

set our hands, this twenty-seventh day of July *Anno Domini*, one thousand eight hundred and seventy-eight.

ALEX. S. ABERNETHY, President.  
LYMAN B. ANDREWS,  
CHARLES M. BRADSHAW,  
BENJ. F. DENNISON,  
EDWARD ELDRIDGE,  
FRANCIS HENRY,  
S. M. GILMORE,  
WYATT A. GEORGE,  
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JAMES V. O'DELL,  
GEORGE H. STEWARD,  
SYLVESTER M. WAIT,  
W. BYRON DANIELS, Secretary.

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#### SPANISH FRIARS IN THE OREGON COUNTRY, 1810-1811

Mr. H. R. Wagner, of Berkeley, California, during a recent visit to the Northwest called the attention of a number of investigators to a remarkable record of early exploration hidden in *Niles' Register* for March 10, 1821. It was at once secured from the Library of the University of Washington for publication in the *Washington Historical Quarterly*. Later, Mr. William S. Lewis, corresponding secretary of the East Washington State Historical Society, sent part of the record with comments. Undoubtedly others are searching *Niles' Register* for the same record. It is, therefore, here reprinted in full.

This record of the explorations was not published until several years had elapsed and Mr. Lewis voices the plea that a search be made for the original journals of the friars in order that their work may be more definitely known and placed in the annals of the Pacific Northwest.

It is not often recalled that the United States had shown interest in the California regions so early as 1810-1811 and it is also refreshing to notice the problem of Russia's colony there ten or more years before the announcement of the Monroe Doctrine.

The briefer entry has a fine vein of prophetic vision. One can

almost see plans there for both the Wilkes Expedition of 1838-1842 and of Perry's Expedition to Japan, 1853-1854. Commodore David Porter, who wrote the remarkable letter of 1815, is one of the family from which came five generations of American naval heroes. His letter had no bearings on the work of the Spanish friars in the former document. It is given here because it appears in *Niles' Register* with the account of the friars.

The record in *Niles' Register*, March 10, 1821, pages 21 to 25, is as follows:

#### NORTH WEST COAST

FROM THE NATIONAL INTELLIGENCER, JAN. 25

Senate Chamber, Jan. 20, 1821.

Messrs. Gales & Seaton — The enclosed communication, which I have received from Mr. Robinson, I take the liberty of forwarding to you, with a request, that you will insert it in the *National Intelligencer*. The important information it contains, will, I am persuaded, be highly acceptable to your readers.

I have the honor to be, very respectfully,

JNO. H. EATON.

Washington City, Jan. 15, 1821.

Since the invention of the mariners' compass, and the improvements in shipbuilding, voyages of discovery have been undertaken and executed under the auspices of several nations. The result may be considered of the highest importance to the human race.

The discovery and settlement of the American continent, by a civilized people, forms an epoch in historic annals, more interesting to the family of mankind, than any we have upon record.

Although the nations of Europe have made, and are still making, efforts to obtain a correct knowledge of the coasts of the new world, yet much remains to be done; and we humbly think that the fame and interests of the republic of the U. States are as deeply involved in this subject, as any other nation in the civilized world.

As yet, we are indebted for our knowledge of the continent of America, to other nations than our own. Among the celebrated navigators who occupy a distinguished place in history, Cook, Anson, Vancouver, &c. are the boast of England, and reflect immortal honor on the sovereigns and enlightened statesmen who patronized their voyages.

France speaks with pride of her enterprising Peyrouse. The measures she adopted to ascertain his fate, as well as the sympathy of

mankind, for the loss of so able a navigator, evince the high regard in which his character and talents were held.

The Portuguese and Spaniards, as well as the Dutch and Russians, have emulated each other in equipping expeditions for the circumnavigation of the globe, and more particularly, for exploring the northwest coast of America.

The discoveries of Cook, on the North-West Coast, were of limited extent, nor had he time to explore, with precision, even those parts which he did visit.

Peyrouse was in a similar situation with Cook; he passed merely in view of the coast, but was rarely able to approach it, in consequence of foggy weather. His observations chiefly apply to the Port des Francaise, (at which place he delayed some time) and to the rest of the coast as far south as Monterey; but, even that space, he had scarcely any communication with the shore.

Cook, after leaving the Sandwich Islands, proceeded for the N. W. Coast, and made the land in latitude 44, north, and thence went to Nootka, but even Cook gives us little or no information of the coast.

