

CAPE DISAPPOINTMENT IN HISTORY

Steamers everywhere throughout the world are guided into port by the lighthouses and lightships guarding the routes of travel. The more dangerous spots are supplied with more numerous warnings against disaster. On the route from San Francisco to Seattle, in passing the $46^{\circ} 10'$ latitude five light signals may be clearly seen. These are: Tillamook Head, Desdemona Light, the Light Ship No. 6, Canby Light and North Head Light and they guard the entrance to the Columbia River. From the little fishing boats which hover nearer the shore one can easily discern the nature of the land upon which the lighthouses stand. Two of the lights, North Head and Canby, are upon a single promontory named Cape Disappointment, yet one cannot be seen from the other because of the extreme irregularity of the coast line. Other government activities are also to be found upon this headland, namely, a first class United States Weather Bureau Station, a first class government wireless base, a Life Saving Station, and Fort Canby with two batteries of long range guns guarding the entrance to the river. All of these go to mark Cape Disappointment as an important strategic point. Canby Light on the southern bluff looks immediately upon the River; North Head Light is further north and west, and both bluffs are connected with the mainland by a neck of land. The whole cape presents from the ocean the appearance of a bold, heavily wooded headland, whose perpendicular scarps arise sharply from the sea and whose isthmus slopes more gradually toward Baker's Bay in the rear.

A visitor on the ocean beaches stretching for about twenty-five miles northward from the cape, might think the name Disappointment significant of the many wrecks that have occurred both upon the beach and at the mouth of the Columbia River. To cross the bar of the Columbia in former years was to endanger both the ship and the lives of the crew. These dangers, however, have been practically done away with by jetties and careful pilotage. Much delay, many narrow escapes and wrecks have taken place here, in fair weather as well as in storms. The currents common to the treacherous waters on the bar carried the ships upon the sands where they lay helpless to be shattered by the breakers of the flood tide. The first European vessel to be lost here, so far as records show, was a supply ship of the Hudson's Bay Company, the *William and Ann*, which went down

in 1829. On the north, Peacock Spit marks where the United States vessel of that name was wrecked in 1841. In the year 1846 the *Shark*, another United States ship, was lost on South Spit. Republic Spit is so called because it caused the wreck of the steamer *Great Republic* in 1879. On Desdemona Sands now stands Desdemona Light, to warn incoming ships from a fate similar to that suffered by the bark *Desdemona* wrecked there in 1857.¹

From Cape Disappointment on the north, to Point Adams on the south, at the discharge of the waters of the Columbia River into the Pacific Ocean, is a stretch of seven miles in an often almost continuous line of surf. In rough and stormy weather the bar seemed very forbidding, so we easily excuse the early navigators for not attempting to cross it. The name Disappointment, however, has a less tragic meaning than one might suppose. It does not mean the disappointment of disaster, but the disappointment of one Captain John Meares, an English navigator, who was unable to verify an earlier Spanish report that a river "San Roc" existed at the 46° latitude. Captain Meares in his vessel *Felice* July 5, 1788, was sailing south from Nookta Sound, for the purpose of exploration. As he was unable to see clearly beyond the line of breakers across the mouth of the river, he was convinced that no such river existed there, sailed back and recorded his feelings by attaching this name to the most prominent landmark.²

This same promontory had been previously named by Bruno Heceta, a Spanish navigator commanding the vessel *Santiago*. On the 17th of August, 1775, he observed the headland which he named cape "San Roque." He did not in his report name the river "San Roc" but called it "Bahia de la Asuncion," and said, "These currents and eddies of water caused me to believe that the place is the mouth of some great river."³ The common report known to Captain Meares and other Pacific Coast navigators was that Heceta sailed into and actually discovered a river, "San Roc," near the 46° latitude, and this river became the object of speculation until its presence was proven by Captain Robert Gray in 1792.

Captain George Vancouver, on his voyage of discovery for the English government, also failed to recognize the presence of a river at the 46° latitude, although his course ran close to the

1 Bancroft, *History of the Northwest Coast*, Vol. II, p. 533.

2 "Extract from the Works of Captain John Meares, Narrative of Voyages in the Pacific" in Robert Greenhow, *History of Oregon and California*, pp. 176-177.

3 "Extract from the Report of Captain Bruno Heceta" in *Ibid.*, pp. 432-433.

outer edge of the bar. He, in 1792, made the positive statement that "no opening, harbor, or place of refuge for vessels was to be found between Cape Mendocino and the Straight of Fuca." He saw Cape Disappointment and described it in his narrative.⁴

