Hurrying downstream in November 1805, they hugged the north bank, so what they called Image Canoe Island (Tomahawk and Hayden islands) blocked their view. On their return after a winter at Fort Clatsop, the expedition reached the Quicksand (Sandy) River before Clark doubled back with an Indian guide to find the Multnomah River, his name for the Willamette. On April 3, 1806, Clark paddled several miles up the Willamette and camped at an unoccupied Indian village somewhere between what is now Terminal 4 and the St. Johns Bridge.

The next day the group proceeded past a point of land on the east bank. Clark's rough estimate of distance supports the idea that he reached the bluff now occupied by the University of Portland, where the river turned sharply around the east side of Swan Island. The mist that morning was too thick to venture farther, but Clark turned around "being perfectly satisfied of the size
and magnitude of this great river which must water that vast tract of Country between the western range of mountains and those on the sea coast.”

One reason that Clark and other explorers failed to remark on the site that would be the future heart of Portland was because the location was relatively important to the region’s Indians. When European and American fur traders began to arrive in the Pacific Northwest at the end of the 1700s, Chinook-speaking people dominated the Columbia from The Dalles to the sea. The Lower Chinooks, among whom Lewis and Clark spent the winter of 1805–06, lived around the wide Columbia estuary. Upstream were the Cathlamets and then the Multnomahs from the Cowlitz River to the Willamette. Their greatest concentration was on and around Sauvie Island. Lewis and Clark counted 2,400 Multnomahs living on the island in several winter villages and an equal number nearby across Multnomah Channel and around Vancouver Lake. Six years later, British fur trader Robert Stuart reported a population of 2,000 on the island—roughly twice the permanent population today.

Twenty-five miles up the Willamette were other Indians who also spoke Chinook dialects. The Clackamas groups were the largest, with perhaps a
dozen villages along the river that now bears their name. Smaller bands included the Cushoks and Chah-cowahs, who clustered around the falls at the present site of Oregon City. Both the falls and the mouth of the Clackamas were places where it was easy to take salmon, attracting a population of perhaps 2,500.

In the Willamette Valley above the falls were the Kalapuyas, a people distinct from the various branches of Chinooks. They belonged to at least a dozen bands with defined territories. Closest to present-day Portland were the Tualatins, in what is now Washington County. They lived in as many as 15 winter villages, which were self-governing but shared common hunting territories.

Compared to native peoples in many other parts of the continent, the people of the lower Columbia enjoyed a relatively rich and easy life. Lewis and Clark remarked on the special fertility of the Columbia Valley in the vicinity of Portland. The Multnomahs, Clackamas, and other groups in the Portland basin fished for salmon, sturgeon, and smelt; hunted migratory birds and deer that thrived in the riverside woods and clearings; gathered nuts and berries; and dug wapato roots out of muddy marshes to eat raw or roasted. Clark compared the root to the Irish potato and commented that “it has an agreeable taste and answers very well in place of bread.” The abundance of wapato gave Sauvie Island its earlier name and supported its especially dense population.

Cedar logs provided the materials for dugout canoes, cooking utensils, and gabled longhouses made of vertical planks lashed to a frame of poles and posts. Usually built over a shallow pit two to six feet deep, the plank lodges
might reach a hundred feet in length, with woven mats subdividing the interior space. Households varied in size, but fifty people per house is a very rough approximation. When they traveled to summer hunting and fishing grounds, the Chinooks used temporary shelters made of poles covered with mats and hides.

Their settlements ranged from clusters of a few small houses to substantial villages with hundreds of residents. Each village was an independent entity, bound together by complex kinship ties and represented by one of several headmen. Although the Chinook-speaking villages acknowledged some common connection, each was closer to an independent extended family than part of a larger political unit. They built their villages to last for years, not generations, for the abundance of resources made it easy for bands to move from one spot to another within their general territory. Members of groups along the Columbia visited, intermarried, shared food-gathering sites, and fought for resources and prestige.

In the Chinook economy, the centers of trade were the mouth of the Columbia and the great barrier of Celilo Falls near the present-day city of The Dalles. Where the Columbia met the sea, the Chinook traded with other coastal peoples and, after Robert Gray and James Broughton visited, with European and American sailing ships. Celilo Falls was the dividing point between the lush coastal lands and the dry ranges and plateaus of the interior. It was also the boundary between the lifestyle of the Northwest coast and that of inland tribes such as the Shoshonis, Paiutes, and Nez Perce. Both before and after the arrival of British fur traders, the break in navigation on the Columbia made The Dalles a natural market and a “general theater of gambling and roguery” in the critical view of one trader. The Multnomahs and other tribes near the lower Willamette lived along the artery of trade but controlled neither of the key points of exchange.