A navigator of the name of Dixon, has given us some loose and general accounts upon the subject; but, as he was a mere trader, and only visited those places where peltry of the best quality could be procured, we derive little information from him.

The viceroy of Mexico, in the year 1775, ordered three small vessels, with experienced navigators, to proceed from the port of San Blas, and to explore the North West Coast. Obstinate winds, and foggy weather, prevented them from making any observations until they reached latitude 41, north, where they entered a port which they called Trinity.

They extol, in extravagant language, the beauty of the country, and its benign climate. They proceeded from Trinity to latitude  $47\frac{1}{4}$  north, and mention having found an excellent port. From thence they went as far north as 58, but made very superficial examinations of the coast. They touched, on their return voyage, at Port St. Francis, in latitude 38, 18, near which they entered a large bay, well sheltered from the north and southwest, and where they saw the *mouth of a large river*, but had not time to explore it.

They returned to San Blas in October 1775, without having made any discoveries that merit particular notice.

Another expedition sailed from San Blas in 1779, and proceeded as far north as 60, but returned without making any important discoveries. Indeed, from the imperfect manner those expeditions were

equipped, and the want of skill in those who conducted them, much was not to be expected.

Vancouver's voyage has afforded additional lights on the subject, but they are better calculated to awaken, than to satisfy curiosity; and, indeed, he, as well as all preceding navigators on the N. W. coast of America, have entirely neglected the examination of that part of the coast, which most *particularly interests the United States*: I allude to the space between latitude 42 and 49. It is that part of the coast to which the present observations are principally intended to apply.

Should a voyage of discovery be undertaken by the government of the United States, on the principles hereafter suggested, I hope the whole coast, from latitude 42 to the highest latitude of practical navigation on the N. W. coast, will be accurately explored. Because I feel well assured that such an undertaking would not only redound to the fame of our country, and to that of the individuals entrusted with the enterprise, but would produce incalculable advantages to the commerce and prosperity of the United States.

In looking over the best map of Mexico, and the N. W. coast of America, we find that from latitude 42, to the mouth of Columbia River, and to the Straits of Juan de Fuca, the whole coast is represented as destitute of any good bays; and no river of any consequence, except the Columbia, is laid down in the charts. This may, in some degree, be accounted for, from the circumstances before suggested, that the coast has never been closely examined, but the following facts will show, that the coast in question, is worthy of the serious and prompt attention of our government.

During the time I remained in Mexico, in 1816, a copy of an important manuscript was furnished me by one of the revolutionary chiefs, for the express purpose of being communicated to our government. This document, as well as my other papers, was lost, by the circumstances which are detailed in my volume of the Memoirs of the Mexican Revolution; but the important contents of the papers in question, are still fresh in my recollection.

The Spaniards have several missionary establishments on the coast of Old and New California, whence one or two friars are annually dispatched to the interior of the country to convert the Indians to the Christian doctrine, and to obtain topographical information of those regions. Some of those friars were men of great enterprise and perseverance, and have displayed, in their reports, much profound observation on the country they traversed, particularly on its productions, animal and vegetable, and on the lakes and rivers with which it abounds. This valuable information was transmitted with

great care to the City of Mexico, and there locked up in the ecclesiastical archives, except such portion of it as the archbishop of Mexico thought proper to communicate to the viceroy.

In the years 1810 and 11, two friars made an excursion up the River Colorado. This noble river discharges itself in the Gulf of California, about the latitude 32, 40. The bar at its mouth has six to nine fathoms water on it, and the river may be ascended with a line of battle ship at least one hundred miles. The friars followed the course of this river nearly six hundred and fifty miles; they found the current gentle, with scarcely any impediments to its navigation by large vessels nearly the whole distance. Several fine streams emptied into the Colorado, but they did not explore their sources. They state the principal source of the Colorado, to be in the Rocky or Snowy Mountains, between latitude 40 and 41. The description they give of the country through which the Colorado flows, would induce the reader to believe that it is the finest region in the Mexican empire. They represent the banks of the river as being, in many places, one hundred feet above its surface; that the whole country is a forest of majestic trees, and that they had never seen such exuberant vegetation. When they came to the ridge of mountains where the Colorado has its source, they proceeded a few miles on the eastern declivity of the ridge, and, to their astonishment, found several streams pursuing a course nearly opposite to these, on the western side of the ridge. I presume, from the descriptions of the friars, that the streams which thus excited their surprise, were the head waters of the Arkansas, La Platte, and some others of our great rivers, which have their sources in those regions.

