



The Education of an Empire Builder: John Jacob Astor and the World of the Columbia

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The Americas were long both battleground and prize in a great contest for empire. From Mexico to Hudson's Bay, that struggle shaped the political and cultural destiny of the continent. In the late 18th century imperial competition took on new force and direction as the great powers of the Atlantic world increasingly eyed the Pacific and the northwestern most parts of North America. For European empire builders the Pacific offered everything from the wealth of the China trade to the solutions for the housing of criminals. With promises of personal wealth and national power, it was little wonder that the world of the Columbia should attract generations of eager explorers and ambitious statesmen.

The course of empire that followed into Pacific waters after 1760 followed a distinctly 18-century direction. Men as remote from each other as Thomas Jefferson, Sir Joseph Banks, Andrei Dashkov and John Jacob Astor all shared a common set of assumptions. Those assumptions both defined and gave direction to the early years of what historian William S. Goetzmann has called the "second great age of discovery." Many Europeans in the 18th century were fascinated by three closely related questions. What was the definition of sovereignty and the nation-state, what were the limits of capitalism and entrepreneurship, and what was the promise of Enlightenment science? Those questions captured the attention of bureaucrats, merchants and scientists from Philadelphia and London to Paris and St. Petersburg. The age of King George III, Czar Alexander I and President George Washington did not separate business from politics. Trade and dominion marched together. Eighteenth-century diplomats and company shareholders assumed that organizations like the Hudson's Bay Company, the Russian-American Company, and the North West Company had twin goals. The companies were "in places as distant as York Factory, Canton and New Arkangel to turn a profit and extend national influence. No one doubted that there was to be a relationship between ledger figures and imperial power. In the era of John Jacob Astor and Meriwether Lewis there was no such thing as a commercial venture without implications for sovereignty and national expansion.

To concerns about politics and profit the 18th century added a third element. In the years after 1760 scientific investigation became an increasingly important part of the course of empire. Certainly no one more fully embodied the connection between science and exploration than Britain's Sir Joseph Banks. In his role as president of the Royal Society, Banks transformed the agenda of exploration. Pacific voyages by Captain James Cook and Captain George Vancouver became both scientific and imperial ventures.

The Banks approach soon had disciples like Jefferson and Astor. While Jefferson's scientific directions to Lewis and Clark are justifiably well-known, Astor's interest in science seems all but forgotten. Writing to Albert Gallatin in May 1810, Astor promised that his western expedition, led by Wilson Price Hunt, would be pleased to provide information and observations to any student of the West. And Astor's chief field agent took that promise seriously. Hunt's overland journey to Astoria in 1811 included John Bradbury and Thomas Nuttall, the first two professional scientists to study the world of the Missouri River and the northern plains.

The symbols of the 18th century were national flags, account books and exotic specimens stowed in a naturalist's collecting bag. Sovereignty, capitalism and science all came together in the first concerted attempt to create an American commercial and political empire in the Northwest. John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company, with its grand entrepôt Astoria on the Columbia River, was no mere business enterprise. Astoria represented both the expansionist energies of the American nation and the sophisticated geopolitical thought of a remarkable man.

As Astoria has long symbolized western adventure à la Washington Irving, so John Astor has come to represent a narrow-minded, money-grubbing capitalism. Contemporaries knew better. Jefferson insisted that Astoria was the fundamental act of territorial occupation that gave the United States valid claim to the entire Northwest. Astor was seen by those who knew him as a careful student of politics and international relations. When Jefferson asked about the entrepreneur's abilities, the president was told that Astor was "a man of large vision and fair character." Alexander Ross, an embittered former Astor employee, admitted that Astoria's founder had a "buoyant, aspiring and comprehensive mind." Astor was part of a long tradition that placed the fur trade in the service of territorial expansion. At a time when the new nation was grappling with its own domestic troubles, Astor thought in global terms.

