



Statehood for Washington

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By Keith A. Murray

Washingtonians must acknowledge, unashamedly; that the state's foundations were economic ones, laid by those who came West seeking their fortunes on a raw frontier with abundant natural resources available for the taking. They were not refugees from extreme poverty, like so many who crossed the Atlantic, nor from oppression, like the Mormons. They were primarily opportunists, intent on taking advantage of abundance.

But land can't be claimed and traded, or lumber marketed, or the dishonest element (always present) held in check, without government, and so one of the first orders of business for the scattered few who had ended their immigrant journeys between the mouth of the Cowlitz River and Puget Sound was to establish a government. This meant inducing Congress to divide Oregon Territory, giving them the northern half and this was successfully accomplished early in 1853, only seven years after an American could settle north of the great river and be sure he would not eventually be living under the British flag.

Two years later, a resource in addition to fish, timber and land was discovered-gold--and it was on the eastern side of the mountain barrier that bisected the new territory, near Fort Colville in the upper valley of the Columbia. That discovery, like all gold findings, started a rush of prospectors from nearby and as far away as California. This made Eastern Washington temporarily more populous than the western side.

Additional mineral discoveries in Idaho resulted in Idaho's being separated from Washington in 1862, with its capital in Lewiston. Walla Walla speculators wanted their city to be the capital when the state of Washington was admitted to the Union, but the loss of the Idaho mines doomed their hopes. For a short time settlers in the area south of the Snake River, where Walla Walla is located, talked of joining with Oregon, but when that territory was admitted to the Union in 1859, the line now marking the boundary was fixed.

Just before the Civil War, Clark County and the town growing around the old headquarters of the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Vancouver tried to move the territorial capital from Olympia to Vancouver, but their scheme failed. Vancouver and Walla Walla newspaper editors, criticizing what they called "the Olympia ring," combined their mutual interests to oppose what Puget Sound communities said they wanted, such as roads, a terminus of a transcontinental railroad on Puget Sound, free lands for farming and lumbering, and generous federal appropriations for making it easier to prosper economically.

By the end of the Civil War some Walla Walla businessmen and politicians proposed that all of eastern Washington and eastern Oregon be joined to make a new territory. Since Oregon was already a state, Congress had no power to remove half of its territory to satisfy the ambitions of a few dozen Walla Walla citizens, and the idea got nowhere. All those citizens could do was oppose any idea or any federal

appropriations for a wagon road through Snoqualmie Pass, an improvement that would be highly profitable for the towns situated at the west end of the pass. Even though the cost of building such a road through the lowest elevation north of the Columbia Gorge was estimated at only \$2,000, the opponents of the road cited the terrible cost of such an undertaking and were able to stop the territorial legislature from appropriating funds even to survey a trail.

When Congress chartered the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1864 it was evident to the Walla Walla group that their community was not to be on the transcontinental rail line that would reach salt water by the shortest route possible. Accordingly, the Walla Walla boosters and their former Lewiston rivals for leadership in the transmontane parts of Washington and Idaho settled their differences and began to cooperate on a scheme to divide Idaho, whose capital was now Boise, and to annex the mining camps north of the Salmon River to Washington. If this could be done they would then petition Congress for immediate admission as a state. The idea was submitted to the voters of Washington but they were profoundly indifferent. Less than 10,000 men voted at all, and only half of these made any choice regarding the statehood issue. Not even 1,000 approved calling a constitutional convention to meet and write a form of government for a new state east of the Cascades.

A new element was added when the Northern Pacific Railroad charter was amended to allow the rail corporation to make Portland its terminus instead of some town on Puget Sound. It permitted the company to run only a branch line from Portland to Puget Sound. Once again the Walla Walla newspaper editor urged the territorial legislature to call an election to vote on statehood to give Washington some political power in Congress. The majority of voters didn't seem to care where the railroad went, for this time only 2,000 people voted, with at least 1,100 opposed.

In 1872 the proponents of statehood tried again and the results were the same. More voters participated this time, but the opposition defeated the measure by more than two to one. The collapse of Jay Cooke & Company in 1873 and the subsequent banking panic in America, followed by several years of economic depression, slowed any idea of statehood. The costs to individual taxpayers, if they had to make up in state taxes what they would lose from federal subsidies, cooled their enthusiasm enormously. When valuable mineral deposits in the mountains east of Coeur d' Alene, Idaho, were discovered, sentiments changed not only in Walla Walla but in the Puget Sound counties as well. As the value of the mines rapidly increased, desire for annexation of northern Idaho, and the consequent tax revenues that could be generated there, made promoters of the statehood issue confident that they had a chance. Nevertheless, the rank and file of the voters remained indifferent.

