

NEW YORK AND ASTORIA

There is a romantic as well as an historic connection between Astoria on the Pacific and New York on the Atlantic, which makes it appropriate that New York should be represented in this celebration today. I regard it as an honor, although I fear undeserved, that I should have been chosen as such a representative.

The justification for calling the tie that binds Astoria and New York a romantic one is found in the words of one of the most notable critics of both romance and history that America produced—Washington Irving. Nearly a hundred years ago in telling the story of John Jacob Astor's founding of Astoria, Irving said:

“The facts will prove to be linked and banded together by one grand scheme, devised and conducted by a master spirit; one set of characters, also, continues throughout, appearing occasionally, though sometimes at long intervals, and the whole enterprise winds up by a regular catastrophe; so that the work, without any labored attempt at artificial construction, actually possesses much of that unity so much sought after in works of fiction, and considered so important to the interests of every history.”

The catastrophe to which Irving refers was the loss, happily temporary, of Astoria to its founder and thus to the United States. This loss was due to the failure of Astor's agents to carry out his instructions, to the War of 1812 with Great Britain, and to the characteristic slowness of our National Government to appreciate a good thing when it sees it. Jefferson and Madison individually approved Astor's project and achievements. Jefferson regarded the founding of Astoria “as the germ of a great, free and independent empire on that side of our continent.” He prophesied that this Pacific empire might later be amalgamated with the Atlantic Republic and that thus “liberty and safe government” might be spread over the whole continent. But President Jefferson did not give Astor's project of planting the American flag at Astoria anything more than his approbation. He found that there were constitutional objections to any official participation of the United States in the enterprise. Later, after the War of 1812, when the British had ceded back to the United States the territory on which Astoria now stands, Astor appealed to

President Madison for military protection and the establishment of a small army post. All he asked for was a company of soldiers commanded by a lieutenant. But although Madison was favorably inclined, he, too, was fearful of the complications that might be involved and took no official action.

Now, no one is a more ardent constitutionalist than I am. The Constitution is the very cornerstone of the Republic. Careless tinkering with it, or haphazard meddling with it, or impulsive disregard of it is a sure road to national disaster. But there comes crises in our national life when a President must brave the criticisms of the technical constructionists and act for the national welfare. The Louisiana Purchase, if not unconstitutional, was certainly extra-constitutional, but it was one of the finest and most beneficent of Jefferson's achievements. The constitutionality of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation has been seriously questioned by theorizers in government but who would wish to have it expunged from the record? Some of those who enjoy and profit by the Panama Canal assert that it is the child of constitutional illegitimacy. Roosevelt, however, wisely said that he preferred to dig the Canal and have the constitutionality of his act discussed and debated for two centuries rather than postpone its construction while the country spent two centuries in arguing about the constitutional technicalities involved.

Dr. Jowett, the great Greek scholar and Master of Balliol College, Oxford, once said, a little ironically perhaps, that a good motto for a political administrator is "Never retract; never explain; get it done and let them howl!" There is a small grain of cynicism in this, doubtless, there is also a large grain of truth. In spite of all his ideals, energy and expenditures, Mr. Astor's agents and associates did not get it done. Even the government failed him. And Astoria, so painfully established, and to use the language of Washington Irving, named Astoria in honor "of the projector and supporter of the whole enterprise" was first sold by Astor's timorous partners to competitors from Canada, and later captured by the British. That the soil on which we stand today finally became American soil is a blessing for which we do not owe any overwhelming debt of gratitude to the National Government of that early era of the Republic. Perhaps no more could have been expected of that government than it accomplished. It was young, inexperienced, struggling with unprecedented problems, and in those days of rudimentary transportation and communication Astoria, was, so far as time and space are concerned,

literally on the other side of the world from Washington. But I think it is only fair to say that Astorians as well as all other Americans owe a deep debt of gratitude to the merchant prince of New York through whose penetration, persistence, patience and patriotism the standard of social and political civilization was first planted on the shores of this mighty ocean and mighty river.

