

FIRST DRAFT

Oregon Territory up for grabs as the 19th century progressed

In the spring of 1845, six companies of horse-mounted U.S. dragoons under Col. Stephen Kearney headed out from Fort Leavenworth in Kansas, then northwest onto the Oregon Trail and eventually to southwestern Wyoming.

In addition to protecting emigrant wagon trains and seeking peace with Native tribes, part of the dragoons' mission was to demonstrate to British authorities how quickly the U.S. Army could deploy troops in the West and reach Oregon in the event of war there.

A pair of British military officers on a spy mission to the Columbia River took notice of the dragoons' expedition.

Disguised as sportsmen, Royal Engineers Lts. Henry J. Warre and M. Vavasour traveled with fur traders from eastern Canada to Oregon to assess British resources in the region and to determine how best to get troops and supplies there.

They concluded, in part based on the dragoon expedition, that the Americans had a much better route to send and supply troops to Oregon.

These were not idle exercises. Although a looming war with Mexico was on the minds of many Americans in 1845, the United States also came close to war with Great Britain over control of the Oregon region.

If the outcome had been different than it was, it could have significantly changed settlement patterns across the West by limiting American access to Oregon, Washington and possibly parts of California.

The dispute with England over who controlled the Columbia Basin and nearby regions had been going on for more than 30 years. It was temporarily alleviated by an 1818 agreement that authorized the joint occupancy of Oregon country by both British and U.S. citizens.

In the early 1840s, however, American settlers began arriving in Willamette Valley — present-day Portland and lands to the south — first at a trickle, but with numbers growing each year. By 1845, there were believed to be more than 3,000 Americans in the area.

Fewer than 1,000 British citizens resided in the territory, most associated with the Hudson's Bay Co. fur trade.

Furthermore, many Americans saw Oregon as part of the nation's birthright, despite the joint occupancy agreement of 1818.

Even before journalist John L. O'Sullivan coined the term "manifest destiny" in 1845 to justify the U.S. annexation of Texas and the Oregon country, large numbers of Americans were pushing for more expansionist policies from their government.

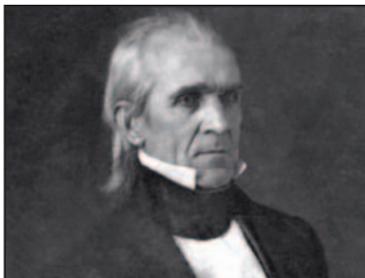
President James K. Polk tapped into that desire during his 1844 election campaign, with the slogan "Fifty-four Forty or Fight!"

It suggested Polk would go to war unless Britain conceded to the United States everything south of latitude 54 degrees, 40 minutes. Such a bound-



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The joint occupancy area of Oregon per the 1818 agreement is all the region west of the Rocky Mountains between the two black lines. The northern black line is the 49th parallel and the modern border between the United States and Canada. The southern black line is the 42nd parallel, where Great Britain initially sought to draw the boundary. If President Polk's call for the boundary at latitude 54 degrees, 40 minutes, had been accepted, everything west of the Rockies to the top of this map would have belonged to the United States.



A portrait of President James K. Polk.



A drawing of Gen. Stephen Watts Kearney.

ary would have given roughly half of British Columbia to the U.S.

The British couldn't accept that, and Polk probably knew it. His campaign slogan was part political bluster, but it was also a bargaining chip to convince the British to concede everything south of the 49th parallel, or latitude 49 degrees north.

That is the western boundary between Canada and the U.S. today. It gave the U.S. control of Oregon and the Columbia Basin, as well as the valuable naval harbor at Puget Sound.

The British had their own demands, however. They wanted the western boundary between the two countries drawn at the 42nd parallel. That would have meant the Willamette Valley, Columbia Basin, and all of today's states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, the Dakotas, most of Wyoming and part of Nebraska would have belonged to England.

It also would have given Britain a stepping stone into California, if Mexico decided to sell it or was unable to hold it.

Both Britain and the United States wanted to assert their authority, militarily and politically.

In February, 1845, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill to "organize a Territorial Government in Oregon Territory." The handful of American citizens in the region had already begun that effort on their own.

The British Parliament quickly responded by declaring that England had "clear and unquestionable" rights to Oregon. In a message delivered to Washington, Parliament said the British could and would defend those rights "against the aggressions of the United States."

