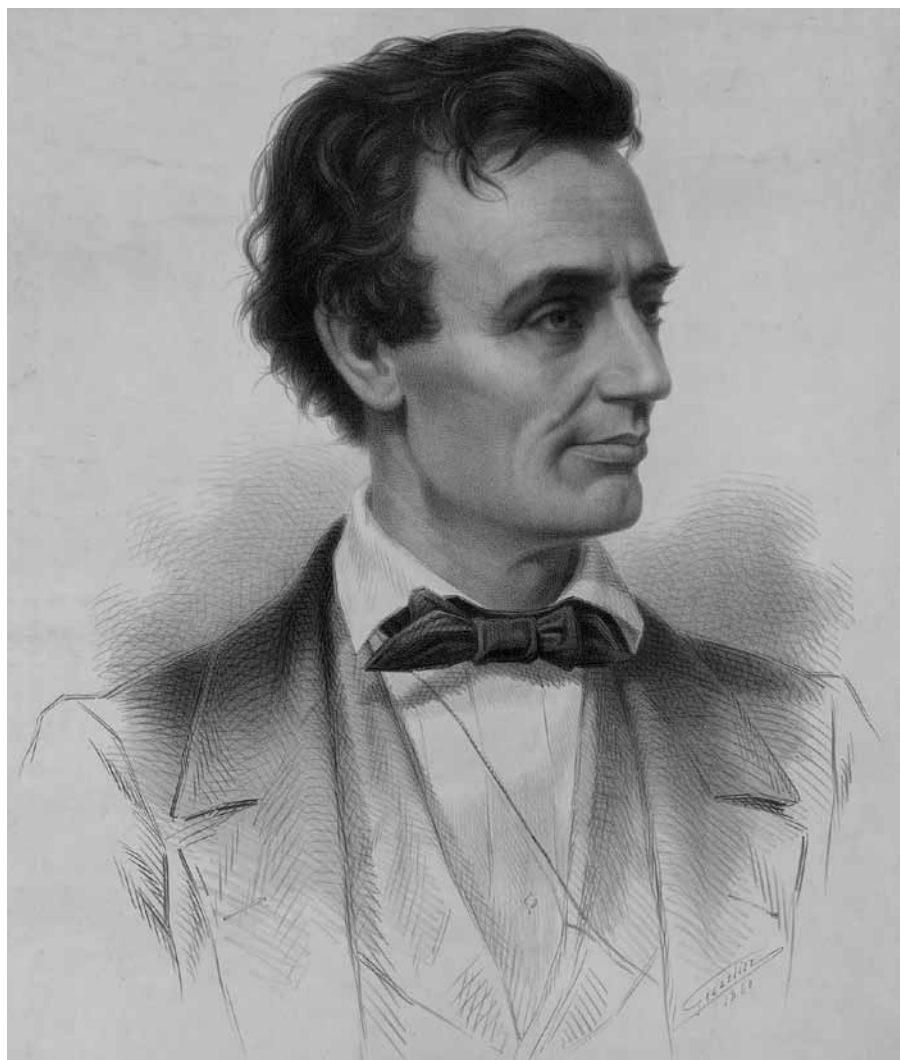


RICHARD W. ETULAIN

*Lincoln and
Oregon Country
Politics in the
Civil War Era*



Lincoln
and
Oregon Country Politics
in the
Civil War Era

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Lincoln
and
Oregon Country Politics
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Civil War Era

Richard W. Etulain

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For the Partch Family



Three Oregonians

David Scofield Partch: son-in-law—caring, dependable PA
Jackie Etulain Partch: daughter—librarian extraordinaire
Adam Scofield Partch: grandson—much-beloved young Lincoln

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Preface

One day after the presidential elections in November 1864 Abraham Lincoln telegraphed the tentative results to his wonderfully opinionated but supportive old friend from Springfield, Dr. Anson G. Henry, in faraway Washington Territory. Lincoln told the political doctor that it looked increasingly likely he had been reelected to a second term. Lincoln's strong connection to Dr. Henry personalizes the president's persisting political links to the Oregon Country, stretching back nearly two decades to the mid-1840s. Although Lincoln spent but a few days west of the Mississippi River and never traveled farther west than eastern Kansas, he had a demonstrable impact on the politics of the American West, his influences radiating out even to the most distant of the western subregions, the Oregon Country, or the Pacific Northwest.

This brief volume traces these increasingly strong political bonds between Abraham Lincoln and the Oregon Country. It is primarily a study of political history, although discussions sometimes spill over, in abbreviated form, into other areas such as Indian relations, military policies, and North-South ideological conflicts. Lincoln's fingerprints on the Oregon Country appear clearly in his political connections with the region. In fact, no national figure did more than Abraham Lincoln to shape regional politics in the Oregon Country in the 1860s.

The story moves chronologically from the 1840s to the mid-1860s—and then beyond. The first chapter traces Lincoln's and Oregon's pre-1850 experiences and the Illinois politician's contacts with the Far Corner. Chapter 2 treats Lincoln's connections with the Oregon Country in the 1850s, especially through his friendships with Illinoisans who had moved to Oregon: David Logan, Dr. Henry, Simeon Francis, and Edward D. Baker. The crucial election of 1860 and Lincoln's roles nationally and in the Pacific Northwest are the subject of Chapter 3. The book's longest section, Chapter 4, deals with Lincoln and the Oregon Country in the Civil War years, from 1861 to 1864. Chapter 5 discusses Lincoln's actions and successes in his reelection of 1864. The final section, Chapter 6, focuses on Lincoln's last months and more extensively on the Oregon Country's reactions to his tragic assassination and the region's

gradual memorializing of Lincoln, especially in the Lincoln centennial and bicentennial celebrations. The concluding bibliographical section features extensive discussions of the major sources for this study and includes a thorough listing of these books and essays.

