

THE WIDOW OF CAPTAIN ROBERT GRAY

All who are interested in the history of the Pacific Northwest love to honor the memory of Captain Robert Gray. His brilliant works of discovery and exploration, notably his discovery of Grays Harbor and the Columbia River, form chapters in every adequate history of this region yet published. The climax of that work was reached in 1792. Subsequently he commanded trading vessels from Boston until his death in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1806. He was born near Tiverton, Rhode Island, in 1755. Such few and brief biographical facts have been repeated over and over again. Other facts are greedily welcomed whenever they appear.

Captain Gray's discoveries were important among the foundations on which were reared American claims and, ultimately, American sovereignty over a large portion of the Pacific Northwest. What could be more natural than this increasing interest in such a man and his work?

One evidence of the genuineness of such interest is the tablet near the lone "beacon" tree on Damon's Point, Grays Harbor, bearing this inscription:

"Tradition links this tree with the name of Captain Robert Gray, who on May 7th 1792, entered this harbor in his ship Columbia. This tablet was erected in his honor by the Robert Gray Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, May 7th, 1911. This site was donated by Mr. A. O. Damon."

Another evidence was the space given to Captain Gray in the dedication of the huge column surmounting Coxcombe Hill, Astoria, culminating the Columbia River Historical Expedition of the Great Northern Railway Company in 1926. Still another evidence is the fact that Chehalis County changed its name to Grays Harbor County. The names of the man and his ship are thoroughly imbedded in the geography and history of Oregon and Washington.

What of Captain Gray's home life?

Geographers and historians are not always neglectful of home life interest, but the Northwest is still pioneering in many ways and thus far Captain Gray's discoveries have overshadowed the interest in his home life so far as this other side of the continent is concerned. His descendants in New England are of course deeply in-

terested in that record but apparently have found no reason to publish the family annals.

It is known that in February, 1794, Captain Gray married Martha, daughter of Silas Atkins, one of Boston's wealthiest merchants of that time. When Captain Gray, on one of his trading voyages, died and was buried in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1806, he left in Boston a widow and four small daughters. She and her children evidently remained with her father's people. The Government documents show that ten years after Captain Gray's death the owners of the ship *Columbia* borrowed the ship's log, obtaining it from Silas Atkins, brother of the Captain's widow. The owners were seeking compensation from Congress and President Madison had asked for documentary proofs. Extracts were copied from the log covering the dates on which Grays Harbor and Columbia River were discovered. These extracts placed in the Government records have been relied upon ever since as the best source records of those important events.

Twenty-one years later history took a curious misstep by wrongly recording Mrs. Gray's death. William A. Slacum, on returning from the Columbia River country in 1837, sought more information about the *Columbia's* voyage than was included in the published extracts. He hired Thomas Bulfinch, son of Charles Bulfinch, one of the ship's owners, to make the search. He reported that both Mrs. Gray and her brother, Captain Silas Atkins, had died a number of years before and that Mrs. Gray's papers had gone to her niece, Mrs. Nash. Thomas Bulfinch found the niece who readily produced one volume of the desired log. When asked for the other volume which contained the discovery records she said that it had been used for waste paper.

Charles Bulfinch, then an old man of seventy-five years, was greatly disappointed, but he went back to the original extracts and prepared an affidavit embracing as complete a record as he could saying that it "may in future be important in determining the right of the United States to the honor of discovering the river, and, consequently, to the right of jurisdiction over the country adjacent." That affidavit was dated at Boston, April 21, 1838, and is found in United States Public Documents, Serial Number 318, Senate Document 470, pages 14-23.

That publication seemed for the West quite definitive as to future dependence on those extracts in place of the precious log that had been destroyed and definitive also as to the death of Mrs. Gray.

However, early western readers should have known that the report of her death "some years before" 1837 was an error. The *Oregon Spectator* for September 3, 1846, published a memorial to Congress from the widow of Captain Gray. It has been copied from the old Oregon newspaper by Nellie B. Pipes, Librarian of the Oregon Historical Society, as follows:

Memorial from the Widow of the Discoverer of the Columbia

Mr. Winthrow of Boston submitted to the House on Monday the following memorial:

To the honorable Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled:

The petition of Martha Gray respectfully sets forth: That your petitioner is the widow of Captain Robert Gray, well known as the navigator who discovered, first entered, and gave its present name to the "Columbia River." That your petitioner was left a widow nearly forty years ago, with four young daughters, and without adequate means for their education and support. That she has struggled thus far through life amidst great difficulties and severe trials, and her advanced age is still in circumstances requiring the strictest economy. That her daughters are yet living, and three of them remain unmarried. That her late husband, Captain Gray, was in the naval service of his country during a part of the war of the Revolution, but that your petitioner is unable under the existing laws to entitle herself to be placed upon the list of United States' pensioners, the act "granting half-pay and pensions to certain widows and for other purposes," providing only for widows whose marriage took place before the first of January, 1794, and her marriage having taken place in the month of February, 1794. That neither her late husband during his lifetime, nor his family since his decease, have received the slightest pecuniary benefit from the great discovery herein referred to; and your petitioner now, for the first time, appeals to the justice of her country with confidence: that, at the moment when your honorable body is spreading before the world the claims of the United States to a vast territory of immense value, and founding these claims, to a great extent, upon a discovery made by the energy and perseverance of one of her citizens, the family of that citizen will not be suffered, in their humble circumstances, to go without any remuneration; but that your honorable body will make such provision as a sense of justice and the honor of the nation seem to require for the aged widow and unprotected daughters of the man

who first unfurled the flag of our country upon the "great river of the west," and who was the first to bear this flag in triumph round the world. With due respect.

MARTHA GRAY.

Boston, Jan. 17, 1846.

The Mr. "Winthrow" is evidently a misprint as the Congressman from Boston from 1840 to 1850 was Robert Charles Winthrop, a descendant of the famous Governor John Winthrop. Efforts are now being made to learn whether the widow's appeal was favorably considered or not.

In 1914 and 1915 Mr. James A. Wehn, Seattle sculptor, using all obtainable data modeled a medallion of Captain Robert Gray. He was fortunate enough to find the addresses of descendants in Boston, especially Mrs. Frank E. Peabody and Edward L. Twombly of Boston, great grand children of Captain Robert and Mrs. Martha Atkins Gray. They were pleased with the western artist's work and seemed proud of the fact that their ancestor was so highly esteemed in the far west.

EDMOND S. MEANY.