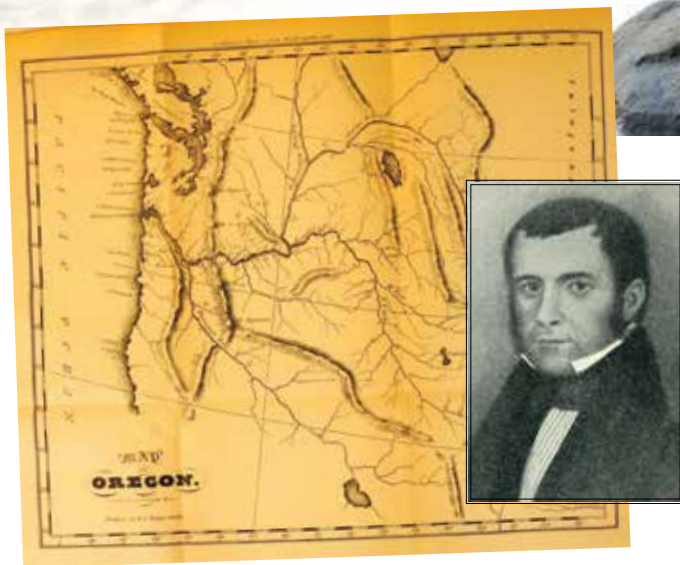


HALL JACKSON KELLEY

Lost Champion of Oregon

By Martin John Brown



While living in Boston, Hall Jackson Kelley compiled his circa-1828 map of Oregon from scraps of information culled from a great deal of reading.

In early summer, the point of land where the Columbia and Willamette rivers meet is so full of promise, it's easy to get a little delirious.

There is a sweet smell all around, and the air actually seems to sparkle. The cottonwood trees are sending out their seeds—tiny bits of fluff that fall slowly to the mud, catching the sunlight as they go.

From one direction comes the Columbia, easily half a mile wide. With the white mass of Mount Hood as a backdrop, it suggests a country of tremendous strength and grandeur. From the other direction comes the placid flow of the Willamette, suggesting comfort and home. Downstream awaits the Pacific Ocean, and thereby the whole world.



It is no wonder that in the 1820s, a man named Hall Jackson Kelley chose this strategic spot for the first great commercial city in the Oregon Territory. It was a marvelous idea—for someone who had never left New England.

The Beginning of a Dream

Kelley lived in Massachusetts, but was obsessed with Oregon. Lewis and Clark's journals had electrified him, and he greedily consumed intelligence about the region, pestering merchants who had gone there by sea. From Boston he wrote an 1828 book, *A Geographical Sketch of Oregon*. His account of the land, plants and animals is surprisingly accurate, but his language extolls a new Promised Land. "All who have explored the country," he wrote, "have been astonished . . ."

Kelley did not know the truth about his city site: It was not a solid peninsula, but a shifting, flooding collage of marsh and island. No city would ever be built on that point, and Kelley's obsession curdled into something sadder. But Kelley deserved some credit for what happened instead, and today, in a way, he is finally getting his due.

An Enthusiastic Promoter of an Ideal

Kelley was born in 1790, and started out with a lively, if academic, mind. "Books and papers . . . were calculated to inspire ambition," he wrote. "I left my juvenile plays and sports . . . I read at times through the day, and more than once through the night."

He became a schoolmaster and wrote successful grammar books. He exercised his math skills as a surveyor. He took part in philanthropies like the Penitent Female Refuge, which aimed to reform "fallen" women. Kelley wanted more than a career—he wanted a perfected society.

In 1831 came his major pitch to plant a colony of white settlers on the Columbia River. A settlement, he argued, would relieve East Coast overpopulation, convert American Indians to Christianity and press the United States' territorial claim. He had already worked out the details.

It would be populated by thousands of men, women and children "in whose characters are combined science, skill and integrity"—from clergymen to geologists to hatmakers. The colony would be a kind of new New England, a civil society where the guiding belief was "the religion of conscience"; where every citizen brought, quite literally, a certificate of their good character; and where streets were laid out in the modern arrangement of right angles.

Kelley's boosterism made him famous. Hundreds responded. One was an energetic young man named Nathaniel Wyeth, who wanted to trade in the Northwest. For a time Wyeth helped and recruited for Kelley.

But the proposal had generated opposition. The practicality of every detail was savaged, especially the grand caravan west. "The journey has, indeed, been performed; but by whom?" wrote *The New England Magazine*. "Not . . . by handicraftsmen just from their workshops, led and guided by a student; but by small parties of practiced hunters."