War appeared to be a real possibility as Kearney led his 300 dragoons on their 2,000-mile

journey and Warre and Vavasour set out to assess British military might in the region.

But several things prevented the war. Political unrest gripped Great Britain at the time. There was the potato famine in Ireland and riots over Poor Laws and tariffs on imported food.

The empire also faced foreign problems from China to the Middle East. For most British citizens, Oregon was a long way from England and important only to the privately owned Hudson's Bay Co.

Consequently, politicians in England were not eager for another war with the U.S. Despite their war talk, they were ready to negotiate over Oregon.

President Polk had his own reasons to negotiate. By May 1846, the war with Mexico was underway, and his small military forces were stretched dangerously thin. Also, many people in the U.S. protested the war with Mexico. A second war with Britain would have made matters worse.

Additionally, representatives of Brigham Young had hinted to Polk that the 15,000 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints might become allies of Britain if there was a war over Oregon country because of the way they'd been treated in the U.S. Polk wanted the issue settled before that could occur.

So, in the summer of 1846, a treaty was approved between the two countries, granting the U.S. everything south of the 49th parallel, except for the southern point of Vancouver Island.

The 2,000-mile trek of the 300 dragoons under Gen. Kearney, who would win fame in 1847 for his action in New Mexico and California, likely had an impact on the Oregon treaty.

Kearney's report was

completed and sent to Washington in September, 1845. And two of his officers published accounts of the journey in newspapers back East, making the case that the U.S. Army could defend both the Oregon Trail and Oregon country.

The formal report of the two British spies didn't arrive in England until after the treaty was approved, but earlier reports may have.

Furthermore, their conclusion that an overland route from eastern Canada was "quite impracticable for the transport of troops with their provisions, stores and etc." certainly helped convince any reluctant members of Parliament that the treaty was necessary.

Two years later, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago was signed, ending the war with Mexico and granting all of the American Southwest, including California, to the U.S. In just a few years, the vast country we now know as the American West had gone from claimed ownership by three different nations to belonging to the U.S. alone.

Sources: "Philip St. George Cooke: On the Vanguard of Western Expansion with the U.S. Army, 1827-1848," by Jeffrey V. Pearson, https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/hist_etds/63; "Documents Relative to Warre and Vavasour's Military Reconnaissance in Oregon, 1845-6," by Joseph Schafer, *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society*, March, 1909, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2060979>; "Settlement of the Oregon Boundary Question, 1818-1846," *Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest*, <https://www.washington.edu>.

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IN BRIEF SENTINEL STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

Orchard Avenue input sought

Mesa County officials will present a study of Orchard Avenue that explores possible improvement plans from 4 to 7 p.m. Sept. 28 at Grand Mesa shelter at the Long Family Memorial Park.

The study focuses on Orchard Avenue from 29½ Road to Warrior Way. The project is to improve that stretch of road for all users.

The project team will present information on the road improvement plans and take public feedback.

GOP leaders reject opting out

DENVER — Colorado Republican leaders have voted down a proposal from that would have allowed GOP nominees to be selected by a relatively small number of party members.

The proposal would have allowed Republicans to opt out of the primary election and instead select nominees for federal offices, the governor and other posts through a caucus and assembly process.

A few thousands party members would have participated, versus millions in a primary election.

The proposal got about one-third support from roughly 500 Republican leaders during a state party central committee meeting on Saturday in Pueblo. It needed 75% support to advance.

Suspect in killings turns himself in

MINNEAPOLIS — One of two men suspected in the shooting deaths of four people whose bodies were found in an abandoned SUV in Wisconsin has been arrested in Arizona, authorities said.

Antoine Darnique Suggs, 38, turned himself in to police in Gilbert, Arizona, on Friday and will be extradited to Wisconsin, the Star Tribune reported.

His arrest came two days after St. Paul police arrested Suggs' father, 56-year-old Darren Lee McWright, who has been charged with helping hide the victims' bodies. There have been no descriptions yet of who shot the victims or where the shootings took place, but authorities said in court documents that Suggs was seen at a St. Paul bar with victim Nitoshia Flug-Presley and two of her friends hours before they were found dead along with a fourth victim.

Flug-Presley's mother and aunt told investigators that Suggs had been dating her.

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