

Twenty-Ninth Congress.

Mr. Benton's Oregon Speech.

In Senate, May 25, 1846. Continued from our last.

The ship Tonquin, carrying the maritime part of the expedition, arrived at the mouth of the Columbia March 25th, 1811. The approach to the coast revealed nothing but lofty ranges of mountains, white with snow, through a gap of which the great river of the West entered the sea. The weather was bad—the night dark—two boats had been swamped—no pilots, lights, or buoys—yet the captain (a rash man who afterwards blew up his ship at Nootka) entered safely, and anchored at midnight in a commodious harbor.

On the 12th of April Mr. Tonquin's crew, examining the sides of the bay for the best situation, a site was chosen on the south side, about four or five leagues from the sea, and the foundation of Astoria began—a name in itself the badge of American title.

On the 15th of July, the young Astoria received an important visit, which is thus described: "All was ready at the appointed, (for an expedition to the interior) and we were preparing to load the canoe when towards mid-day, a vessel, carrying a flag, which was rounding the point called by us Tongue Point. We were ignorant who they might be, for we did not look to see for our people, who as we had no other members) were to cross the continent by the route which Captains Lewis and Clarke had followed in 1805, and winter for this purpose on the banks of the Missouri. Our uncertainty was soon banished by the hearing of the canoe, which landed near a little quay which we had built to facilitate the unloading of our vessel. The flag which this canoe carried was the British flag; and her crew amounted to only nine persons in all.

Mr. Thompson kept, as it seemed to me, a regular journal, and travelled rather as a geographer than a trader in furs; he had a good quadrant; and during a sojourn of eight days, which he made at our establishment, he had occasion to make several astronomical observations.

This was a visit of great moment in the history of Astoria, and in the consideration of the British claim to the Columbia, which has been lately brought forward. Mr. Thompson was one of the Northwest Company, its astronomer, a gentleman of science and character, to whom we are greatly indebted for fixing important geographical positions in the interior of North America. He had crossed the continent from Montreal to Astoria, and had been in the possession of the mountains from St. Louis, but in a higher latitude, and arrived a few days before it. He came to the Columbia to give the information to Mr. Astor's agents that the Northwest Company, to avoid competition with them, would abandon all their establishments west of the mountains, provided Mr. Astor would not interfere with them on that point. This proposal was agreed to. The valley of the Columbia was to be the free enjoyment of the Americans; and the extension of posts to the mountains went on without question according to the original intention. The Northwest Company, at that time, no more than the British government, had happened yet to take into its head that the Columbia river, or any part of it, was British property!

Mr. Astor's agents proceeded to the establishment of interior posts, and the despatch of parties to hunt and trade up the Columbia to the mountains. The Okanakan, about six hundred miles up, on the north side of the river, and at the mouth of the river of that name, was the most considerable, and was remarkable for being the nearest to the British establishment in New California; for by that name the valley and district of Frazer's river is then known; and that was ten years before Mr. Harby published his book. The Spokane, two hundred miles higher up, and on the south side, was established at the same time. The post on the Wahlamath, two hundred and fifty miles southeast from Astoria, was established the next year; and of all these establishments Mr. Franchère gives a particular account, which it is not necessary to read here. The country was, at the same time, completely penetrated by parties of traders and hunters, up to the head-waters of Clark's river, and of Lewis's river, and into the Rocky Mountains. Two years every thing had gone on without interruption, when two events occurred, in communicating which I will use Mr. Franchère's own words:

"The 15th of January, 1812, Mr. Mackenzie arrived from his establishment, which he had abandoned after having cached a part of his effects. He came to announce to us that a part had been declared Great Britain and the United States. This news had been brought by some gentlemen belonging to the Northwest Company, who had given him a letter containing the President's Proclamation to that effect.