The friars spent several days on the eastern side of the ridge — they passed over six distinct rivers, all of which, they say, were of considerable depth and width — they met several roving bands of Indians, who treated them with kindness, and conducted them, by a short rout, on their return, over the ridge to the River Colorado. The distance between the sources of the respective rivers on each side of the ridge, they represent as very trifling, not exceeding 22 or 25 leagues. They represent the ridge as full of deep ravines, and have no doubt that it would be easy to open a water communication by canals, between the rivers before mentioned. They gave a glowing description of the beauty of the country, comparing it to the hills and vales of Andalusia and Grenada! They dwell particularly on the mildness of the climate, and recommended the immediate establishment there of two missionaries.

The original intention of the two friars, was to return to

Monterey, by descending the Colorado, but learning from the Indians that, at a short distance to the west, there were two other rivers as large as the Colorado, they determined on exploring the country, and accordingly, after traveling two days, they came to a spacious lake, which they described to be about forty leagues in circumference; from this lake issued two fine rivers. They descended what they considered the largest stream, whose general course was about W. N. W. After descending about fifty leagues, they represented the river to be deep, and in many places, a mile in width. They continued their route until the river discharged itself on the coast of California, at about the latitude 43 30. They state the bar at the mouth of the river to have on at least twenty feet water. They procured a large canoe from the Indians, and went leisurely along the coast until they reached Monterey. On their route, they discovered several fine harbors and deep bays, which they describe as far superior to the port of Monterey. It is possible, some portion of the remarks of these friars may not be correct, but of the fidelity of their general statements, I have no doubt, particularly as to the important fact of their having descended a river which disembogues on the California coast, at the latitude before mentioned.

One of these friars, in the year 1812, was sent from Monterey to Mexico, with dispatches to the archbishop. On his route from San Blas to the city of Mexico, he was intercepted by a party of revolutionists, and was sent, with his papers, to the headquarters of the patriots. It was a copy of those papers that was put into my hands.

By the treaty recently made between the United States and Spain, the southern limits of our republic, on the Pacific Ocean, will be found somewhere between the latitude 41 and 42 N. The first object which, I presume, will occupy the attention of our government, will be, to send an exploring party by land, conducted by able officers, to examine the tract of country from the headwaters of the Red River and the Arkansas, to the coast of California, and if it should be found that a river, as before described, has its source, and discharges itself within our territory, it requires no gift of prophecy to predict that this section of our country will become highly important.

During the time that an expedition by land is occupied in topographical investigations, could not one or more ships of our navy be dispatched on a voyage of discovery, and in the first instance, to survey accurately the range of coast from our southern to our northern boundary. After accomplishing this essential object, they may proceed along the North West Coast to the extremities of our con-

continent, pass over to the Asiatic coast, and thence shape their course for the Indian Archipelago, carrying our star-spangled banner among a people with whom the civilized world has scarcely yet had any intercourse.—These Indian Islands offer an immense field for American enterprise. They contain upwards of fifteen millions of inhabitants, and cover a space of near five millions of square miles.

Great Britain, and the other European nations, are just beginning to traffic with them; our citizens will soon be among them.

If the United States select a proper site for a town, on the Pacific Ocean, and where between the latitudes 42 and 49, it would speedily become a great commercial emporium. It is not merely that the advantages of the fur trade would be there immediately concentrated, but a traffic would be opened with Asia, with Japan, the Philippine Isles, and with the whole Indian Archipelago. The climate on the Pacific coast, within the before mentioned latitudes, is much milder than the parallel latitudes on the Atlantic, and of course, offers a delightful residence for man; and if the fertility of the soil corresponds with the statements we have received, there is no part of our republic where European emigrants would be more likely to settle than in the country lying between the Pacific Ocean and the head waters of Arkansas and Red River. A chain of military posts, from the two last rivers to our town on the Pacific Ocean, would not only give us the command of the Indian fur trade in those regions, but would open an internal communication, the importance of which would be every day augmenting. The inhabitants of New Mexico would speedily awake from the torpor in which they have been so long, and would flock to our posts and to our establishments on the Pacific Ocean for purposes of traffic. A thousand objects of commerce, of which neither the merchant or manufacturer at present contemplate, would arise, in proportion as those regions became settled by a civilized people, under a liberal government. This is a subject fruitful of important reflections. But my object in this merior, is merely to excite attention to the matter. I shall merely draw outlines, and leave to the reader to form his own conclusions.

