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## THE OREGON CONVENTION OF 1843

There was a growing interest among the American people in the year 1843 over the Oregon question. This interest was to cause the Democratic party in the following year to declare in favor of the occupation of all the Oregon country as far as 54 degrees 40 minutes north latitude. The debate in the Senate over the Linn bill to extend a line of fortified posts from the Missouri westward to the mountains and to grant lands on the most liberal terms to settlers served to focus popular attention. Evidences of this widespread awakening were to be seen in meetings to discuss the holding and settlement of Oregon, which were held in Alton, Illinois, in 1842 and in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, in Logan, Ohio, in Columbus, Ohio, in Springfield, Illinois, in Vermilion County, Illinois, in St. Louis, Missouri, and in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1843. Of these the Oregon Convention at Cincinnati, July 3, 4, 5, is best known and most important.

The convention in July was foreshadowed by a preliminary meeting held at Cincinnati April 29, 1843, which published a declaration favoring the following lines of policy and procedure<sup>1</sup>: That the Californias should never be allowed to pass into the possession of Great Britain and in the event of their loss to Mexico they should become a part of an American republic on the Pacific; that no part of the Pacific coast should be surrendered by the United States for an equivalent in the Californias; that Great Britain should be excluded from the whole Pacific coast between the boundaries of Mexico and Russian America; to more effectively arouse public opinion, an address should be made to the people of the South and the Union generally; and that a convention of the western and southwestern states and territories should be called at Cincinnati in July to urge the immediate occupation of Oregon by force of arms.

In the address<sup>2</sup> to the South that section was taken to task for its failure to support Western interests. It was intimated that the South had shown a subservience to Great Britain in order to pre-

<sup>1</sup> The *Globe* (Washington, D.C.) May 8, 1843, but reprinted from the *Ohio Statesman*.

<sup>2</sup> The *Globe* (Washington, D.C.) June 20, 1843, and also reprinted from the *Ohio Statesman*.

serve the British market for southern cotton, and the willingness of southern members of Congress to agree to co-operate with British cruisers in suppressing the African slave trade came from the desire to prevent the development of a cotton agriculture in South America based in negro slavery. But, the address went on to argue, Great Britain was in reality the foe of the South; both Canada and the West Indies were refuges for fugitive slaves, and, the *Creole* case showed, British law encouraged slaves to murder and piracy. Both the Southern slave interests who might fear the admission of free states formed out of the Oregon country and those American citizens who might be apprehensive of the undue expansion of our system of government over the vast areas of the Northwest should rest assured that when those distant lands were settled that they would become an independent Pacific republic to the mutual advantage of both its own people and of those of the United States.

Although the arguments of the address were not remarkable for ingenuousness or happy presentation. It is noteworthy that there was no suggestion as to the expansion of slavery interests in the Southwest to balance Northern expansion on the Pacific. The Texas question at this time was full of political dynamite, and the Oregon boosters evidently wanted to keep their issue as free as possible from the danger of becoming involved in the extension of slavery areas.

The principal source of information regarding the convention is found in the pages of the Cincinnati *Daily Chronicle* whose editor, E. D. Mansfield, was one of the leading figures of the meeting. The *Chronicle* was a four-page paper, seven columns to the page, and is a good example of the daily journalism of the period. The present day reader is likely to be surprised by the slight amount of attention given to local news. In this connection it may be noted that the proceedings of the convention did not appear in the *Chronicle* until July 11 and July 12.

A formal call for the convention was published on May 22 "to urge upon Congress the *immediate occupation* of the Oregon Territory by the arms and laws of the Republic, and to adopt such measures as may serve most conducive (sic) to its immediate and effective occupation whether the government acts or not." It proposed to base this action on the Monroe Declaration of 1823, "That the American continents . . . are not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European power," and that . . . "we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their systems to

any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety."

That this did not meet the approval of all shades of opinion was shown when the *Cincinnati Gazette*<sup>3</sup> attacked the project, ridiculed the members of the Oregon Committee, and accused them of self-seeking motives. The *Gazette* went on to advise young men to put these notions of wild adventure out of their heads and to stay at home where the workshops were not yet filled or the land occupied and where they would be "blessed with peace and prosperity if they but toil perseveringly."