When Captain Robert Gray sailed into and actually discovered the river on the 19th day of May, 1792, he called it "Columbia's River" after his ship *Columbia*. To the northern promontory he gave the name "Cape Hancock"; to the southern "Adams Point." It is an interesting fact that, while the southern projection still retains the New England name of Point Adams, the northern cape has kept the more picturesque name, Disappointment. Later in the same year, when at Nootka Sound, Captain Gray met Captain Vancouver, and informed him of the discovery of Columbia's River. To verify this information, Captain Vancouver in the *Discovery*, and Lieutenant Broughton in the *Chatham*, arrived off the mouth of the river on October 20, 1792. Both mentioned the importance of Cape Disappointment as a point of bearing and recognition. Captain Vancouver was unable to enter the river because of the dangers to a ship as large as the *Discovery*, but Lieutenant Broughton in the *Chatham*, which was considerably smaller, sailed in and examined it for about one hundred miles above the mouth, as far as Point Vancouver.⁶

The first overland expedition to reach the mouth of the Columbia River was that of Lewis and Clark. In November, 1805, they visited and explored Cape Disappointment, and Captain Clark examined about four miles of the beach above; his diary tells us that he carved his name on trees both at the beach and on the cape, but careful search has failed to reveal these interesting commemorations to history. Lack of game forced the party to resort to the south side of the river, somewhat further back from the ocean, for their winter quarters. They have left to us what is probably the first detailed map of Cape Disappointment.⁷

In March, 1811, the *Tonquin*, the first supply ship of John Jacob Astor's fur-trading enterprise, under Captain Jonathan Thorne, arrived off the mouth of the Columbia. The weather

⁴ George Vancouver, *Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and Round the World* (London, Robinson, 1798), Vol. I, p. 244.

⁵ "Extract from the Second Volume of the Log-book of the ship *Columbia*" in Greenhow, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 434-436. This extract was made in 1816 by Mr. Bulfinch, of Boston, one of the owners of the *Columbia*. The Log-book has since disappeared but the extract is considered authentic. See, also, Edmond S. Meany, editor, "A New Log of the *Columbia*, by John Boit, on the Discovery of the *Columbia* River and Grays Harbor" in *Washington Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XII, No. 1 (January, 1921). "Roc" is the English spelling of the Roque of the Spaniards.

⁶ T. C. Elliott, editor, "Log of H. M. S. 'Chatham,'" in *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society*, Vol. XVIII, No. 4 (December, 1917), pp. 231-243.

⁷ Reuben Gold Thwaites, editor, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806*, Vol. III.

was rough and the waves were running high, notwithstanding which, Captain Thorne sent out men in the ship's boat to sound the channel of the river. This fool-hardy act, which caused the death of seven members of the little party, emphasizes the character of that stern disciplinarian, Captain Thorne, and may be said to foreshadow the future of his ill-fated ship, which was blown to atoms in the bay of Cloyquot three months later. The members of the party chose a spot about fifteen miles up the opposite side of the river from Cape Disappointment and called the post Astoria, in honor of the head of their Company. A few months later,⁸ when David Thompson descended to the mouth of the river (whose upper waters he had discovered in the summer of 1807), he found that Astor's party had preceded him. He observed Cape Disappointment, and with his scientific instruments, formally confirmed its latitude and longitude.⁹

The Oregon Country now becomes a subject of national import. Washington Irving, in his widely circulated book "Astoria," was influential in arousing the interest of the statesmen and people of the nation in the Oregon Question. The *Tonquin* incident, told realistically by him, helped to make Daniel Webster think the Columbia River too dangerous for a good harbor, and to advocate Puget Sound in its stead as the chief port of the Oregon Country. One can easily see what great effect this would have upon the boundary controversy.

When the War of 1812 was declared, England sent the sloop-of-war *Raccoon*, commanded by Captain Black, to take the trading-post at Astoria. "On the morning of the 30th," (November, 1813), says Franchere, "we saw a large vessel standing in under Cape Disappointment." The long looked for British ship had arrived—too late—for Astoria had just been sold to the North West Company of Canada. However, the motions of taking possession were executed and the station re-christened "Fort George." By the treaty of Ghent, ending this war, "All territory, places, and possessions whatsoever, taken by either party from the other during the war * * * (should) be restored without delay. * * * ." ¹⁰In September, 1817, the *Ontario*, under Captain Biddle, was ordered to the Columbia "to assert the claims of the United States to the country in a friendly and peaceable manner * * * ." England now claimed that Lieutenant Broughton

⁸ Gabriel Franchere, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America in the Year 1811, 1812, 1813, and 1814*; etc. (Redfield, 1854), pp. 86-96.

⁹ T. C. Elliott, editor, "Journal of David Thompson" in *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society*, Vol. XV, No. 2 (June, 1914), pp. 104-125.

