

## DOCUMENTS

### *Washington Irving and Astoria.*

The letters written by Washington Irving in regard to the compilation called *Astoria* add some details to the brief account in the Introduction to that work. They also give a better understanding of the part played by his nephew Pierre Munro Irving, and throw more light upon the statement in the Introduction: "The trouble of rummaging among business papers, and of collecting and collating facts from amidst tedious and commonplace details, was spared me by my nephew, Pierre M. Irving, who acted as my pioneer, and to whom I am greatly indebted for smoothing my path and lightening my labors."

These extracts are taken from the four volume work by this same nephew, entitled *The Life and Letters of Washington Irving*, published in 1864 by Putnam, Hurd and Houghton. Since the work is long out of print and not easily obtained for consultation, and since the following extracts are buried in the great mass, it seemed advisable to pick out allusions to the writing of *Astoria* for the convenience of students of Oregon history.

Some twenty years ago the writer happened to reside in a valley which was so accurately described by Irving in his account of the Hunt expedition that the idea occurred to attempt to trace the entire route of that interesting journey. The ease with which it was possible to almost follow the footsteps of those early explorers is evidence of the historical value of the work as a history.

With the assistance of General Chittenden,<sup>1</sup> who had also made a study of the route of the Hunt party, practically all the localities mentioned were identified. (See *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Volume XII, No. 2, June 1911, and Volume XIII, No. 3, September 1912).

This appears to offset much of the criticism which has been made by some writers, who were under the impression that a large portion of *Astoria* was "fiction." The fact that the locality of practically every incident mentioned in *Astoria* can now be

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<sup>1</sup> Hiram Martin Chittenden: *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (New York, Francis P. Harper, 1902.) Vol. I., pages 239-246, gives a strong commendation of Irving's *Astoria*, including this sentence: "Not in the allurements of style alone, but in the essential respects of accuracy and comprehensive treatment, Irving's work stands immeasurably above all others on the subject."

identified, would seem to indicate that the narratives were obtained from persons who had been eye-witnesses of the events.

Much fruitless effort has been made to find the valuable journals, etc. used by Pierre M. Irving in compiling the material. Unfortunately all seem to have been destroyed, which makes it most fortunate that so much has been preserved in *Astoria*, which Washington Irving described as "a rich piece of mosaic."

J. NEILSON BARRY.

*Extracts from Letters*

To Pierre Munro Irving.

New York, Sept. 15, 1834.

My dear Pierre;

... John Jacob Astor is extremely desirous of having a work written on the subject of his settlement of Astoria, at the mouth of the Columbia River; something that might take with the reading world, and secure to him the reputation of having originated the enterprise and founded the colony that are likely to have such important results in the history of commerce and colonization.

The old gentleman has applied to me repeatedly in the matter, offering to furnish abundance of materials in letters, journals and verbal narratives, and to pay liberally for time and trouble. I have felt aware that a work might be written on the subject, full of curious and entertaining matter, comprising adventurous expeditions by sea and land, scenes beyond the Rocky Mountains, incidents and scenes illustrative of Indian character, and of that singular and but little known class, the traders and voyageurs of the Fur Companies. Still I am so much engrossed with other plans, that I have not time for the examination of papers, the digesting of various materials, etc., and have stood aloof from the undertaking, though still keeping the matter open.

Since I have heard of your inclination to return to New York, however, it has occurred to me that you might be disposed to take this subject in hand; to collate the various documents, collect verbal information, and reduce the whole to such form that I might be able to dress it up advantageously, and with little labor, for the press.

In an interview which I had with Mr. Astor, a day or two since, in which he laid before me a variety of documents, I accordingly stated to him my inability at present to give the subject the labor that would be requisite, but the possibility that

you might aid me in the way I have mentioned; in which case I should have no objection to putting the finishing hand to the work. The old gentleman caught at the idea, and begged me to write to you immediately. He said he would be willing to pay you whatever might be deemed proper for your services, and that, if any profit resulted from the sale of the work, it would belong, of course, to the authors.

I lay this matter before you, to be considered in contrast or connection with your other plans. If you take it in hand, it will furnish you with employment for at least a year, and I shall take care to secure your being well paid for your current time and labor; the ultimate profits of the work may be a matter of after arrangement between us.

Mr. Astor is a strong-minded man, and one from whose conversation much curious information is to be derived. He feels the want of occupation and amusement, and thinks he may find something of both in the progress of this work. You will find him very kindly disposed, for he was an early friend of your father, for whose memory he entertains great regard; and he has always been on terms of intimacy with your uncle Peter and myself, besides knowing more or less of others of our family. Halleck, the poet, resides a great deal with him at present, having a handsome salary for conducting his affairs.