"On learning this news we strongly desired—that if, all of us at Astoria who were English and Canadians—to see ourselves in Canada; but we could not even permit ourselves to think of it, at least at present. We were separated from our country by an immense space, and the difficulties of travel were insurmountable at this season. We held then a sort of council of war, and after having thoroughly weighed the crisis in which we found ourselves, after having considered seriously that although we were in the midst of subjects, we nevertheless traced under the American flag, and that we could not expect assistance, all the posts of the United States were immediately abandoned, and we abandoned the establishment by the following spring on the beginning of summer at farthest. We did not tell our engines of this resolve for fear that they might abandon their work at once, and that we should be left without from that moment, as much because we were not provided with a large supply of merchandise, as that we had more fur than we could carry away."

Here is an important fact stated, that of hearing of the news, and preparing for protection from the United States. The agents of Mr. Astor, upon full consultation, determined to abandon the country.

Mr. Franchère continues: "Some days after Mr. Mackenzie's departure, we perceived, to our great surprise, at the extremity of Tongue Point, two canoes carrying the British flag, and between them another bearing the flag of the United States. One of the canoes, which was returning with Messrs. J. G. McFavish and Angus Bethune, of the Northwest Company. He had met these gentlemen near the Rapids, and had determined to return with them in the same canoe. We had seen in the news which they had given him. They were in light canoes, having left behind Messrs. John Stuart and McNeil with a small party of men, and a small boat, and Mr. McFavish came up to our lodge, and showed us a letter which had been written to him by Mr. A. Shaw, one of the agents of the Northwest Company. This gentleman mentioned to him in the letter that the Spanish flag had sailed from London in March in company with the frigate Pléiade, and that they were coming by order of the government to take possession of our establishment—this establishment being regarded by the Lords of the Admiralty as an important colony founded by the American government."

"The eight canoes which had been left behind having joined the first, only seven persons were left behind, and were formed at the little bay near our establishment. We were without provisions we furnished them with what they needed; nevertheless we kept on our guard for fear of some surprise from them, for we were much inferior to them in number.

"The season advancing, and their vessel not arriving, caused them to find their situation very disagreeable; without provisions and without means of defence, and the natives, who looked on them with an evil eye, having good hunters but wanting ammunition. Tired of seeing themselves in this situation, they proposed that we should let them return to their country, and that we should let them see an English man-of-war appear to take away what we possessed, we listened to their proposal, and after some consultations, the negotiators went wearily long; at length they agreed on the price of the furs and merchandise; and the treaty was signed by both parties on the 23d of October. The gentlemen of the Northwest Company, who were in possession of Astoria, having agreed to pay each of the services of the de-voiced Pacific Fur Company (a name chosen by Mr. Astor) the amount of the wages in full from the price of the goods we delivered to them, and that they should receive a passage gratis to those among them who wished to return to Canada.

"It is thus that, after having crossed seas and endured all sorts of fatigues and privations, I lost, in an instant, all my hopes of fortune. I could not prevent myself from remarking that we should not look for such treatment from the British government after the assistance we had received from its Majesty's minister before we left New York. But as I have just said, the value of our trading-post had been so exaggerated to the ministers, that they had known it, they strictly would not have taken offence at it; at least would not have judged it worthy of a just re-examination."

This is the manner in which the effects of Mr. Astor passed into the hands of the Northwest company; this manner in which they became installed in the valley of the Columbia. It was a purchase of goods and furs, and of the buildings which contained them, and nothing more. No one was foolish enough to suppose that the sovereignty of the country was to be transferred as an appendage to an apprenticeship to the skins and blankets. We will now see how the British Government obtained possession of the country.

"The 15th of November, 1813, Messrs. Alexander Stuart and Alexander Henry, both proprietors in the Northwest Company, and who had been in the possession of the country, were taken by sixteen voyageurs. These gentlemen had left Fort William, on Lake Superior, in July. They lost some Canadian voyageurs, by which we learned that the British had been in the possession of the country. They also confirmed the news that an English frigate was to come and take on the de-voiced establishment; they were even very much surprised not to see the Isaac Todd in the harbor.

