

Pacific northwest history



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Pacific Northwest History-II 05 August 2009 Origins of the Pacific Northwest

First of all, the Pacific Northwest region of the US is sometimes hard to define in a precise manner. This is due to the region having easy access when coming from the outside but also difficulty moving around within the region due to the abundance of physical barriers inside it. Boundaries of the Pacific Northwest were largely determined by politicians engaged in diplomatic and horse-trading efforts rather than the natural geographic boundaries on its borders. For purposes of history, the American Northwest (or alternatively, American West) starts at lands west of the Missouri River that begun during the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and continued with the acquisitions of Texas, the Oregon territory, the Mexican Cessions and ended with the Gadsden Purchase in 1853. This history is written from a viewpoint of whites, with the Indian tribes living on the land previously for several centuries largely ignored, often mentioned only as footnotes. The Indians did not have much documentary records on this.

Another important fact when considering the history of the US Pacific Northwest is to acknowledge the existence of the native peoples prior to the arrival of the European settlers to the area. Many history books hardly touch on the sensitive topic and if they do, only cursorily. The Indian peoples, especially in California, burned the foothills and valleys, increasing the spread of grasslands and the number of deer (White 3). In other words, they developed the land to generally make it habitable primarily through slash-and-burn tactics of clearing and this made their land attractive to the new settlers interested in cattle raising ventures. The US Pacific Northwest history is a story of conquests and the mixing of diverse racial groups and is generally conceded to have begun when Europeans first arrived there in

1528 (ibid. 5).

Early travelers to the region noted the charred and blackened landscapes, a result of deliberate burning. An account by the peripatetic David Douglas, a Scot employed by the Horticultural Society of London, noted burned and charred terrain in the Willamette Valley in his 1826 journals. The natives said its purpose was to hunt deer easily (Robbins 24). Overton Johnson predicted the West, notwithstanding their wildness and danger, offer inducements for white mans stronger hand to subdue the present wild and implacable inhabitants (ibid. 50). Skirmishes gradually reduced Indian populations and diseases like malarial outbreaks further decimated the natives, illnesses Indians believed were brought by the white settlers (ibid 59). Although the first whites to stumble into the region were Spaniards, they got there not as explorers or conquerors but had gotten lost (White 5). The West was settled primarily due to fear and greed (ibid. 27) such as French movements to the west of Louisiana interpreted by Spaniards as a threat to the Mexican mines. The Spaniards led by Hernando Cortés had their hands full in the Yucatan peninsula (Maya Indians) and in Mexico (against Aztecs). Cortés got enamored of the wealth in Tenochtitlan – modern day Mexico City (Clendinnen 17).

What triggered the transformation of the West started in the mid-nineteenth century – a mass migration of millions of Anglo-Americans, black Americans, Europeans, Mexican immigrants and the Chinese as labor for the railroads (White 183). The author described this movement of people as a flood that changed the social landscape forever from being largely of an Indian and Spanish character. The migrants were in search of timber but the imperative was really mining between 1850-1880 that settled vast areas of Idaho,

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Montana, Colorado, Utah, Nevada and Arizona. White calls them the mining rushes of which the most famous is the California Gold Rush of 1849.

Government sold public lands to turn these into private lands with Indians ceding land and becoming dispossessed. Social conflicts were inevitable due to cultural differences such as riots against Chinese and Indians being hunted (ibid. 328).

Works Cited

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