When you have thought over this matter, and made up your mind, let me hear from you. If you determine in favor of it, the sooner you come on the better. I have entertained the matter thus far for your sake, having no care about it for myself; decide, therefore, as you think fit, or as your inclination prompts....

New York, Oct. 29, 1834.

My dear Pierre

I received, a few days since, your letter of Oct. 5th., which gives me to suppose that you would undertake the task proposed to you, provided you could be sure of a compensation of two thousand dollars. I have since had a definite conversation with Mr. Astor, and fixed your compensation at *three thousand* dollars.

Now for the nature of the work, and the aid that will be required of you. My present idea is to call the work by the general name of *Astoria*—the name of the settlement made by Mr. Astor at the mouth of the Columbia River: under this head

to give not merely a history of his great colonial and commercial enterprise, and of the fortunes of his colony, but a body of information concerning the whole region beyond the Rocky Mountains, on the borders of the Columbia River, comprising the adventures, by sea and land, of traders, trappers, Indian warriors, hunters, &c.; their habits, characters, persons, costumes, &c.; descriptions of natural scenery, animals, plants, &c., &c. I think, in this way, a rich and varied work may be formed, both entertaining and instructive, and laying open scenes in the wild life of that adventurous region which would possess the charm of freshness and novelty. You would be required to look over the various papers, letters, and journals in the possession of Mr. Astor, written by various persons who have been in his employ, to draw anecdotes and descriptions from him, and from Northwest traders who occasionally visit him; to forage among various works in French and English that have been published relative to these regions, and thus to draw together and arrange into some kind of form a great body of facts. In all this I may be able to render you much assistance. When your work is thus crudely prepared I will take it in hand, and prepare it for the press, as it is a *sine qua non* with Mr. Astor that my name should be to the work. You now have a general idea of what will be your task. I think you may find it a very interesting and agreeable one, and may accomplish it within the space of a year.

Should you determine to undertake the work, you must come on immediately. Mr. Astor has his mind set upon the matter, and, in fact, looks forward to it as a source of pleasant occupation for the winter. He has taken a house in town for his winter residence, and, if you understate the task, would wish you to reside with him, as long as you may find it agreeable, and has likewise invited Halleck to be his guest. The latter you will find a very pleasant companion.

Mr. Astor has all his papers arranged, so that you would be able to get to work immediately. Let me hear from you on the receipt of this. If you determine to come, you had better put your portmanteau in the first stage coach, and come on as promptly as possible.

Your affectionate uncle,

W. I.

In a letter to his brother Peter Irving, under date of April 17th, 1835, Washington Irving wrote;

"Pierre Munro (Irving) is busily engaged gathering material together for the work about old Mr. Astor's grand commercial, or rather colonial enterprise. I have not taken hold of the subject yet, but have no doubt I shall be able to make a rich piece of mosaic"

In a letter to the same brother, he wrote, May 16th, 1835

"I am now engaged in the work on the subject of Mr. Astor's great enterprise; and I am much mistaken if I do not make it a very rich, curious, and unique work. Pierre Munro makes an admirable pioneer."

To the same brother, June 10, 1835.

"I want to get the Astor work into the rough. Pierre M. has acted as an excellent pioneer, and, in the course of two or three months, will have gathered together all the materials. I have commenced, and have rough-cast several of the chapters, and have no doubt I shall make a rich and taking work of it."

To the same brother, July 8, 1835.

"It is at any rate, my intention to come out to you as soon as I can get all the materials in order for my work on the subject of Columbia River: this, however, will probably take me some few months, as I have been interrupted by the publication of my Miscellany, and I shall require, after I have worked upon the materials collected for me by Pierre M. Irving, and possessed myself generally with the subject, to have conversations with various individuals who have been engaged in the enterprises by sea and land connected with the settlement."

Again, August 24th, 1835.

"I am working away at the Astor enterprise, and hope to get the narrative in frame in the course of the autumn; after which I shall have nothing to do but enrich it."

Again, Sept. 26, 1835.