Exclusive of the preceding suggestions, there are other considerations of no ordinary character, which appear to me to urge the policy and necessity of our government fixing on a place on the Pacific Ocean, for a commercial and military post.

It would afford our merchant vessels and our navy, shelter and security, the want of which has already been seriously felt by our citizens, whose enterprise has led them to the Pacific Ocean.

It would cause our flag to be respected over regions where, ere long, we may have to act a conspicuous part.

The government of Russia has already planted her standard to the north and to the south of our acknowledged territories on the Pacific Ocean.—The imperial eagle is displayed on the fort at Norfolk Sound, in latitude 57 — a fortification, mounting 100 pieces of heavy cannon, is there erected. About the latitude 38 degrees, 40 minutes, at a place called Badogo Point, the Russians have recently formed an establishment.

The government of Spain has not possessed means to disposes the Russians of these establishments, but she has, at various times, made strong remonstrances to the court of Russia on the subject.

The encroachments of Russia, on the American continent at Norfolk Sound, may have been supported by the same plausible prettexts which Great Britain had used on several occasions, viz: that the country was unoccupied by Spain or any other civilized people, and that the right of Spain over all the north west coast of America, was merely nominal, or very questionable. Without discussing the force or fallacy of these arguments, there can be no question that the Russian settlement at Bodoga Point, is within the universally acknowledged territory of New Spain.

It is well known, that of late years, the Russian cabinet have been anxiously endeavoring to obtain from Spain a cession of territory on the north west coast, and indeed, it has been said, that a treaty to that effect was actually made, but, for some reasons not generally known, it has not yet been carried into effect.

There is no circumstance which has excited more indignation among the Mexican people, than that of the Russians having made an establishment at Badoga Point, and if the Mexican revolutionists had succeeded in their struggle for independence, one of the first acts of the new government would have been the expulsion of th Russians from that post.

Whatever may have been the views of the Russian cabinet in making these establishments in America, I do not conceive it a point of much consequence to discuss, because even if those views were political, or merely commercial, we have it completely in our power to render them abortive, by simply forming the establishment before suggested, anywhere between the latitude 42 and 49.

The enterprise of our citizens would, in a very few years, insure to us the traffic in the fur trade, which the Russians have hitherto enjoyed with the savages on the N. W. coast. The Russians would soon abandon establishments when they ceased to be lucra-



tive; and when they beheld the civilized population of America spreading along the coasts of the Pacific Ocean, and covering the territories between that ocean and the Rocky Mountains, the dreams of Russian ambition (if any were ever indulged) on our continent, would soon be dispelled.

To form an establishment, as before suggested, would not, in my humble opinion, be attended with any new or extraordinary demands on our treasury.

The employment of one or two of our ships of war, at present in commission, would cause little extra expense for the object in question. But, even admitting that a few hundred thousand dollars would be expended, of what importance is it, when compared to the magnitude of the objects to be accomplished? Can our public vessels be better employed than in a survey of our coasts, and in voyages of discovery? How many of our gallant officers would rejoice at an opportunity of seeing opened to their exertions a new path to fame? How many men of science would cheerfully embark in such expeditions?

Can a portion of our military be better employed than in exploring our newly acquired territories? How many of our brave officers would be proud of being appointed on such an expedition? How many naturalists and scientific men would cheerfully, at their own expense, accompany such an expedition?

I am perfectly aware that, in these days of retrenchment, any proposition that bears the features of new expenses, will be frowned on by some of our rigid economists; but, as the object suggested is one in which I humbly conceive the interests of our country, commercially and politically, are deeply involved, I flatter myself, the hints I have thus cursorily thrown out, will attract the consideration of our government and our citizens, and have their due weight at the present, or at some future period.

Very respectfully,

WILLIAM DAVIS ROBINSON.

To the HON. JOHN H. EATON.

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#### THE NORTH-WEST COAST

Doubts are entertained, by intelligent citizens, with whom we have conversed, of the policy and propriety of a disclosure, *at this time*, of the advantages which may probably result to the United States from the possession of an extent of coast on the Pacific. We were not aware, at the time of publishing Mr. Robinson's Memoir, that the