This short study advances a central thesis about Abraham Lincoln, the Oregon Country, and the Civil War. For well over a century, historians have portrayed most westerners, and nearly all inhabitants of the Oregon Country, as distant spectators, uninvolved in the events and discussions that divided the United States leading to and within its most fractious years of conflict. That view no longer serves well in understanding the ties between Abraham Lincoln and the Oregon Country during the Civil War era. Instead, the Pacific Northwest tied itself to the nation, including links to politics, Indian relations, military policies, civil and legal rights, and northern and southern sociocultural conflicts. This volume attempts to illuminate the clear connections between the East and West by focusing on Lincoln's political connections to the Oregon Country. Rather than uninvolved spectators, residents of the Pacific Northwest reacted strongly to national ideas and events of the Civil War years. Their political bonds with Lincoln are but one clear indication of their participation in national happenings in the Civil War era.

This book also serves as an exemplar of what historian Elliott West terms the Greater Reconstruction. West contends that we need to rethink and rewrite mid-nineteenth-century American history in order to demonstrate that the two most important events of the time—the expansion of the American West and the Civil War—were not separate, isolated events. Instead they were joined experiences, mutually shaping one another from the 1840s to about 1880. This examination of Lincoln's political connections with the Oregon Country provides one example of how studies of the Greater Reconstruction illuminate the interrelations of East and West through notably significant cross-continental influences. Tracing these lines of influence stretching from Washington, D.C., to the Far Northwest illuminates both Civil War era politics as well as the political development of the Oregon Country.



PREFACE

I am much indebted to several persons and institutions for their help in preparing this study of cross-continental politics. Staff members at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library (Springfield, Illinois), the Oregon Historical Society (Portland), the University of Oregon Library (Eugene), the Washington State Library (Olympia), the State of Washington Archives (Olympia), the University of Washington (Seattle), the Idaho State Historical Society (Boise), and the Montana Historical Society (Helena) have been particularly helpful. I am also grateful to Tom Booth of the Oregon State University Press for encouragement and to Sylvia Frank Rodrigue and Sara Vaughn Gabbard, two superb Lincoln ladies, for delightful email exchanges on these topics. At the OSU Press, I also wish to thank Jo Alexander, Micki Reaman, Judy Radovsky, and Mary Braun for their aid and encouragement. I am indebted, too, to Tom Lapsley, enthusiastic Lincoln collector, for information concerning burial sites of Lincoln's friends, the locations of Lincoln sculptures, and other useful material about Lincoln in the Pacific Northwest.

Since this is my fiftieth book, I also wish to mention here those who have especially influenced my career. Bob Woodward, Edwin R. Bingham, and Earl Pomeroy were superb undergraduate and graduate mentors. Bob Swanson and Ron Hatzenbuehler at Idaho State and Frank Szasz of the University of New Mexico were encouraging colleagues. Editors David Holtby, Chuck Rankin, Joanne O'Hare, and Sylvia Frank Rodrigue have also been generous with their time and help. More generally, I owe an intellectual debt to Earl Pomeroy. He urged his students to think continentally, to see continuities as well as discontinuities between the East and the American West. Without abandoning the path-breaking earlier contentions of Frederick Jackson Turner, Pomeroy, by example, showed fellow historians how to understand the shaping eastern influences on the trans-Mississippi West. This study follows Pomeroy's point of view.

I'm also indebted to several editors and publishers for permitting me to draw on without merely repeating my previous writings on Abraham Lincoln and the trans-Mississippi American West. They are Sylvia Frank Rodrigue at the Southern Illinois University Press for allowing use of information in my *Lincoln Looks West: From the Mississippi to the Pacific* (2010); Gregory Lalire at *Wild West*, "Lincoln Looks

West” (April 2009); Molly Holz at *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, “Abraham Lincoln: Political Founding Father of the American West” (summer 2009); and Sara Vaughn Gabbard at *Lincoln Lore*, “Lincoln and the Oregon Country” (spring 2012). These permissions are greatly appreciated.

And most of all, I am indebted to Joyce—for fifty years of support and encouragement.

Chapter 1: Lincoln Looks Toward Oregon

The unexpected telegram from Washington, D. C., arrived in Springfield, Illinois, in mid-August 1849. Its message was direct and requested a quick answer: would the Honorable Abraham Lincoln, recently retired U.S. Congressman from Illinois, accept appointment as secretary of the new Oregon Territory? With little deliberation, the tall, gaunt politician from the Prairie State rejected the offer. One month later another surprising message carried a second offer: would Mr. Lincoln take the governor's chair of Oregon? After a few days of deliberation and mixed-up, delayed messages, Lincoln also turned down the second overture.¹

So, in late summer and early fall of 1849 Abraham Lincoln chose not to become an Oregonian. But despite his rejection of these two offers, Lincoln forged several links with the Oregon Country. In fact, even before 1849, Lincoln had connected with Oregon, and after several of his Illinois friends immigrated to the Pacific Northwest in the 1850s, those connections became much stronger. Later, as president, Lincoln tied himself to the Far Corner by appointing dozens of officials in the new state of Oregon, the territory of Washington, and the new territories of Idaho and Montana, the latter two of which began during his administration. He also supported railroad, land, and agricultural and education measures that had a lasting impact on the Oregon Country. During his presidency, letters from his friends and political appointees kept Lincoln abreast of political, economic, military, and ideological clashes and combinations that characterized the region during his years in the White House.²

An understanding of Abraham Lincoln's expanding links with the Oregon Country broadens our perception of our greatest president. Those connections also enlarge the meaning and significance of the Far Northwest as part of the Civil War era. Seen whole, Lincoln's links with the Pacific Northwest are moments of illumination for understanding his notable leadership roles as well as for comprehending the expansion and development of the Oregon Country. Together, these Lincoln links and Oregon Country advancements add another layer of meaning and significance to the history of the mid-nineteenth-century United States, particularly its political history.