"For upward of a month past I have been quartered at Hellgate, with Mr. Astor, and I have not had so quiet and delightful a nest since I have been in America. He has a spacious and well built house, with a lawn in front of it, and a garden in the rear. The lawn sweeps down to the water edge, and full in front of the house is the little strait of Hellgate, which forms a constantly moving picture. Here the old gentleman keeps a kind of bachelor

hall. Halleck, the poet, lives with him, but goes to town every morning, and comes out to dinner. The only other member of the family is one of his grandchildren, a very fine boy of fourteen years of age. (Charles Astor Bristed) Pierre Munro Irving has been a guest for several weeks past, but has recently returned to New York. I cannot tell you how sweet and delightful I have found this retreat; pure air, agreeable scenery, a spacious house, profound quiet, and perfect command of my time and self. The consequence is, that I have written more since I have been here than I have ever done in the same space of time. Within the last month I have written more than a volume, and have got within a half dozen chapters of the end of my work--- an achievement which I did not expect to do for months. Of course there will much to be done afterward in extending some parts, touching up others, enriching and embellishing. It will make two good volumes---probably octavo; and Pierre Munro thinks it will be more liked than anything I have lately written."

Again, October 8, 1835.

"I finished my first draught of the Astor work about a week since, very much to my own surprise, not having anticipated such a long and successful fit of writing. I have yet much to do to it, but it will be merely in the way of enriching it by personal anecdotes, &c., to be gathered from individuals, actors in the scenes narrated. I feel sanguine as to the work proving interesting to the general reader. I have promised old Mr. Astor to return to his rural retreat at Hellgate, and shall go out there today."

Again, November 24, 1835.

"I have lately resumed the Astor MS., and hope to complete it in the course of a few weeks."

The compiler states "He had suspended his labors, in expectation of the arrival of a person who had been a principal actor in the enterprise of Astoria, and from whom he was to get many personal anecdotes for the enriching of his work"

In another letter to Peter Irving, Dec. 25, 1835.

"My dear Brother: . . . I am still at Hellgate with Mr. Astor, who is detained in the country in consequence of his new house in town not being finished. Pierre M. Irving is here likewise, and we pass our time most pleasantly and profitably. In fact, Mr. Astor does everything in his power to render our resi-

dence with him agreeable, and to detain us with him; or rather, he takes the true way, by leaving us complete masters of ourselves and our time. In consequence of having so much leisure and quiet, I have been able to get on famously with my new work, and hope to finish it in the course of a few weeks"

Pierre M. Irving stated "The year 1836 opens upon the author in that admirable place for literary occupation, Mr. Astor's country retreat, opposite Hellgate, where he was still sojourning, and working upon various parts of the Astorian manuscript which afforded room for enrichment"...and also "The following extracts are from the last letter addressed by Washington to Peter before his embarkation, from which it will be seen that, in addition to the three thousand dollars stipulated by Mr. Astor, I received a special compensation from Mr. Irving for my literary jobwork in lightening the labor before him; yet the imputation was afterwards made that Mr. Astor gave the author five thousand dollars to take up his manuscripts. I would premise, also, in this place, that during Mr. Irving's long acquaintance with Mr. Astor, commencing when he was a young man, and ending only with his death, he never came under a pecuniary obligation to him of any kind. The only monied transaction that ever took place between them, is alluded to in the following letter—the purchase of a share in a town he was founding in Green Bay, for which he paid the cash, though Mr. Astor wished the amount to stand on mortgage. The land was not sold when it had advanced in value; and long after it had declined, when Mr. Irving was in Spain, Mr. Astor, of his own free will, took back the share and repaid the original purchase money.

"He was too proverbially a rich man," says Mr. Irving, in a letter which appeared in the *Literary World* of Nov. 22, 1851, "for me to permit the shadow of a pecuniary favor to rest on our intercourse"

In a letter to Peter Irving, February 16, 1836. W. I. writes, "I am giving my last handling to the Astor work. It is this handling which, like the touching and toning of a picture, gives the richest effects. I am interested and pleased with the work. and feel that the labor I am now bestowing upon it will contribute greatly to its success. Pierre has received three thousand dollars from Mr. Astor for his services in the work. I have given him one thousand dollars."

Pierre stated "Astoria, which was going through the press at the close of June, was published in October (1836) He received from Bentley, in London, 500 pounds, and from Carey & Lea, for the right of printing five thousand copies, four thousand dollars, in equal notes, at four months."

The following is from a letter written to Pierre M. Irving.

Tarrytown, Dec. 12, 1836

My dear Pierre:

....Astoria succeeds equal to your anticipations, and far beyond my own. It was highly spoken of in two English Reviews which I have read. One pronounces it my *chef d'oeuvre*, I am so glad he thinks so, though I don't. Old Mr. Astor appears to be greatly gratified, which is very satisfactory to me. William Astor also expresses himself in the most gratifying terms, and seems surprised that the subject should have been made so interesting and entertaining. In fact, I have heard more talk about this work considering the short time it has been launched, than about any other that I have published for some time past.