"On the morning of the 30th, we perceived a vessel which was doubling Cape Disappointment, and which soon anchored in Baker's bay. It was a friendly vessel, and we thought it prudent to send to it in a canoe. Mr. McDougall, with those of the men who had been in the service of the de-voiced P. F. C., with the injunction to call themselves Americans if the ship was American, and English if it was the contrary. Whilst they were on their way, Mr. McTavish had all the furs which were marked with the name of the N. W. Co. packed upon two barges which were to go to the fort, and remoth of the river to Tongue Point, where he was to wait for a signal which he had agreed upon. Towards midnight Mr. Halsey, who had accompanied Mr. McDougall to the vessel, returned to the fort, and announced that the ship was the British ship, the company, and 20 men in her crew, Captain Black commanding. Mr. John McDonald, proprietor in the Northwest Company, had come as passenger in the Harcoon, accompanied by five engineers and a surgeon. The vessel had sailed from the mouth of the Columbia, and had come to the mouth of the river, and had separated after having agreed to meet at the island of Juan Fernandez. The three vessels of war did go there, and had having waited a long time for the Isaac Todd, Captain Hiltay, who commanded this little squadron, having learned that the American Commodore Porter was doing great damage to the English commerce, especially in the Pacific, he had resolved to go and find him and give battle, giving to Captain Black orders to go and destroy the American establishment of the Columbia river. Consequently Mr. McDonald and his men were to be taken to the fort, and the frigate was to be destroyed. The British government, in peace and quietness. The British government, in peace and quietness. The British government, in peace and quietness.

"We thus see that, in 1824 the British government, by authentic acts, and by the language of Mr. Canning, admitted our right to the river and valley of the Columbia; and, what was better, limited their claim to 49. At the same time we see, that our government was offering 49; so that the two governments were of accord, and the question is, why they did not agree. The Commodore Porter, in answer to this question, and a strange answer it is. Nothing else than a love of partnerships, and a desire to go into partnership with Russia and Great Britain in the use of all the country beyond the Rocky mountains, each enjoying the use of the whole in common with others, and the title to remain in abeyance. The Emperor of Russia, like a wise man, declined all share in this mixed concern, and left it to the British and the United States, and has enjoyed it ever since in peace and quietness. The British government, in peace and quietness. The British government, in peace and quietness. The British government, in peace and quietness.

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"Another river, called the Caledonia, (Fraser's) holds a parallel course to the Tacoteuse, (Columbia), falls into the sea near the Admiralty Inlet of Vancouver, in latitude 48, and forms a natural boundary between the British and the United States, and falling in precisely with a continued line with the same parallel with the lake of the Woods, and leaving about two degrees of latitude between it and the Columbia."

"I set out to establish, upon the admissions of Great Britain herself, our right to the Columbia river and its valley. I have done more. I have established her admission to the line of 49, giving us near three degrees on the coast, the valuable waters about the Straits of Fuca and Puget's Sound, and the whole Olympic district, no part of which is in the valley of the Columbia."

"We thus see that, in 1824 the British government, by authentic acts, and by the language of Mr. Canning, admitted our right to the river and valley of the Columbia; and, what was better, limited their claim to 49. At the same time we see, that our government was offering 49; so that the two governments were of accord, and the question is, why they did not agree. The Commodore Porter, in answer to this question, and a strange answer it is. Nothing else than a love of partnerships, and a desire to go into partnership with Russia and Great Britain in the use of all the country beyond the Rocky mountains, each enjoying the use of the whole in common with others, and the title to remain in abeyance. The Emperor of Russia, like a wise man, declined all share in this mixed concern, and left it to the British and the United States, and has enjoyed it ever since in peace and quietness. The British government, in peace and quietness. The British government, in peace and quietness. The British government, in peace and quietness.

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