Before Abraham Lincoln connected with the Oregon Country, he and that region, separately, stumbled through a series of stuttering steps. In Lincoln's case, his insular family experiences, his inadequate education, and his initial political allegiances circumscribed his earliest acquaintance with the trans-Mississippi American West. Although his three states of residence in his early years (1809-1831)—Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois—were part of “the West,” he knew little about the region beyond the Mississippi. His less than one year of formal schooling also limited his geographical knowledge. In the early 1830s, when Lincoln became a member of the Whigs, both that political party and Lincoln exhibited much less interest in the American West than did the expansionist Democrats.³

During the 1830s Lincoln was finding his way as a Whig politician in Illinois. Elected to the state legislature in 1834, he gradually assumed a leading role in his party during the eight years he served in the Illinois legislature. Revealingly, Lincoln avoided the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian Democratic political tradition that won over so many frontier areas like those of Lincoln's earliest residences. Instead, he joined the Whigs, declaring Henry Clay his “beau ideal” as a political leader. Like most other Whigs, Lincoln supported Clay's program of internal improvements: banks, tariffs, roads (and later railroads), expansive land policies for settlers, canals, and improved educational programs. Whigs like Lincoln were convinced that these steps were the best route for individual improvement as well as national economic expansion. Lincoln's affinity

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for these economic plans, which had begun with Federalist Alexander Hamilton and expanded as the American System under John Quincy Adams, remained centrally important to Lincoln after he switched to the Republican Party in the mid-1850s. He spoke for internal improvements as part of the Republican platforms in the elections of 1856 and 1860, and they became, as well, parts of his presidential policies from 1861 to 1865.⁴

Although internal improvements were notably important for westerners from the early 1840s onward, Lincoln remained relatively silent on other political issues significant to residents west of the Mississippi. Conversely, Lincoln's long-time political rival in Illinois, Stephen A. Douglas, emerged as an enthusiastic cheerleader for western expansion, much earlier than Lincoln. As a Democratic legislator in Illinois (1836-1837), a member of the U. S. House of Representatives (1843-1847), and a U. S. senator (1847-1861), Douglas often stood in the vanguard of political leaders calling for the development of the trans-Mississippi American West. Serving as chair of the territorial committees in both the House and Senate, Douglas formulated and led expansionistic policies. But, like most of the leading Whigs, Lincoln was slower to sense the growing importance of the West in America's future.⁵

Even in the early to mid-1840s, as controversies swirled around the annexation of Texas, the settlement of the Joint Occupation of Oregon, and the outbreak of the Mexican-American War, Lincoln was tardy in his reactions. That would change when he became a member of Congress (1847-1849), where he was forced to become involved in the verbal battles over the Mexican-American War. He also took part in the increasingly complex and volatile congressional debates about Oregon's becoming a territory.

A few minor documents from the beginning of the 1840s mention Lincoln's links with Oregon. As early as 1843, he is cited as attending meetings in Illinois concerning the "Oregon question."⁶ During the election of 1844, news of settlers heading up the Oregon Trail rang across the Illinois prairies and filled the columns of the state's newspapers, setting off verbal jousts over expansion. The Joint Occupation of Oregon moved to the arena center, and Lincoln, at least, cast a half glance toward Oregon. In a speech in July 1846, he dealt with "the Oregon Question,"

the Mexican-American War and the annexation of Texas, the latter of which had occurred the previous year.⁷

Lincoln's position on Oregon was not clear, however. One Illinois newspaper urged him to be more forthright on the British-American competition for the Oregon Country, especially after it became obvious that he planned to run for U. S. Congress. Was he "for 54 4[0], or [was he] for 'compromising' away our Oregon territory to England." The newsman added: "This, the People ought to know before they vote next August. No shuffling, Mr. Lincoln. Come out, square."⁸

Lincoln did not respond to the issue, keeping silent on Oregon until its possible territorial organization forced itself on him in 1848, during his time in Congress.



Meanwhile, Oregon transitioned from its first stages of exploration and settlement to new cultural and economic developments in the 1830s and 1840s as Lincoln emerged as an Illinois and national politician. By the mid-1840s two spheres of influence had gradually evolved in the Oregon Country. The more powerful and longer-lasting of the two, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) of England, dominated much of the region for two decades, especially after Dr. John McLoughlin, the towering, imperial, and indefatigable HBC leader, arrived at Ft. Vancouver in 1824. For twenty-one years, spinning out his influence like an unbreakable web, the lordly McLoughlin controlled much of the economy and development of the Pacific Northwest.

The other sphere of influence, commencing with the arrival of American missionaries in the mid-1830s, promised much but eventually proved to be a rather weak competitor to the powerful HBC. In 1834, Jason Lee founded a Methodist mission in the Willamette Valley, near present-day Salem. Two years later, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and Henry and Eliza Spalding, sponsored by a combined Protestant group, arrived in the Northwest to begin missions at Waiilatpu (close to Walla Walla, Washington) and Lapwai (near Lewiston, Idaho), respectively. Although the missionaries came to convert and "civilize" Indian tribes of the Northwest, conversions were few and problems numerous, and mounting. By 1843, Lee had been recalled from Oregon, and the

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Dr. John McLoughlin (left), chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company, and Jason Lee (right), leader of the Oregon Methodist Mission, competed for dominance in the Oregon Country in the 1830s and 1840s. (Oregon Historical Society Research Library, McLoughlin, carte de visite 707; Lee, image 8342.)

Whitmans and Spaldings faced increased opposition from their Native charges and from Catholic priests, who were often more successful in converting Indians than the Protestants.

Just as the missions were in increasingly shaky circumstances, farmers began to dream of Oregon. They were forced to ponder a move west by the tough economic times invading the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys, particularly following the Panic of 1837. Travelers, congressmen, and other cheerleaders trumpeted the rich, available lands in the coastal Pacific Northwest, a region of mild climate, few troublesome Indians, and agricultural riches.⁹

And the emigrants came. The first group traveled the Oregon Trail in 1841. By the mid-1840s, roughly another four thousand had come, adding up to more than five thousand Americans in the Oregon Country.