On this plea of the "stay-at-homes" the *Chronicle* turned in high dudgeon. The *Gazette* is accused<sup>4</sup> of being an organ of British opinion; of stupidly distorting the meaning of the printed call for the convention and of showing a pusillanimous spirit. The editorial concludes with this burst of expansionist feeling: "We look upon the United States as the last home of Liberty, from which if she ever takes her flight, she takes it never to return. We look upon it as our business to take possession of every part of land in this continent, to which we have any right—to send our Eagle over the Rocky Mountains, that the oppressed of the earth may be gathered beneath its wings. With these sentiments, we shall take very little thought whether the Oregon settlers rouse the Lion of England from his lair, or even scare the gentle *Gazette* from its repose."<sup>5</sup>

On the evening of June 24,<sup>6</sup> a meeting described as "large and respectable" was held at the court house in Cincinnati for the purpose of appointing delegates to the coming convention. The meeting was organized by the election of a chairman and secretary and then proceeded to appoint three delegates from each township of Hamilton County and from four to six from each of the nine wards of the city. Committees were also appointed to meet strangers who came as delegates and to secure a suitable place for the convention to assemble.

The convention assembled at 9:00 A.M. July 3 in the Cincinnati College and Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky was unanimously elected to preside over its deliberations.<sup>7</sup> Johnson had been vice-president of the United States from 1837 to 1841 and was at this time a candidate for the Democratic nomination in 1844. In present-

<sup>3</sup> *Cincinnati Gazette*, June 7, 1843.

<sup>4</sup> *Cincinnati Daily Chronicle*, June 8, 1843.

<sup>5</sup> A search of the files of the *Gazette* shows that it did not resume the journalistic fray; the *Chronicle* was left in possession of the field.

<sup>6</sup> *Cincinnati Daily Chronicle*, June 27, 1843.

<sup>7</sup> *Cincinnati Daily Chronicle*, July 11, 1843.

ing Colonel Johnson to the convention, General Worthington denounced the "all grasping avarice and arrogant pretensions of Great Britain" and described the disappointment which Western people felt when Webster and Ashburton, in 1842, had failed to secure a settlement of the Oregon boundary. Under these circumstances it had been determined to call the convention.

In his reply Johnson spoke of his interest in the Oregon question and declared that there were those present who would see the country on the Pacific peopled as thickly as the Ohio Valley. It was true that some looked askance at immigration to the Pacific-Northwest, but the same attitude was taken fifty years before by people along the Atlantic Coast when the Alleghanies were considered almost impassible barriers.

A roll of the delegates was made<sup>8</sup> and it was found that 113 were present. Of these 87 were from Ohio, 16 from Kentucky, 4 from Indiana, 2 from Tennessee, 1 from Louisiana and 3 from Iowa Territory. The names of the 113 are printed in the *Chronicle*. It may be noted that few of the Hamilton County nominees originally named in the meeting of June 24, appeared as delegates while the majority of those nominated in the city were present. A committee was appointed to report on the best means for urging on Congress the adoption of legislation for the immediate occupation of Oregon Territory and the extension thither of civil and military protection. Other officers for the convention were then chosen and in their choice care was exercised to make as nearly as possible an equal division between the Democrats and Whigs.

For the instruction of the delegates the secretary was directed to read from an address of Senator Benton the arguments upon which he based the title of the United States to the Oregon Territory. These were summarized under eight heads as follows:

- (1) the discovery of the Columbia River by Captain Gray; (2) the explorations of Lewis and Clark; (3) the Astorian settlement; (4) the Louisiana Purchase; (5) the treaty with Spain in 1819; (6) the vindication of Spain's title as far north as 50 degrees in the Nootka Sound treaty;<sup>9</sup> (7) French and British boundaries in the treaty of Utrecht with American succession to the rights of France; (8) the restoration of Astoria as provided in the treaty of Ghent.

<sup>8</sup> McMaster states (vol. 7, p. 296) that there were 96 delegates to the convention. The *Chronicle* gives the names of 113 and states in an editorial on July 10 that about 100 were in constant attendance and in the same article that 90 signed the final declaration.

<sup>9</sup> Any argument based on article 6 of the Nootka Sound Convention of October 28, 1790, would have been invalidated by the Convention of January 11, 1794, for the mutual abandonment of Nootka.

When the convention was called to order on the following day,<sup>10</sup> July 4, committees were appointed to report on the following subjects:

- (a) On the British Occupation of the Sandwich Islands.
- (b) On the donation of land to immigrants and the policy of increasing the amount to settlers who located at increasing distance from the ocean or in areas bordering on portions claimed by Great Britain.
- (c) On our relation with the Indians of the Northwest.
- (d) On the declaration of President Monroe that the continent of America was not open to colonization by European governments.