Congress refused to help, so Kelley sold much of his property to support the venture. Relations with his wife and children fractured. Perhaps the worst blow was the defection of the capable Wyeth. When Wyeth saw Kelley was serious about taking women and children, he quit and organized his own expedition.

"He has no means of moving a step in this business," Wyeth wrote about Kelley, "and in my opinion will never move."



Nathaniel Wyeth



Kelley was entranced by the reports of Lewis and Clark and other explorers to the Pacific Northwest. **Clockwise from top:** The Fort to Sea Trail, the route used by the Lewis and Clark expedition from Fort Clatsop to the Pacific Ocean, ends at Sunset Beach. • Youngs River Falls were discovered by Patrick Gass, a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition. • William Clark explored Cannon Beach, shown here at Haystack Rock, in early 1806 while his expedition was wintering at nearby Fort Clatsop. • American Indians traveling through the Columbia River Gorge most likely passed Multnomah Falls. In 1805, the route was used by the Lewis and Clark expedition to reach the Pacific.

Six months after Wyeth set out, Kelley also eventually departed for Oregon with a few companions. All the colonists had dropped away, and Kelley now pictured himself as a patriotic investigator. But *The New England Magazine* was right: Kelley was a student, not Indiana Jones. He was robbed and deserted on his circuitous route through Mexico and California, and when he finally collapsed in a Hudson's Bay Company fort on the Columbia, he was beset by malaria.

It was an odd spot to seek refuge. The Hudson's Bay Company was an extension of the British Empire, and Kelley had criticized it in print. His colony, if it came to be, would push a competing, American claim to Oregon. Nonetheless, Kelley was surprised by the lukewarm hospitality.

Into Kelley's sick-hut came a familiar face: Nathaniel Wyeth. In the time it had taken Kelley to get to Oregon, his one-time protégé had traveled from Boston to Oregon, back

to Boston, collected more travelers, and returned to Oregon. Among Wyeth's party were two Methodist missionaries. Meeting them, Kelley came face-to-face with his clearest legacy. The missionaries were not American Indians, soldiers or fur traders, and they meant to stay and do good work. And they were in Oregon, indirectly, because of Kelley.

Shortly thereafter, the Hudson's Bay Company placed Kelley on a ship, and his time in the Promised Land was over.

Despairing Days

Back in Massachusetts, Kelley's life was broken. His family was living with sympathetic in-laws, and Kelley was too weak to work outside as a surveyor. He retreated to the village of Three Rivers, where from a ramshackle house his boosterism for a colony sputtered on and off. He watched as news trickled in: Oregon fur traders were becoming settlers;



Clockwise from top: The Vista House at Crown Point was built in 1916 for tourists visiting the Columbia River Gorge. • The basalt walls of Lower Oneonta Falls are home to a wide variety of ferns and mosses native to the Columbia River Gorge. • The Willamette River joins the Columbia River less than 10 miles from downtown Portland. There, at the confluence of the two rivers, lies Kelley Point Park.

wagon trains of families were streaming west; Oregon was gaining statehood.

Kelley struggled to find emotional justice for all that had gone wrong. He wanted credit for Oregon, but believed all avenues to recognition were blocked by agents of the Hudson’s Bay Company. “The troops at this place have come daily to vex and to torture,” he wrote, blaming them even for apples stolen from his orchard. In the end the one-time man of property and vision was begging food from neighbors. He died in Three Rivers in 1874.

Where the Rivers Meet

Today, the site of the great city Kelley envisioned is still a mess of mud and cottonwoods. Gazing at the mixing currents of the Columbia and Willamette, it is easy to pity Kelley and his baroque air castle of fantasy. But all it takes to cure this feeling is a turn of the head.

On the Columbia a stout tugboat pushes a barge, bringing Northwest grain to the world. Just south of the view of Mount Hood rises the immense gantry of a port’s cargo crane. Up the Willamette glimmer the bridges and buildings of Portland, a city that—like Kelley—cannot stop reading. It’s known for its bookstores and the oldest public library on the West Coast. It’s famous, too, for urban planning. And like Kelley, Portland—as skewered on television’s “Portlandia”—is preoccupied by a very particular kind of civility.

Kelley has finally gotten his credit, less in words than in the reality of what Portland has become. The place where the rivers meet is now called Kelley Point Park. It is a small recognition that castles in the sky sometimes, like cottonwood seeds, land softly on the ground. 🌿

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