The mounting numbers of newcomers traversing the Oregon Trail called for new decisions. In 1846, the Joint Occupation agreement signed in 1818 between the British and the Americans ended; the Hudson's Bay Company retreated from Fort Vancouver to Fort Victoria, just north of what eventually became the American-Canadian border. In the same year, British and American diplomats hammered out a series of agreements that set the boundary between Canada and U. S. at the 49th parallel.¹⁰

These events on the north Pacific coast demanded attention, first within the territory and then on the national scene. Before long, the controversies swirling about the present and future of the Oregon Country came within the purview of Abraham Lincoln. By the mid-1840s the U. S. was pulsating with conflicts rolling out of the American West, especially from Texas and Oregon. When the Democratic candidate, James K. Polk, asserted that as president he would "re-annex" Texas and "re-occupy" Oregon, expansion was in the air. Texas, Oregon, and, soon, the Southwest in the Mexican-American War, were front-page news. And even a reluctant, non-expansionist Whig like Abraham Lincoln would be forced to take more explicit stances. These controversies led Lincoln into his first contacts with the Oregon Country.



As these events were sweeping up to a peak of national controversy, Oregonians were trying to deal with a series of vexing problems. Even before the Oregon Country became legal U. S. territory, residents were organizing politically. A number of pressing needs converged to impel them to form what would become the Provisional Government of Oregon. When Ewing Young, a former fur trader, died without a proper will in 1841, when increasing numbers of emigrants came on the Oregon Trail after 1841, and when marauding wolves endangered the Willamette Valley's growing herds of livestock, residents organized a series of meetings to deal with these perplexing issues. In 1843, building on the momentum of previous gatherings to establish a court to probate Young's will and to deal with land and other topics bothering incoming immigrants, the so-called "Wolf Meetings" moved steadily toward a tentative regional government. Then, on 2 May 1843, at Champoege, former mountain man and now Oregon resident Joseph L. Meek

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called for a dramatic vote for or against organizing a new government. Folklore, exaggeration, and controversy blanket and complicate what is known about these important decisions at Champoege. But a majority of attendees—either by a close vote or by “a large majority”—supported the American settlers’ organizational efforts. A Provisional Government of Oregon was soon on the books. In continually revised form it served Oregon until March 1849. It would “govern,” however tentatively, a wide swath of present-day areas, including Oregon, Washington, Idaho, portions of Montana and Wyoming, and western Canada.¹¹

Some of the issues the Provisional Government discussed were similar to those facing Lincoln when he became president in 1861 and had to appoint territorial officials in several areas of the American West. How would the new government be organized politically? Who would hold the reins of power? How would a balance of leadership be achieved between elected and appointed office holders? And of central importance to the mounting numbers of immigrants: what was to be done about land ownership, military organization, and dealings with Indians?

In its half-dozen years of existence, the Provisional Government inched forward by slow accretion. After trying out an elected three-person executive, the government moved to a single governor, George Abernethy, who served from 1845 to 1848. The legislature, first a small committee, evolved into the Oregon House of Representatives, also in effect from 1845 to 1848. Similarly, launched with one supreme judge and lower courts, the judiciary branch expanded into a Supreme Court, with other lower courts dealing with probate and other legal matters. All these moves toward organization began while the Oregon Country was under Joint Occupation; once that competitive international agreement ended in 1846, the Provisional Government took on more significance.

The major challenge facing the Provisional Government was two-pronged. Officials wanted to adopt a land policy that drew new settlers to Oregon but one that also satisfied them once they arrived. Heeding these growing needs, the government generously provided land for new residents in 1843. Claimants could hold 640 acres of land if they improved on it. (Subsequent federal legislation allowed for 320 acres for each adult man and another 320 for his wife.) Here was a forerunner of the famous Homestead Act that Lincoln touted as an ambitious Republican

politician in the 1850s and that he signed as president in 1862. These generous grants of land in the fertile Willamette Valley were a huge magnet in drawing land-hungry and ambitious farmers to the Oregon Country. But how to gain the land from Indian tribes and to secure land titles recognized in an established court of law were particularly difficult because the Provisional Government was extra-legal, not recognized by either the British or American governments before 1846, nor by the U. S. government after the areas became American territory in 1846.¹²

Oregon's sociocultural profile rapidly changed in the later 1840s and early 1850s as a result of the pipeline of emigrants continuing to pour into the region. The competition between the HBC and the missions, which had dominated the Oregon Country from the mid-1830s to the mid-1840s, also transitioned in a new direction. The region was evolving into a family farm society. Year after year hundreds of emigrants, especially from the midwestern river valleys, flooded into Oregon, bringing with them occupational, political, and economic experiences that would reshape Oregon cultural landscapes.

The emigrants were, most of all, people of the land. The land donated to the earliest arrivals under the Provisional Government allowed the incoming families to begin afresh in a new country. When Congress passed the Donation Land Act of 1850, accepting much of what had occurred under the Provisional Government and extending its coverage for several years, the act greatly expanded the draw to Oregon. The farm families came with a decided cast of mind; they were not yet market farmers, and they did not exhibit the speculative and transitory tendencies of so many single men who flocked to California after the discovery of gold in 1848-49. Oregon became increasingly the home of farm families bent on living comfortable and satisfied lives in the fertile lands, mild climate, and relatively safe Eden they had chosen.¹³

The conduit of land-hungry emigrants continued to flow. At the end of 1850, the population of the Oregon Country stood at about fifteen thousand. Even though the California Gold Rush dramatically redirected the emigration route to the West Coast in the early 1850s, immigrant agriculturists and their families continued to roll into Oregon. Indeed, Oregonians came to accept a story, undoubtedly apocryphal, that defined their differences from Californians. In southern Idaho, where the Oregon

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Trail forked, a two-part sign is said to have pointed immigrants toward California or Oregon. The sign pointing to California featured a gold nugget, that to the north the word Oregon. Those after the almighty dollar, said the Oregonians, went to California; those who could read came on to Oregon.