Letters of encouragement were read from prominent persons who had been invited but who were unable to be present. Of these the best known to present day readers is Lewis Cass. This was followed by General Worthington's address on the foreign relations of the United States.

In the afternoon session, the delegates listened to the reading of the Declaration of Independence and Mr. McGuire read to the convention a report on the resources, climate, soil, and productions of Oregon. Unfortunately with the exception of the report of the committee on the Monroe Doctrine, of which Mr. E. D. Mansfield was chairman, none of the committee reports or other papers were published. We should like to read the opinion of the committee on the resources of the Oregon Territory and to compare the economic realities of the present with the expectations of 1843.

On July 5, the committee on the British occupation of the Sandwich Islands reported. There is no summary of the content of the report, but it was probably strongly denunciatory. The seizure of the Sandwich Islands aroused much excitement in the United States and was looked upon as another evidence of the spirit of unscrupulous aggression which at that time the majority of Americans were quite ready to attribute to the government of Great Britain. The American newspapers of 1843 carried many references to what, in the language of British diplomacy, was termed a "provisional occupation." This was made by the British warship *Carysfort* and the Earl of Aberdeen hastened to disavow the act as entirely unauthorized by the British Government and promised an enquiry into the matter. The Secretary of Foreign Affairs also conveyed by Mr.

<sup>10</sup> The proceedings of the Convention on July 4 and 5 together with the resolutions and declarations are found in the *Chronicle* for July 12, 1843.

H. S. Fox, British Minister, to Secretary of State Upshaw the declaration of the British Government that it intended to recognize and support the independence of the Islands with the proviso, however, that no other nation should exercise in the Islands a greater influence than that possessed by Great Britain. The Sandwich Islands question probably inspired many Americans to urge the immediate occupation of the Oregon country and may have sent some immigrants to the Northwest to hold the country against Great Britain.

Reports were then read on the boundaries of the United States and on the nature of the Monroe Doctrine and its application to the existing dispute with Great Britain. The committee on the best means for urging Congress to immediately occupy the Oregon Territory reported and a special committee was appointed to which the matter was referred for further consideration. To this committee Messrs. Southgate, Medary, Worthington, and Mansfield were appointed. To this group of leaders was entrusted the responsibility of framing a formal declaration to the people of the United States of the judgment of the convention on the Oregon Question.

In the afternoon of the third and last day of the convention a number of minor reports were considered and accepted and then the special committee brought forward the following resolutions and declaration which were received, considered and unanimously adopted as the sentiments of the Convention:

*Resolved.*—That the right of the United States to the Oregon Territory from 42 to 54 degrees 40 minutes north latitude is unquestionable and that it is the imperative duty of the general government forthwith to extend the laws of the United States over said territory.

*Resolved further,*—That to encourage migration to and the permanent and secure settlement of said Territory, the Congress of the United States ought to establish a line of forts from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean—and to provide also an efficient naval force for the protection of the Territory and its citizens.

*Resolved.*—That for the purpose of making known the causes and principles of our action, the following declaration is unanimously adopted and now signed by the members of this Convention, with instructions to the officers thereof to transmit a copy to the President of the United States, and to each member of Congress, and also to the Executives of the several states, with a request to present them to their prospective legislatures.

*Declaration of the Oregon Convention*

*"A declaration of the citizens of the Mississippi Valley, in Convention assembled at Cincinnati, July 5, 1843, for the purpose of adopting such measures as may induce the immediate occupation of the Oregon Territory by the Arms and Laws of the United States of North America.*

"We, the undersigned citizens of the Mississippi Valley, do hereby declare to our fellow citizens of the whole Republic, that in urging forward measures for the immediate occupation of the Oregon Territory, and the northwest coast of the Pacific from 42 degrees to 54 degrees 40 minutes north latitude, we are but performing a duty to ourselves, to the Republic, to the commercial nations of the world, to posterity and to the people of Great Britain and Ireland, not, as we believe to be benefitted by the further extension of her empire.