The Chinooks were eager and natural trading partners for British and American fur companies. Both “King George’s men” and “Boston men” took two years to make a round-the-world circuit with stops at the Northwest coast, the Hawaiian Islands, and China. The heyday of maritime commerce to the Columbia lasted from 1792 until the War of 1812. Thereafter, attention focused on transcontinental trade. New Yorker John Jacob Astor organized the Pacific Fur Company in 1810 and planted the trading post that evolved into the city of Astoria. Three years later he sold out to the North West Company, a Montreal-based firm that renamed the post Fort George and dominated regional fur trade until 1821.

In turn, the powerful British Hudson’s Bay Company swallowed up the North West Company. Fort George soon dwindled to a lookout post to
report on possible competition and the Hudson’s Bay operations moved to Fort Vancouver, built in 1825 on the north shore of the Columbia, seven miles upstream from the Willamette. 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.

Fewer than thirty years after Lewis and Clark brought back reports of the Chinooks and Kalapuyas, and less than a decade after the building of Fort Vancouver, disease had virtually exterminated the native population of northwestern Oregon. The spread of the Anglo-American trading system opened the possibility of both immediate economic gains and ultimate catastrophe for Indians. 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, 1801–02, and 1824–25, and had 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 the inhabitants in some villages and 90 percent in others, leaving only a few hundred Native Americans and a virtually unoccupied Lower Columbia and Willamette Valley landscape. Observed from the outside and in retrospect, the Cold Sick was a tragedy whose human cost we can scarcely calculate.

The first European and American settlers who filled the void also ignored the site of Portland. Fort Vancouver continued to be the major British settlement, humming with activity that impressed occasional visitors. 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 from eastern Canada. 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. Hall J. Kelley, an eccentric New Englander who dedicated his life to fervently boosting Oregon, 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.
Early traders and settlers who followed the Willamette upstream from Fort Vancouver in the 1830s or early 1840s had their eyes on the falls or the interior valley beyond. Their diaries and reports usually ignored or dismissed the first few miles of the river, where Portland was eventually to be built. The banks were either high bluffs or low and swampy ground, and the land behind was too thickly wooded for quick and easy cultivation. Philadelphia physician and naturalist John Townsend summed up the common reaction when he wrote that “there is not a sufficient extent unencumbered, or which could be fitted for the purposes of tillage in a space of time short enough to be serviceable; others are at some seasons inundated, which is an insurmountable objection.”

As a result, the first large European settlements along the Willamette itself were upstream from the site of Portland. Retired employees of the Hudson’s Bay Company, mostly French Canadians, began to settle and cultivate the “French Prairie” in 1829. By 1840–41, the community had grown to more than sixty families, who worshipped in a new Roman Catholic church and sold their surplus wheat to Fort Vancouver through a small warehouse and
landing at Champoeg, 25 miles above Willamette Falls. A second settlement formed at the base of the falls, where John McLoughlin and Methodist missionaries contended for control of what seemed to be a natural location for a major town. Rival development efforts started in 1840 and 1841. By the winter of 1842–43, the new community of Oregon City had made a significant impression on the wilderness, with more than thirty buildings, a gristmill, and growing competition for building lots. It was the first destination for most of the participants in the swelling American migrations that had brought more than eight hundred settlers to Oregon in 1843 and about twelve hundred more in 1844.

Into the early 1840s, in short, the history of Portland is a story of near misses. The Chinooks preferred to live at Sauvie Island or along the Clackamas River and traded at the mouth of the Columbia and at Celilo Falls. British traders operated out of Fort Vancouver with satellite operations at Sauvie Island and Champoeg. Missionaries followed Indians into the Willamette Valley and up the Columbia, while American settlers made Oregon City their first real town. The site that would become Portland, meanwhile, remained at the beginning of 1843 what it had been before—a small clearing of an acre or so made by trappers and Indians traveling between Fort Vancouver and Oregon City. It served as a sort of early highway rest area where travelers could rest or cook a midday meal during the 30-mile trip. Jesse A. Applegate later described the site he had visited as a boy in 1843:

We landed on the west shore and went into camp on the high bank where there was little underbrush . . . No one lived there and the place had no name; there was nothing to show that the place had ever been visited except a small log hut near the river, and a broken mast of a ship leaning against the high bank. There were chips hewn from timber, showing that probably a new mast had been made there. . . . We were then actually encamped on the site of the city of Portland, but there was no prophet with us to tell of the beautiful city that was to take the place of the gloomy forest.