If the newcomers transported their attachments to the land into Oregon, they also imported their political enthusiasms to the new country. One observer succinctly summed up these predilections. In Oregon, he reported, “there are but two occupations ... farming and politics.”¹⁴ Most of the new arrivals came as Democrats or as persons tied to the platform ideas of the Democrats. Like Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, they preferred federal governments that ruled least, leaving more legislative and administrative power at state and local levels. Just as President Jackson had taken on and defeated the U. S. Bank, which he viewed as the symbol of bloated capitalism, centralism, and monopoly, Democrats who came to and resided in Oregon wanted to make their own decisions, keeping choices out of the hands of those they considered arrogant and octopus-like monopolists. Gradually in the 1850s, Oregon Democrats spoke increasingly for popular sovereignty, which meant more than Senator Stephen Douglas’s idea of allowing people to decide on slavery issues in his notorious Kansas-Nebraska Bill of 1854. In the Oregon Country, Democrats—and some of their opponents as well—wanted federal government clutches off their affairs and local, democratic control as their *modus operandi*. These ideas—the opposite of those Lincoln would espouse in the 1850s—won over the Oregon Country by the early 1850s and held sway in that decade.



As early as the 1820s, well before settlement by American farmers had begun, some Oregon enthusiasts had called for organization of the joint-occupation area as a new U. S. territory and begun to introduce bills to that effect in the U. S. Congress. The proposals for territorial status for Oregon continued in the 1830s and 1840s, with many thinking this development would win the area for the United States. News of the massacre of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and others at their mission in November 1847 and the resultant Cayuse War the following year

provided additional emotional support for organizing Oregon as a territory. The people of the area needed aid from the federal government to protect them from Indian attacks. Driven by the urgency of these dramatic events, the legislature of Oregon's Provisional Government hurried a petition to the U.S. Congress, again calling for territorial status for the region.

By time the petition reached Congress, the initial steps toward Oregon territorial organization had already begun. Buoyed by President James K. Polk's call for the "re-annexation of Oregon" and the compromise border agreement in 1846, Stephen A. Douglas, now in the Senate after several years in the House, had pushed for Oregon as a new territory. When representatives from Oregon arrived in the nation's capital with memorials for territorial organization, they found that Douglas, chair of the Senate's Committee on Territories, had already introduced such legislation. But the issue quickly became enmeshed in much larger controversies.

During the first months of 1848, previously contested debates in Congress about Oregon's status gained new intensity. The nation's victory in the Mexican-American War turned the controversy red hot. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in February 1848 included the cession of California and New Mexico (comprising those two present states and portions of Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and Colorado). Congress and the rest of the country wanted to know what would happen to these new areas: would slavery be allowed? would the areas be free of slavery? or what other compromises could be worked out? The question of Oregon becoming a new territory quickly became part of the verbal conflicts threatening to rip apart the country. By early summer 1848, one Lincoln scholar writes, "the debate over slavery in the territories grew intense, posing the gravest threat to national unity since the South Carolina nullification crisis of 1832-33."¹⁵



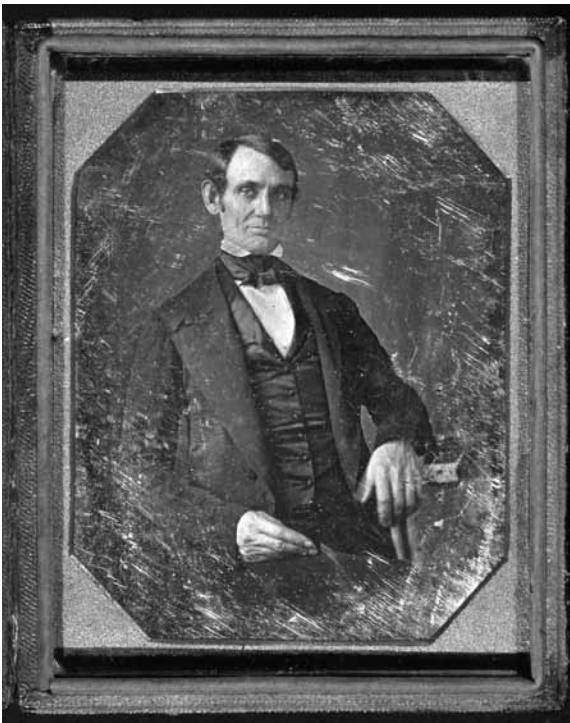
Abraham Lincoln, although not a leading figure in the fiery debates over Oregon's possible territorial status, was intensely involved in these issues. Indeed, even though Lincoln had been only tangentially tied to Oregon until his congressional years, for the period stretching from early

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summer 1848 to late summer and early fall 1849 Lincoln was linked to Oregon by two major decisions. These two events were among the most significant of Lincoln's political connections with Oregon before he entered the White House nearly a dozen years later.

Soon after Lincoln came to Washington in December 1847 to take his seat in the House of Representatives he became embroiled in partisan politics. By this time, the Mexican-American War had been underway for nineteen months, with the bloody military engagements already in the past. As a loyal Whig, Lincoln strongly opposed the war, and his surprising attacks on Democratic President Polk in December 1847-January 1848 stirred up Whigs in Illinois. These political controversies came back to haunt Lincoln in later political contests, especially in the Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858 and even into the presidency.¹⁶

Other events were more important, however, in forging Lincoln's links with the Oregon Country. In late summer 1846, looking ahead to what might occur at the close of the Mexican-American War, Pennsylvania Congressman David Wilmot and several other colleagues had introduced legislation to amend a war appropriation bill. The amendment called for



Congressman-elect Abraham Lincoln paid little attention to the Oregon Country in the early 1840s. Later in the decade, he supported territorial status for Oregon without slavery and was offered, but rejected, positions as secretary and then governor of the new territory. (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographic Division, LC-USZC4-2439.)

prohibiting slavery in any territory the U. S. might win from Mexico. The Wilmot Proviso, as it came to be called, passed the House but not the Senate. Although that notable amendment died in Congress, it became the rallying cry—the no-expansion principle—that many northern antislavery Whigs and Democrats supported. The proviso also became the strongly held position of Abraham Lincoln, a stance he resolutely stuck to for the next fifteen years and carried into the White House. It was also the political position that shaped Lincoln’s actions toward Oregon in late summer 1848.