The range and complexity of Astor's imperial thinking was not apparent all at once, but its outlines were clear early as 1808. In a letter to New York politician De Witt Clinton, Astor spelled out a strategy "for carrying on the fur trade in the United States even more extensive than it is done by the companies in Canada." He envisioned a series of trading houses from the Missouri to the Pacific, all the time assuming that the Pacific shore would someday be the westernmost margin of the American land empire. Although he made no mention of China in this 1808 letter, it was plain that Canton and its thriving fur market were on Astor's mind. Canton was the unspoken goal; Russian America

would prove the unexpected opportunity. Less than two years Lewis and Clark came back from the Pacific, an American promoter was preparing to make their discoveries turn profit and coin an empire.

Over the years the temptation has been to see Astor as a no-nonsense businessman who simply followed up on what Jefferson's captains had pioneered. But Astor's thought about business and politics in the Northwest was not directly inspired by either the president or his intrepid explorers. Astor was the inheritor of an intellectual tradition that called Montreal, not Monticello, home. His tutors in the art of geopolitics were the men of the North West Company, the members of the celebrated Beaver Club, and in particular Alexander Henry the Elder. Beginning as early as 1787 Astor journeyed each year to Montreal, there to engage in his growing fur business. What happened in that city amounted to more than buying and selling. At the homes and in the counting houses of men who would someday be his rivals, Astor obtained a superb education in the western facts of life.

The course of study for that education took shape even before Astor arrived on the scene. With the fall of New France in 1760, a tidal wave of eager Anglo-American traders swept through the Great Lakes and into what are today the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Led by men like Peter Pond, Alexander Henry the Elder, and the brothers Thomas and Joseph Frobisher, these "pedlars from Quebec" brought back both wealth and information. What emerged from their travels was a kind of trader geography made with measures of Indian information and personal observation. Pond, Henry and their companions carried home an image of the American outback, an image that would prove compelling for two generations of explorers and their patrons.

Astor learned his western geography from no less than Alexander Henry the Elder. After returning from the Northwest in 1776, Henry settled in Montreal, there to pursue the fur business from his warehouse on St. Paul Street. Away from the Athabasca country, Henry had time to think about conversations with fellow

trader Peter Pond years before. Both men believed that Lake Athabasca and the Great Slave Lake formed a waterwheel whose river spokes struck west too the Pacific. The Rocky Mountains would prove no barrier since, at least in this vision of the West, they were little more than narrow ridges easily portaged.

Trader geography also embraced the notion that major western rivers had either a common source or sources at close proximity to one another. Her again was the dream of a Northwest Passage, a passage to India, what Jefferson once called "the most direct and practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce." From his sometime partner, Astor learned this hopeful geography. And he believed it. As late as 1813 Astor wrote confidently that the headwaters of the Missouri and the Columbia were almost within sight of each other. This was the geography of imperial expansion, one that became central to both the North West Company's Columbian Enterprise and Astor's Astoria.

But Astor learned more than the shape of the greater Northwest. From his Canadian friends he heard about a strategy to control the region and make it part of a national domain. During the 1780s fur trade geographer Peter Pond bombarded American, Canadian and Russian officials with maps and petitions. Those documents contained not only Pond's geographic vision of the Northwest but also his grand program to dominate the region. The trader proposed a series of fortified posts along a line across the continent from Lake Winnipeg to the Pacific. Pond's faithful pupil, Alexander Mackenzie, expanded that strategy. In his Voyages from Montreal and in nearly a dozen petitions to the British government, Mackenzie argued the merits of a trading post chain as a means sure to command the entire destiny of the Northwest. Mackenzie and Astor were not strangers. In 1798 they met in New York. Their dinner conversation may have turned on Mackenzie's western plans, but Astor did not need this social occasion to learn about the design. By the late 1790s what became the Columbian Enterprise was everyday talk in Montreal. Alexander Henry the Elder could have filled Astor's ear with such dreams and schemes.