¹⁰ Joseph Schafer, *History of the Pacific Northwest*, p. 89.

took formal possession of the Columbia River and surrounding country in 1792 and said furthermore Astoria was not one of the "places of possession," as it had been purchased by the North West Company before the *Raccoon* entered the river. Captain Biddle continued on his way, however, and on August 19, 1818, left his vessel at anchor outside the bar of the Columbia, and proceeded in three well armed and manned boats toward the north shore. He landed inside Cape Disappointment, near where Fort Canby is now located, and there went through the ceremonies of saluting the flag, turning up a sod of earth, and nailing a leaden tablet to a tree. This tablet was inscribed with an account of what they had done and with the United States Coat of Arms. The ceremony was repeated at Point George (Smith Point, Astoria); a call was made upon the settlement at Fort George and the next day the party embarked for the south.¹¹

When the *Ontario* left New York, she carried as a joint special commissioner to represent the United States at the surrender of Fort George, Mr. J. B. Prevost. At Valparaiso, due to personal feeling between himself and Captain Biddle and to the fact that no British naval forces had received instructions in regard to their carrying out the terms of the treaty, he disembarked to await developments. By August, 1818, Mr. Prevost was sailing north in the British vessel, the *Blossom*, as the guest of the British naval officer who was to represent England in the transfer of Fort George. Upon arrival, the *Blossom* anchored behind Cape Disappointment and Astoria was reached in smaller boats. So Astoria was formally restored by the North West Company to Mr. Prevost, on the 5th of October, 1818. From that year until 1846, by the treaty of joint occupation, the whole Oregon country was jointly governed and settled by the citizens of the United States and Great Britain.

The history of Cape Disappointment now becomes the history of the fur traders, under the wise administration of the Hudson's Bay Company. (The Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company combined under the former's name in 1821.) Bakers Bay, which is directly behind the Cape, was the harbor for all ships at that time. Canby Head was used as a lookout point and was visited daily by the crews of the ships which were sometimes held there a month at a time, waiting for the bar to be calm enough for them to sail out in safety.

¹¹ T. C. Elliott, "An Event of One Hundred Years Ago, in *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society*, Vol. XIX, No. 3 (September, 1918), pp. 181-187.

About 1843, the United States began to talk of withdrawing from the joint occupation pact, thus dissolving the treaty. England was afraid we should obtain the whole Oregon Territory and was well justified in her fears, not only because of the majority of American settlers there, but also because of the general feeling of the people as expressed by President Polk, in his inaugural address of March 4, 1845, in which he pronounced the American claim to the whole of the Oregon country clear and unquestionable. To assert her rights in America, England instructed Sir George Simpson to send out the expedition of Warre and Vavasour for the purpose of making a military reconnaissance of Oregon. Among other things the directions contained the following statement: "While in the Oregon Country I have to suggest your close examination of Cape Disappointment, a headland on the north bank of the Columbia River at its outlet to the Pacific, overlooking the Ships channel, and commanding as far as I was able to judge when on the spot from superficial observation, the navigation of the river, the occupation of which, as a fortification would, in my opinion, be of much importance in the event of hostilities between England and the United States."¹²

Both the cape and the isthmus behind it were to be taken possession of, ostensibly as a trading post but as can be easily seen by the above statement, actually for the use of the British forces in case of hostilities. Peter Skene Ogden, one of the factors of the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Vancouver, was sent to the cape and found there a hut, inhabited by a man named James Sanler, whom he bought off for \$200. But upon filing the claim of the Hudson's Bay Company at Oregon City, it was found that Messrs. Wheeler and McDaniels were the real owners and that Sanler was merely holding it for them. They were willing to sell for \$900; Mr. Ogden disputed the price but finally settled for \$1000, which amount was repaid to him by the Company. Later, in their claims against the United States, the Hudson's Bay Company included Cape Disappointment at a value of \$14,600. As all of their claims were extensively cut down and paid in a lump sum, we are unable to ascertain the exact amount paid for this cape.¹³

The principal interest taken in the Oregon country by both

¹² Joseph Schafer, editor, "Documents Relative to Warre and Vavasour's Military Reconnaissance in Oregon, 1845-6" in *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society*, Vol. X, No. 1 (March, 1909), pp. 29-30.

¹³ T. C. Elliott, editor, "The Peter Skene Ogden Journals" in *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society*, Vol. XI, No. 4 (December, 1910), pp. 355-397.

England and the United States was for the purpose of extending trade and commerce. Since the first approach of all commerce was by the sea, the importance of Cape Disappointment lies in its prominence as a land mark and as a sentinel, for all shipping entering the Columbia River or proceeding north to Puget Sound. As such a land mark it has witnessed: In 1810, the arrival of the *Albatross* and first attempted settlement by Captain Nathan Winship of Boston; the coming of Astor's supply ships, the *Tonquin* in 1811 and the *Beaver* in 1812; Nathaniel Wyeth's unsuccessful attempt to compete with the established Hudson's Bay Company in the fur trade the arrival, in Oregon, of the first detachment of United States troops from San Francisco, by vessel in 1849; the coming of the missionaries in the *Lausanne* in 1838, one of whom, Dr. E. White, began to build on Cape Disappointment, northeast of Fort Canby, as a visionary rival of Astoria, Pacific City, which was soon abandoned.

As a final proof of the importance of this point the United States government purchased and owns the whole cape and uses it for the various government agencies already mentioned. The name after all is in a very glorious sense, a misnomer, for in the great development of the Pacific Northwest this sentinel of the Columbia River has beheld the golden realization of whatever dreams for the future the first explorers may have fashioned.

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