One other happening illuminates Lincoln’s attitudes toward issues involving the Oregon Country. In the first session of the 30th Congress, convening from December 1847 until August 1848, Lincoln made no notable comments on slavery. But in the second session, Lincoln revealed, for the first time on a national stage, his attitudes about the peculiar institution. In January 1849, after several other Whig politicians had attempted similar measures, Lincoln announced his intention to introduce a bill to end slavery and the slave trade in Washington, D. C. Lincoln’s bill, if it received the support of white male voters in the District of Columbia, would gradually end slavery in the nation’s capital.¹⁷ Although his views were quite conservative and much less controversial than parallel legislation that abolitionist legislators promoted, Lincoln could not gather the needed support and never introduced the legislation. Perhaps his ideas on compensation for slave owners—and most certainly his proposal to support fugitive slave retrievals—alienated some potential supporters. Much later, Lincoln explained his actions: “finding that I was abandoned by my former backers and having little personal influence, I *dropped* the matter knowing that it was useless to prosecute the business at that time.” These attitudes surfaced after his votes on the establishment of the Oregon Territory but likely represent his thinking about slavery as he voted on the Oregon measure. He retained his support for the idea and probably relished signing a bill to end slavery in Washington, D. C., when in the White House in 1862-63.¹⁸

These ideas on slavery, its possible extension westward, and the Wilmot Proviso, as well as controversies over partisan politics, came together in Lincoln’s links vis-à-vis Oregon in the late spring and summer of 1848. The bitter debates and emotionally contested votes in Congress

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in the first months of 1848 dragged out and then ended quickly. When the year began, champions of antislavery and proslavery measures were already advancing their intense opinions. Most northern antislavery advocates (but not the most radical abolitionists) reluctantly accepted the constitution's protection of slavery where it already existed, but they wanted to stop its spread, especially in any new western areas added to the republic. Conversely, proslavery forces were convinced they must not only protect the institution where it was but also find ways to foster its extension into new frontier regions. Those conflicting viewpoints stoked many fiery congressional debates in early 1848 and thereafter.

The mounting conflicts in Congress in 1847-48 surrounding Oregon's run toward territorial status touched clearly and extensively on Lincoln's political stances. But he did not speak out publicly and enter the fray. Although Lincoln's votes on the House floor revealed his forcefully felt positions on matters increasingly dividing his country, he made no major speeches on these issues as a U. S. Congressman. On one occasion he threatened to speak out on the proposed territories, but under the pressures of time and the discouragement of some of his House colleagues he decided not to.¹⁹

Nor did he write to friends or political cronies about Oregon and the slavery debates delaying its territorial organization. True, he voted on the measures dealing with Oregon's possible territorial status, but these issues had not yet become the central planks of his political platform, as they later did, beginning with the Kansas-Nebraska imbroglio of 1854.

Other politicians, Democrats especially, were more publicly involved than Lincoln with the debate over Oregon. President Polk pushed hard for organizing Oregon as a territory, particularly after he received news of the Whitman Massacre and subsequent Cayuse War in 1847-48. The president, realizing the divisive issues surrounding the slavery conflict and their increasing linkage with Oregon, called for extending the Missouri Compromise line, which had been hammered out in 1820-21, all the way to the Pacific Coast. Douglas, Lincoln's long-time rival and the new chairman of the Senate Committee on Territories, also championed using the Missouri Compromise line of 36° 30' as a way to close the Oregon debates and move on. Douglas repeatedly tried to keep the compromise

at the forefront in the organization of Oregon, but without success.

Northern Whigs and other antislavery supporters would have none of this. In the closing years of Polk's presidency, Whigs preferred delaying tactics. If a Whig won the White House in fall 1848, they reasoned, the newly elected president could appoint party warhorses or other regulars to territorial offices. Polk understood these politically motivated actions. As he recorded in his diary, his Whig opponents wanted "to leave the Territories of Oregon, California and New Mexico without Territorial Governments ... [because] they may stand some chance to elect a Whig President."²⁰

Lincoln's votes on Oregon beginning in spring and extending into August 1848 revealed his growing support for the Wilmot Proviso or for similar legislation keeping slavery from expanding farther into the trans-Mississippi West. Lincoln voted against an Oregon territorial bill that would have extended the Missouri Compromise to the Pacific. The vote was 82 (yes) to 121 (no) against the bill in the House. He probably voted with the nays because he did not want to allow the possibility of slavery in the West below the 36° 30' line. Conversely, when an Oregon bill was introduced adopting phrasing from the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 that disallowed slavery in the Old Northwest (the present midwestern states), Lincoln supported that legislation, evidently thinking this was a surer path to keeping slavery out of the trans-Mississippi West.

One scholar studying congressional voting in summer 1848 mistakenly argues that Lincoln "was obstructive with reference to Oregon." To the contrary, he rather consistently followed the Whig Party line in his voting pattern on Oregon,²¹ supporting Oregon bills that utilized statements from the Northwest Ordinance or the Wilmot Proviso. Indeed, several years later he exaggerated the number of his votes but correctly identified his stance when he asserted to his friend Joshua Speed, "When I was in Washington I voted for the Wilmot Proviso as good as forty times. ... I now do no more than oppose the *extension* of slavery." And in one case, very briefly, Lincoln made clear his general views. In reference to the Wilmot Proviso, he told his House colleagues, "I am a Northern man, or rather, a Western free state man, with a constituency I believe to be, and with personal feelings I know to be, against the extension of slavery."²² While not yet closely linked to Oregon in late summer 1848, Abraham

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Lincoln was beginning to formulate his stance on the slavery issue: he would accept slavery where the constitution protected it in established states, but he would oppose all possible expansions of slavery into new territories, including Oregon.