Astor's third lesson in the art of empire also came from his Canadian mentors. Pond, Mackenzie and Henry all believed that no single fur trading company had sufficient resources to direct the course of empire. Substantial government support was needed. That support might come in the form of a trade monopoly, military protection or direct financial subsidies. There were certainly ample precedents for such a partnership between crown and company. While France's Cardinal Richelieu had used the Company of One Hundred Associates to secure New France, the Dutch Republic employed the Dutch West India Company to advance national goals, and all were aware of the intimate relationship between Whitehall and the Hudson's Bay Company. Pond favored direct payments to the North West Company. Mackenzie envisioned something far grander. He promoted the union of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company to create a single powerful monopoly firm. That company could seize control of the entire West, thwart both American and Russian expansion, and secure reliable Indian allies.

Such proposals were the talk of Montreal, and Astor was surely caught up in the discussions. At the very least, he heard the gossip. What he sought for both his American Fur Company and the Pacific Fur Company was something akin to those Canadian ideas. Astor wanted his employees to enjoy official protection and semiofficial status. He often used the word "approbation" when describing the slippery relationship between official Washington and unofficial New York City. In the years between 1808 and 1812, approbation meant tacit support and well-wishing. Once Astoria became embroiled in the War of 1812, its founder tended to describe his company as almost a branch of the federal establishment worthy of prompt military and naval protection. However Astor defined his enterprise, he had learned one Canadian lesson well. Playing the imperial game demanded substantial resources and the deep pockets of a national treasury.

Astor's early letters to Jefferson and others reveal how deeply the Canadian curriculum had influenced his thinking. Geography, company strategy and government relations, Astor applied himself to each and became master of all. But that education in empire did not end in 1808. Secretary of War Henry Dearborn

had described Astor as a man of large vision. Part of that vision was the ability to see and then act upon new and perhaps unexpected opportunities. One such opportunity was an opening to Russian America.

May 1810 found Astor busy tying up loose ends for his Columbia River enterprise. Preparations for the voyage of his ship *Tonquin* to the mouth of the Columbia were well under way, and agents of the Pacific Fur Company were hard at work in Lachine recruiting French Canadians for the proposed Hunt overland journey to Astoria. In the midst of this activity Astor put to Secretary of the Treasury Gallatin what must have seemed an odd question: Did the United States contemplate any changes in its treaty relations with Russia? That query was a quiet signal; it represented an expansion of Astor's thinking and an extension of Astoria's empire.

Astor's interest in things Russian, and his pointed diplomatic question, came as a result of events that had been stirring in the North Pacific for some three decades. Since the 1780s Russian traders and their hunters had been busy exploiting the fur resources of the Alaskan coast. After years of cutthroat competition, merchants and government officials agreed on the creation of the Russian-American Company. That company, like its cousins elsewhere, was expected to fill investors' pockets and advance Russian territorial ambitions. While the Alaska fur harvests were usually bountiful, the company labored under a number of difficulties. Inadequate food supplies, restrictions on access to the China markets, and intense competition from Boston maritime traders hindered Russian efforts. The Russians were especially concerned about a growing weapons trade between Alaska natives and the Bostonians. Diplomatic efforts to regulate that trade had failed, and by the time the first official Russian representative was sent to the new American republic, both St. Petersburg bureaucrats and trading company functionaries were desperate for some action.

Russian hopes were pinned on Andrei Dashkov, consul general at Philadelphia, *chargé d'affaires* to the American Congress, and "honorable correspondent" for the Russian-American Company. Dashkov was experienced and imaginative, just the sort of diplomat who could be counted on to seize opportunities not spelled out in formal instructions. Those formal instructions from the imperial court directed him to negotiate a commercial treaty with the United States. While a seemingly innocent overture, the proposed treaty actually contained a dangerous deception. After arriving in Philadelphia late in the summer of 1809, Dashkov suggested that the first article of the treaty contain language "to forbid and not allow their subjects to furnish military goods to an enemy of the one of them at war." Once the treaty was ratified, the imperial government would declare war on the native peoples of the Northwest Coast and invoke article one of the convention. The United States would then be obligated to restrain any weapons trading by American ships.