A few words about this merchant prince. As early as 1796 the Government of the United States began to look with disquiet at the growing domination by the Canadians and British of the fur trade and the western territory in which that trade was carried on. It therefore sent out agents to establish trading posts on the frontier. "The expedition" says Washington Irving in language which may well be taken to heart today "was unsuccessful, as most commercial expedients are prone to be where the dull patronage of government is counted upon to outvie the keen activity of private enterprise. What government failed to effect, with all its patronage and all its agents, was at length brought about by the enterprise and perseverance of a single merchant, one of its adopted citizens."

This man was John Jacob Astor, born in the little German village of Waldorf, on the River Rhine near Heidelberg in 1763. Thus three great and noble rivers figure prominently in his career—the Rhine, the Hudson and the Columbia. He migrated to London where he was for a time engaged in the business of making and selling musical instruments, and one of the most famous English pianos still bears the name of one of the partners of his firm. Pushing on with the spirit of a pioneer, he brought his comfortable savings to New York in 1874 at the close of the Revolution. A chance acquaintance, who was his fellow passenger on the sailing vessel in which he crossed the Atlantic, suggested that he invest his little capital in the fur trade. This he did, and traveled between New York, Montreal and London in the prosecution of his merchandising. By the time he was forty years old he had accumulated a fortune, enormous for those days, of at least one million dollars. This sum in 1809 he invested in a corporation which he formed called "The American Fur Company." A year later he fitted out a vessel, the *Tonquin* which Irving speaks of as "a fine ship of two hundred and ninety tons burden, mounting ten guns, with a crew of twenty men" to sail for the Pacific Coast and establish a trading post and colony on the Columbia which had been discovered by Captain Gray. Two hundred and ninety tons burden. Think of it! I myself, have a lively

appreciation of what this voyage meant in adventure and hardship, for in 1885, a young man just out of college, I sailed round the Horn in a merchantman of thirteen hundred tons, nearly five times the size of the *Tonquin*. I know from experience what are the terrors of tornadoes and even mutinies on such a craft. The passenger who crosses the Atlantic or the Pacific today on a twenty thousand tons steamer has little conception of the courage and virility required for such ocean pioneering as that of the *Tonquin*. In addition to her crew of twenty, she carried four of Mr. Astor's partners, twelve clerks, several artisans and thirteen Canadian voyageurs, and all the necessary supplies for founding a colony. The catastrophe which ended the hopes of this bold adventure I have already alluded to and is related in detail in Irving's "Astoria."

It is too often the custom, at least in my own city of New York, to regard the name of Astor as merely a synonym of accumulated wealth. This is an injustice. John Jacob Astor, the founder of the family, was truly a pioneer and a patriot. One has only to read Washington Irving's narrative of "Astoria" to be convinced of this. Astor was not only a builder of edifices in his adopted city but an empire builder as well. He planned and directed one expedition by sea around the Horn and one expedition by land over the Rockies to the mouth of the Columbia. When warned by his agents of the dangers and obstacles that threatened his enterprise and might mean the loss of a fortune to him, he replied "Were I on the spot and had the management of affairs, I would defy them all; but as it is, everything depends on you and your friends about you. Our enterprise is grand and deserves success, and I hope in God it will meet it. If my object was merely gain of money I should say to you, think whether it is best to save what we can and abandon the place; but the very idea is like a dagger in my heart." And again when his partners sold to the Northwest Company in a somewhat pusillanimous fashion his comment was: "Had our place and property been fairly captured I should have preferred it; I should not feel as if I were disgraced."

These are not the words of a sordid trader. They express the heartfelt sentiment of an American who wished to see his country grow in strength and stature.

So may it be said of all of us when our time comes to pass off the stage—whether we now live on the banks of the Hudson or the banks of the Columbia.

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