

Pacific northwest history



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Pacific Northwest History 03 August 2009 Joint Occupancy Treaty As a brief backgrounder, the dispute concerning the US Pacific Northwest region stemmed from lingering claims by both Britain and the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. This is known in history books as the Oregon Question because both of the countries had prior treaties with Russia and Spain respectively concerning this US region. The Pacific Northwest, depending on which historian to believe, comprises the entire states of Oregon and Washington to include northern California and the Canadian province of British Columbia. Other writers tend to include southeastern Alaska, western part of Idaho and parts of western Montana. The potential for conflict existed because of the agricultural bounties in this largely unexplored region such as thick coniferous forests that can support a large timber industry (ideal for shipbuilding too), lumber for commercial uses, an almost unlimited supply of fur, to include sea otters and the very rich fishing grounds, particularly the chinook salmon considered by many as “pink gold” that served as a crude currency for barter (Merchant 97).

There was also another reason for staking a claim: geopolitics. America, flush from its relatively recent victory in its war for independence, was eager to spread its wings and this was expressed in its expansionist aspirations via a political philosophy of “Manifest Destiny”. The belief was that America was destined to expand across the North American continent, that is primarily westward from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific seaboard to include Canada, Cuba and Mexico, even parts of Central America. These territorial ambitions were advanced as obvious or readily apparent (manifest) and inevitable or inexorable (destiny) but this came into conflict with Great Britain that also explored this US region known as British Columbia.

Viewed from this perspective, the joint occupancy served more as a diplomatic course to exploit the regions riches and avoid a war for resources of which the two countries fought briefly, between 1812-1815 known as the War of 1812. This particular war was actually part of the larger Napoleonic wars in Europe between Great Britain and Napoleon of France. This was actually a *modus vivendi* (a diplomatic accommodation of a temporary nature) despite the political, cultural, economic or cultural differences for the sake of expediency. Incentives for suing peace were very much evident because neither side could gain an upper hand either in territorial gains or military supremacy. The larger reason for waging the war in the first place was also no longer there with the eventual defeat of Napoleon and banishment to exile, hence the two sides agreed to formalize the stalemate with the Treaty of Ghent (Belgium) in 1815. The main achievement of this treaty was the *status quo ante bellum* or status before the war, which restored captured lands, boats and slaves (not fully complied with).

Many of the sore points that led to the war were not addressed completely by this treaty, such as conflicting territorial claims following explorations and staking of claims by both countries in the regions of modern-day Washington, Oregon, Idaho and western Montana which the British called as British Columbia and Americans call as Oregon Country. This was partly addressed by the Treaty of 1818 which established a commonality of interests in the disputed region, hence the term joint occupancy. This treaty was actually a formal agreement respecting fishery rights, restoring black slaves and establishing the 49th parallel as the natural boundary between British Canada and American territory. However, irritants persisted such as perceived increasing encroachment by American fur traders and additional

US immigration to the area. Despite agreements, friction continued especially during the period 1810-1830 that culminated in the Oregon Treaty of 1846. This finally settled the Oregon boundary dispute once and for all (Haas and Blanchard 2). Washington state separated from Oregon in 1853.

Works Cited

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