These clever moves did not simply fail, they were wholly ignored by the Madison administration. Frustrated by American inattention to Russian concerns, Dashkov decided to try another approach. The directors of the Russian-American Company had earlier suggested that a private American merchant with considerable capital and influence might resolve most of the company's problems. How Dashkov met Astor remains something of a mystery. When Washington Irving wrote in the 1830s, he spun out an improbable tale in which the federal government, confronted with Russian complaints about the weapons trade, turned to Astor for advice. Irving claimed that this urgent plea suggested to Astor the possibility of including Russian America in his grand design. At least once Astor himself told a quite different story. Writing to Jefferson in 1812, Astor insisted that he approached Dashkov about the chance for mutual ventures in the North Pacific and the China trade.

The most likely sequence of events is described in a November 1809 letter from Dashkov to Alexander Baranov, the company's chief officer in Russian America. During the fall of 1809 Astor was deeply involved in two complex maneuvers, both directly related to his western enterprise. In August he had been in Montreal discussing the possible purchase of the Michilimackinac Company. And there was the unspoken chance for a joint venture with the North West Company beyond the Rockies. At the same time, Astor was

planning his first voyage in the coastal fur trade. His ship *Enterprise*, under Captain John Ebbetts, was in New York harbor taking on cargo. Sometime during September Dashkov heard about the *Enterprise* and decided that Astor was just the man the Russians needed.

The conversations between Dashkov and Astor expanded the scope of Astoria's empire. And the talks were yet another part of Astor's education in empire. Dashkov explained Russian problems and needs, suggesting "a direct and permanent trade with our settlements." When he asked Astor about his western plans, the merchant confided that the Pacific Fur Company intended to establish a colony on the north bank of the Columbia River. Astoria was, of course, planted on the south side of the river. Astor may have purposely misled the Russians as part of his growing notion of a joint Russian-American presence to squeeze out the Canadians. Warming to the geopolitical benefits of cooperation between the two companies, Astor suggested that if the Russians moved south while American traders advanced north, the British would be eliminated as a power in the Northwest. Dashkov was plainly taken aback by such a daring proposal and gave only the vaguest of replies. But the Russian was impressed by Astor's "capital, spirit of enterprise, and business acumen."

Finding that Astor was "well disposed" toward a Russian connection, the two men fashioned a far-reaching proposal for shared undertakings. Their plan called for both companies to sign a three-year agreement. The pact made Astor sole supplier of all goods to Russian America. He was required to send at least two or three ships each year. Astor's vessels would then be chartered by the Russian company to transport furs to Canton. Russian furs could be sold to the Chinese by Astor's commercial agent, thus concealing their true origin. Dashkov believed that a deal with Astor might accomplish both corporate and imperial goals far quicker than any tedious negotiations with poorly informed American diplomats. He was convinced that, once other American merchants heard about Astor's monopoly to provision Russian posts, all incentive for independent voyages would vanish. The dangerous weapons trade would collapse, the settlements could be fed, and furs might turn good profits at Canton.

By the late summer of 1811 Astor's chief diplomatic agent, Adrian Bentzon, was in St. Petersburg to negotiate with both the Russian-American Company and the imperial government. The true character and complexity of those talks have become plain only in the past decade with the release of new documents from Russian archives. Needless to say, Bentzon was an agile diplomat, so much so as to even outfox American ambassador John Quincy Adams. By the spring of 1812, on the very eve of war, Astor got his Russian connection.

Canadian traders and Russian bureaucrats all played essential roles in defining and expanding Astor's imperial vision. Without knowing it, those teachers prepared him for the most demanding part of his education. Nothing so matured Astor as the finishing school called the War of 1812. Struggling to defend Astoria against British assault and federal indifference, Astor was compelled to give his thinking logical order and rhetorical coherence. In meetings and correspondence with President James Madison, Secretary of State James Monroe, and Secretary of the Navy William Jones, Astor demonstrated a sure grasp of international diplomacy, great power rivalries, and the place of the West in the contest for empire. What he found more difficult to grasp were lessons about bureaucratic inertia, human frailty, and the power of events to overwhelm even the most energetic of planners.