Revealingly, roughly one hundred and fifty years later, as the United States began to ponder anew the complicated meanings of a fractious Civil War, the nation still did not comprehend the full meaning of these events beginning to unfold in the late 1840s. Nor have many American historians. True, more and more Americans were coming to realize that slavery and controversies over it were the major reason a civil war erupted in 1861, but very few understood that the conflict also involved a deadly competition for the trans-Mississippi West. Both sides—North and South—were beginning to see that the section that won the West would most likely win the race for power and dominance in the United States. Clearly, the controversies stretching from 1848 to secession and the attack on Fort Sumter were as much about the West as about slavery. In 1848, in his new connection with Oregon and its attempts to become a new western territory, Lincoln was beginning to realize the regional as well as the slavery issues swirling through the country.²³

As Lincoln ended his two years in Congress in March 1849, he became embroiled in a sticky competition for a federal position before being offered two different appointments in Oregon. After a slow start in spring 1849 in the race for the commissioner of the U.S. General Land Office, Lincoln threw himself whole-heartedly into the contest. Stiff and acrimonious rivalry ensued, with Lincoln losing out to Justin Butterfield, an Illinois lawyer less involved than Lincoln in the election of 1848 that brought Whig Zachary Taylor into the White House. Lincoln was deeply—if not bitterly—disappointed with the outcome.

On the heels of Lincoln's loss the entirely unexpected telegram arrived from Washington offering him the secretaryship of the new Oregon Territory. The tendered position came nearly one year after Lincoln had supported the legislation organizing the new territory. The surprising offer begs for explanation. The constitution gave Congress the right to organize territories after the original states were established on the East Coast. Over time presidents had assumed the duty of appointing a governor, secretary, three judges, and other officials in each newly minted

territory. This power to appoint territorial officials became an important part of an expanding presidential patronage in the nineteenth century.²⁴

The telegram from Secretary of State John M. Clayton naming Lincoln the Oregon Territorial secretary at a salary of \$1,500 was particularly unusual because Lincoln had not been nominated for the post, nor had he expected it. Perhaps the Taylor administration was compensating Lincoln, offering him a consolation prize, after his loss in the bitter battle for commissioner of the General Land Office. Clayton sent his letter appointing Lincoln on 10 August 1849. Eleven days later Lincoln answered the secretary of state “respectfully declin[ing] the office.” Without explaining his reasons for rejecting the offer, Lincoln reiterated at length his desire for Simeon Francis, his journalist friend in Springfield, to be given the position. There is no evidence that Lincoln gave the offer serious consideration even though he had vigorously supported Taylor’s run for the presidency and, according to the political customs of the time, deserved some kind of reward for his political activities.²⁵

One month later, on 20 September, the second message from Washington arrived in Springfield. This time the invitation, coming from Secretary of Interior Thomas Ewing, was for governor of the Oregon Territory at a salary of \$3,000. This offer, with added prestige and remuneration, caused Lincoln more pause. Should he accept? What would be the impact on his political career should he take this position in far-off Oregon?

The available details behind the gubernatorial offer and Lincoln’s reactions to it, although not fully in view, nonetheless provide tantalizing hints of what might have happened. First, the chronology of the second offer overlaps the first. Were the two cabinet members confused in their offers of Oregon leadership since a second offer came before Lincoln had fully rejected the first? On 21 August, the very day Lincoln wrote to Secretary Clayton declining the position of territorial secretary, his fellow Whig and his doctor in Springfield, Anson G. Henry, wrote to Secretary Ewing that Lincoln “has declined the office of Governor of Oregon, and for reasons I presume entirely personal to himself and *certain friends* whose claims he early pressed upon Gen. Taylor for appointments to office.” But Dr. Henry wanted to assure President Taylor and his cabinet secretary that Lincoln was “disposed to yield the administration his

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most cordial support notwithstanding his refusal to take the office for *himself* so long as his friends are unprovided for.”²⁶ Another Illinois acquaintance telegraphed Secretary Ewing to promise that Lincoln, now out of Springfield, would return home soon and reply to Washington.

But Lincoln was delayed in returning home, and a bit of impatience surfaced in Washington. Even though Lincoln continued to recommend Simeon Francis for the territory’s secretarial position and although Lincoln’s appointment to Oregon’s governorship had been announced in several newspapers, the president and his cabinet had not received an official response from Lincoln—so they thought. On 25 September, Ewing, evidently feeling pressure from Taylor, telegraphed Illinois, asking “Is Mr. Lincoln in Springfield? The President wishes to hear from him immediately.” Meanwhile, Lincoln had received the offer and had answered Ewing on 23 September, but that letter had not arrived before Ewing sent his telegram. So, wanting to make certain his position was clear, Lincoln sent a telegram to Ewing on 27 September: “I respectfully decline Governorship of Oregon; I am still anxious that, Simeon Francis shall be secretary.”²⁷ One scholar has posited that Lincoln chose not to take the position because he was embarrassed to do so when others he had recommended for positions had not gained them, and now he had received, unrequested, two offers.²⁸ And to eliminate any other unanswered questions, Lincoln also wrote Ewing a letter on the same day. Evidently, according to Lincoln, some of his Springfield friends, thinking he had acted too quickly in rejecting the governorship, had delayed sending his answer, hoping to change his mind. But Lincoln settled the question explicitly with his telegram and explanatory letter to Ewing on 27 September.²⁹

Clearly, some of Lincoln’s closest friends and political advisors wanted him to think long and hard about the Oregon offer, but he took a different route. Why was that? What were the major reasons Lincoln rejected a position that promised political attention when doors for political advancement seemed closed in Illinois after his two-year stint in Congress? The salary for the Oregon governorship would be the same as if he had been named commissioner in the Land Office. At the time and in later years, contemporaries and historians cited family and political reasons as explanations.