"Duty to ourselves requires that we should urge the immediate occupation of Oregon, not only for the increase and extension of the West, but for the security of our peace and safety, perpetually threatened by the savage tribes of the Northwest. That this duty is required of us as due to the whole Republic, all parts of which may not appreciate, as they seem not to have appreciated the value of the territory in question, and its political importance to the honor, prosperity and power of the Union, to say nothing of our commercial interests and naval preponderance, threatened as they are with injury or diminution should the northeast coast of that ocean pass into the possession of a great naval power. That as an independent member of the great family of nations, it is due from us to the whole commercial world that the ports of both coasts of this continent should be held by a liberal government, able and willing to extend and facilitate that social and commercial intercourse which an all wise Providence has made necessary for the intellectual improvement, the social happiness and the moral culture of the human race.

"That we owe the entire and absolute occupation of the Oregon to that posterity which without such occupation by the citizens and free institutions of our great Republic, could not perfect or make available to themselves or to the world the important considerations above set forth.

"That however indignant at the avarice, pride and ambition of Great Britain, so frequently, lawlessly and so lately evinced, we yet believe that it is for the benefit of all civilized nations that she should

fulfill a legitimate destiny, but that she should be checked in her career of *aggression with impunity and dominion without right*.

"That for the independence and neutrality of the western coasts of the American continent and the islands of the Pacific Ocean it is important that she should be restrained in the further extension of her power on those coasts and in the middle and eastern portions of that ocean.

"That so far as regards our rights to the territory in question, we are assured of their perfect integrity, based as they are on discovery and exploration by our own citizens and government and on purchase and cession from those powers having the pretense of right to the same.

"That beyond these rights so perfectly established, we would feel compelled to retain the whole territory, in accordance with Mr. Monroe's universally approved declaration of 1823,<sup>11</sup> that the American continents were not henceforth to be considered subjects for future colonization by any foreign powers.

"Influenced by these reasons and considerations, so important to us and the whole Republic, to liberty and justice and to free governments, we do subscribe our names to this declaration, with the firm, just and matured determination, never to cease our exertions till its intentions and principles are perfected, and the North American Republic, whose citizens we are, shall have established its laws, its arms and its free institutions from the shores of the Pacific to the Rocky Mountains, throughout the limits above specified.

"And we do hereby protest, as we shall continue to protest against any act or negotiation, past, in process, or hereafter to be perfected, which shall yield possession of any portion of the same to any foreign power, and above all do we remonstrate against the possession of any part of the northeast coast of the Pacific Ocean by the power of Great Britain."

The following resolution was offered and passed:—"Resolved, that six commissioners be appointed by this Convention, whose duty it shall be to urge upon Congress, personally or otherwise, the resolutions and declarations of this Convention; to open a correspondence with the citizens of other states, and endeavor by all means in their power, to obtain the favorable action of the National Legislature in a bill for the immediate occupation of our territory in the Pacific, between 42 degrees and 54 degrees 40 minutes north latitude."

<sup>11</sup> This is evidently from the pen of Mr. Mansfield as his report on the Monroe Doctrine published in the *Chronicle* of July 19 emphasizes this point.



It is significant of what were apparently changing views that while the preliminary meeting of April 29 and the address to the South encouraged the idea of the formation of a Pacific republic, there is no evidence of this in the proceedings of the convention itself or in the formal Declaration which was published widely throughout the United States. It is an unequivocal statement of the extreme claims of the Western expansionists and with it the final words of the former vice-president who presided, were in complete accord. Colonel Johnson declared that if "he were to leave his final parting benediction to his fellow citizens, he would say never *yield* one inch of American territory for force or fraud."

Apprehension of British aggression was very apparent among the Americans of 1843. They were six years nearer to the close of the Revolution than we are to the close of the Civil War and four years nearer the close of the War of 1812 than we are to the close of the Spanish-American War. There were old men in every county who had fought under Washington and middle aged men who had served with Harrison and Jackson.

Besides the military traditions and the war memories of living men, the relative situation of the United States and Great Britain with respect to military and naval power, finance and industry, was very different in 1843 from what it became toward the close of the century when the general attitude of the popular mind in America toward Great Britain greatly changed. The confident fearlessness that came from a sense of increasing national power and security may have had an influence in promoting a friendlier feeling toward the mother country.

The Oregon convention at Cincinnati and the other meetings that came about voluntarily in different places in the Mississippi Valley in 1842 and 1843 performed a useful part in bringing the Oregon question to a final settlement. They helped to arouse the sentiment of the people in favor of a strong assertion of American rights to the Pacific Northwest—a sentiment that found a political outlet in 1844; and by spreading information and awakening interest, they contributed in some degree to the pioneer emigration which settled the Oregon country between 1843 and 1850.

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