After the declaration of war against Great Britain in June 1812, Astor quickly recognized that the conflict would endanger all his fur trade dealings. Certainly what he once called his "Columbia river schemes" were at risk. Astoria was exposed to crown naval forces and, although he did not know it, many of his employees had retained their British citizenship. By the summer of 1812 Astor had put into motion a number of plans to warn Astoria and secure it against the winds of war. Those efforts involved everything from hurried letters sent to Canton to high-risk gambles that employed secret agents in London and a ship flying false flags.

But Astor pinned his greatest hopes on the chance that American naval vessels might protect Astoria. Such an expectation was not beyond the realm of the possible. For the first time there were American ships of war operating in the Pacific. Astor believed that the Pacific Fur Company was an extension of the American state in the same way that the North West Company advanced British interests. Was not his imperial outpost worthy of protection in time of war? It was a question that Astor asked repeatedly and one that found little firm answer.

Astor was no stranger to the halls of power in Washington. He understood the art of politics and knew how to use personal influence. In January 1813 he traveled to the federal city carrying a letter of introduction from Gallatin to the new secretary of the navy. Knowing that the Navy Department was a rat's nest of corruption and incompetence, Astor decided to meet instead with Secretary of State James Monroe.

Although no record of that meeting survives, an early February letter to Monroe sums up what must have been Astor's main line of argument. Thanks to the recent arrival of the North West Company's winter express in Montreal, Astor now had fairly current information from the Northwest. Canada and the United States might be at war but Astor still had his "reliable sources" across the border. Armed with that knowledge, Astor lectured the secretary on Indian relations, coastal geography and the boundless promise of the region. But such remarks were really just for openers. Astor knew that the North West Company was busy urging the British government to launch a maritime assault on Astoria. Would the federal government, he politely asked, be willing to stop that attack by taking formal possession "of a country which will afford wealth and comfort to many and to protect the establishment which has been made?"

Astor thought that a troop contingent, perhaps some 40 or 50 men, could easily secure Astoria against any invasion. Concluding his appeal with the kind of language that would come to typify Manifest Destiny writings decades later, Astor declared "I am sure the government will readily see the importance of having possession and command of a River so extensive as the Columbia." Possession would mean not only power but national prestige. As Astor put it, "the impression which such an enterprise would make ill favor of the United States" would not be lost on any potential rival. The spelling and syntax of those lines were surely smoothed out by an Astor employee, but the thought was undoubtedly his.

Caught up in the troubles of a war gone sour, Monroe and his State Department could spare little time for a place so remote. By mid summer 1813 Astor was desperate for the government to take some action. Increasingly embittered by official indifference, Astor momentarily lost his temper and raged at the State Department. "Good god," he thundered, "what an object is to be secured by Smale means." That object was made abundantly clear in a private memorandum prepared for Secretary of the Navy Jones. In the most sweeping statement he ever made of his global vision, Astor wrote the following:

The object is to secure the existence of an establishment, which, if prosperous, will place the monopoly of the fur trade of the world in the hands of this country, and at no remote period extend its dominion over a most interesting part of the opposite coast of the North American continent, and perhaps open communications of no small moment with Japan and the East coast of Asia.

No proponent of Manifest Destiny could have put the case for an imperial America with more strength and clarity.

In petitions to an often distracted and sometimes uninterested government, Astor did not necessarily seek to compose a philosophy of empire. His concerns were more immediate and surely more pragmatic. But because Astoria and the ideas behind it grew in an age of territorial expansion, Astor could not escape an education in the rhetoric of empire. In thought and action he was the quintessential imperialist. Blurring the line between public interest and private gain, he sought to wrap his ventures in the cloak of nationalism.

Jefferson's empire of liberty and Astor's own empire of commerce seemed one and the same. To advance one was to advance the other.

War and international diplomacy were not kind to Astoria. Although the United States reasserted its claim on Astoria, the post remained effectively in Canadian hands. Renamed Fort George, the trading house was soon over-shadowed by Fort Vancouver. While the Columbia River post never became the center for a great commercial enterprise, Astor's vision set the course for future American ventures. Astor once wrote that the Columbia was "the key to a vast country." His education in empire-building helped put that key in American hands. Jefferson had been right after all. Astor belonged in the ranks of those who shaped the course of empire.

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