Considerable disagreement surfaces, however, among those commenting on Lincoln's decisions concerning Oregon. William Herndon, Lincoln's third and final law partner, pointed his opinionated finger of decision making at Lincoln's wife, Mary. Herndon asserted that "Lincoln himself had some inclination to accept" the governorship offer, but "when he brought the proposition home to his fireside, his wife put her foot squarely down on it with a firm and emphatic NO. That always ended it with Lincoln." Another of Lincoln's law partners, John T. Stuart, told Herndon a similar story in an early interview. When Lincoln's political colleagues urged him to take the governorship, he "[s]aid he would if his wife would consent. [She] Refused to do So."³⁰ Undoubtedly Mary would have fretted much about all the separations, dangers, and isolations a removal to Oregon would entail. She worried too about her sickly three-year-old son Eddie (he died the following February), and she may have believed rumors of threatening Indians in Oregon.³¹ (One modern wag, playing on stereotypes, observed that Mary Lincoln did not want to come to Oregon once she learned it was without a Macy's or Nordstroms.) Realizing Mary's hesitations, Lincoln may even have contacted his best friend, Joshua Speed, then in Kentucky, requesting that he and his wife accompany the Lincolns to Oregon so they could enjoy one another's company and support in the faraway West.

But politics and Lincoln's possible political advancement may have been an equally important determining factor in his decision. Oregon was clearly a Democratic territory, so what political future, as a very loyal Whig, would Lincoln have there? Responses from Lincoln's political acquaintances help to answer these questions as well as to explain the political machinations going on behind the scene of the offers. A group of Lincoln's political friends then in Washington, D. C., including former Illinois editor George T. M. Davis, John Addison, an official in the interior department, and others, "united in an effort to have [Lincoln] appointed governor of the territory of Oregon. Those efforts were so far crowned with success as to be dependent only upon the willingness of Mr. Lincoln to accept the position to secure his appointment."³² Addison wrote to Lincoln apprising him of what his political supporters in the nation's capital had done. Later, after Lincoln had decided not to take the position, he wrote to Addison, thanking him and "all other friends

who have interested themselves in having the governorship of Oregon offered to me; but on as much reflection as I have had time to give the subject, I cannot consent to accept it.” Lincoln also asked Addison to thank Davis, “especially, for his kindness in the Oregon matter.”³³

If these were the actions in the East initiating Lincoln’s nomination for the governorship, others at the western end helped shape his response. Former law partner John Todd Stuart provided the fullest account of the actions that led to Lincoln’s uncertain steps toward rejection. Stuart and Lincoln were in court together in Bloomington, Illinois, when the offer from Secretary Ewing arrived, via a message from a friend in Springfield. Lincoln asked Stuart what he thought, and Stuart replied: “I told him I thought it was a good thing; that he could go out there and in all likelihood come back from there as a Senator when the State was admitted. Mr. Lincoln finally made up his mind that he would accept the place if Mary would consent to go.” Then Stuart added the story about Lincoln’s contacting Joshua Speed, but he concluded the deciding factor was Mary. She “would not consent to go out there,” Stuart noted; “Mary had a very violent temper, but she had more intellectual power than she has generally be[en] given credit for.”³⁴

Other Lincoln biographers are convinced that Lincoln decided against going to Oregon primarily because of its obvious Democratic cast in politics. True, he might have a run at a senatorial seat if Oregon quickly became a state, but how long would that take in an area safely in the Democratic camp? If that indeed was Lincoln’s thinking, the arguments make sense—with one major and significant exception. A decade later Edward D. Baker, Lincoln’s Whig friend in Illinois and now a very recent Republican in Oregon, by careful and wise compromises, captured one of Oregon’s first senatorial seats.

Whatever the deciding reasons, Lincoln nearly always remained silent afterwards about his decision. However, Lincoln’s political friend and supporter from Illinois, Isaac Arnold, does mention one later Lincoln reference to the Oregon governorship, without providing a source. When visitors to the White House asked Lincoln for an army commission for the son of Justin Butterfield, to whom he had lost the disappointing race for commissioner of the General Land Office, Lincoln “then spoke of the offer made to him of the governorship of Oregon. To which the reply

was made: ‘How fortunate that you declined. If you had gone to Oregon, you might have come back as senator, but you would never have been President.’ ‘Yes, you are probably right,’ he said.” Mary also recalled the decisions. Once the Lincolns were safely ensconced in the presidency, she reminded her husband that she had saved him from becoming isolated and forgotten out in the territories. What might have happened to Lincoln—and to Oregon—if Lincoln accepted the governorship? As one scholar rightly notes, “In retrospect, Oregon’s loss became the nation’s gain.”³⁵



After his two years in Congress, the disappointment of the Land Office commissionership, and his rejection of the Oregon offers, Lincoln claimed that he lost interest in politics. He exaggerated his political inactivity, however. He remained involved in several ways, regularly reading political news stories, delivering memorial addresses of politicians (including those for Henry Clay and Zachary Taylor), and continuing his political correspondence with dozens of friends and political cronies. Perhaps Lincoln’s political fires were banked some between 1849 and 1854, but the live coals remained, needing only a fresh breeze of new controversies to reignite the political embers. The winds of conflict came in 1854, in the Kansas-Nebraska controversy, and they remained, eventually sending Lincoln into the White House in 1861.

Meanwhile, several of Lincoln’s closest friends had moved to Oregon. In his continuing connections with them and in his mounting interest in slavery and its dramatic impact on American politics, Lincoln moved into a second and new stage of his links with the Oregon Country.

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