Among Walla Walla enthusiasts, their antipathy toward Puget Sound Republicans like Elisha P. Ferry made it difficult for them to cooperate on almost anything. Seattle news-papers accused Portland's Oregon Steam Navigation Company of trying to ruin the future for Puget Sound towns for the benefit of the lower Columbia River ports. While there was probably considerable truth to their charges, only the adjournment of Congress before southeast Washington was annexed to Oregon prevented Walla Walla, the most populous town in the territory, from becoming part of Oregon. Frightened by the prospect of losing Walla Walla and north Idaho to Oregon if Congress consented to the proposed boundary changes, Puget Sound opponents of statehood switched sides, and in 1876 proposed that a state with the current boundaries be admitted as soon as possible. A feverish pro-statehood campaign was successful, and the voters all around Puget Sound shifted from indifference or opposition to support for statehood. Seattle and King counties, for example, voted 1,399 to 22 to call a constitutional convention. Port Townsend and surrounding communities supported the idea 357 to 7. Kitsap County voted 272 to 4 in favor. Only in the river counties south of the Snake and north of the Columbia did opponents of immediate statehood win a majority. They still wanted to be a part of Oregon. To court support in these regions the constitutional measure proposed that Walla Walla be the site of the convention.

Advocates of statehood had a new problem, however. In 1876 Colorado had been admitted to the Union, and its three electoral votes for the Republicans in the presidential election of that year had turned an almost certain Democrat victory for Samuel Tilden into a Republican triumph when the electoral commission, created to resolve all disputed election results in several states, gave every vote in question to Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio. The Democrats in Congress howled in protest and some of the party leaders stated that it would be a long, long time before they voted to admit another Republican state. In the face of this, Republican Washington had little chance of being admitted by a Democratic party in control of Congress.

Nevertheless, the constitutional convention met in Walla Walla in the summer of 1878, and proceeded to draft proposals that were certain to arouse opposition by the powerful lobbyists for the Northern Pacific Railroad or for the Oregon Steam Navigation Company. In addition, the delegates came up with an unusual proposition calling for voters to express their preference for a candidate, and also to select a second choice if no one received a majority. Voting rights for women and their right to hold state or local offices, radical proposals in the 1870s, were included in the draft constitution. There was a referendum proposed to abolish the sale of alcoholic beverages, but in a hard-drinking frontier society this had little chance of passing. But then, it really didn't matter. Although Washington Territory voters favored the constitution 6,537 to 3,236, Congress did not even vote the matter out of the Committee on Territories, and that was that. Interestingly, Washington voters rejected both prohibition and women's suffrage, but the north Idaho counties approved the constitution itself in a nonbinding "straw vote," 737 to 26. This, however, was because these mining counties were having their own sectional problems with those interested in the prosperity of Boise and southern Idaho Territory.

In 1881 a legislator from Walla Walla named N. T. Caton introduced a memorial to Congress asking it to authorize Washington to draft a new state constitution immediately. The Washington Territorial legislature passed the memorial, but when it reached Congress it was sent to the usual hostile committee and there it stayed for the next six years. The Democratic majority meant it when they said they were going to admit no more Republican states. Everyone knew, though, that sooner or later the Democrats would have to change their position.

During the 1880s, railroad building in the Western United States expanded the rail lines and increased population rapidly. Very soon Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho and Washington territories would have enough population to make statehood near-mandatory. New Mexico was slightly different, as was Oklahoma. In New Mexico there were sharp divisions between the Anglo and Hispanic sections of the territory. Oklahoma had many Native Americans living in it, and the nation was not yet ready for citizenship for Indians. Utah's population was largely Mormon, and Congress was hostile to them because of their practice of polygamy. This still left five territories to be considered, and the Republicans made their admission a large part of their political programs.

During the next five years admission bills were routinely introduced into Congress but nothing came of them, for the Democrats buried them as soon as they appeared. Of passing interest was a bill introduced by Senator Orville H. Platt of Connecticut for admission of the State of Tacoma. Immediately, Seattle and Olympia citizens opposed such a name for the eventual state. Given the mortality rate of statehood proposals, this debate counted but little. Congressional Democrats were as opposed to a Republican state of Tacoma as they were to a Republican state of Washington.

The matter of annexation of north Idaho to eastern Washington continued to be pushed by advocates of statehood. Even the south Idaho counties reluctantly supported it through a memorial to Congress, but other problems delayed Congressional consideration. During the mid-1880s labor troubles in the coal mines of Washington and Wyoming resulted in violence against Chinese and black laborers brought in to replace Caucasian workers on strike against the mining companies. Opponents of statehood for these two territories

seized on these outrages to denounce Western society as unfit for self-government. This was unfair to the local population, for most people in the Northwest were not so much concerned about racial prejudice as they were hostile to the corporations importing the victims of violence in the first place.

In the presidential campaign of 1888 the Western statehood issue became a priority among Republicans. This time the candidate, Benjamin Harrison, won the election in the electoral college, though Grover Cleveland received a majority of the popular votes. Before leaving office, Cleveland signed a bill on February 22, 1889, setting in motion the machinery that would culminate in statehood for the Dakotas, Montana and Washington.

Seventy-five delegates met in Olympia on July 4, 1889, to draft the state constitution. They borrowed from constitutions of other, older states and copied parts of a proposed model document submitted to them by a Portland resident. The delegates worked steadily until August 22, adding a few ideas of their own and resolving differences in wording. Finally they reached a consensus. Unhappily, the legislature didn't appropriate funds to transcribe the minutes taken of the debates, so all that historians have to work with are newspaper reports, interviews with delegates and the journal of the convention finally published in 1962. The delegates rushed home as soon as the convention adjourned to prepare for the October 1 election which would decide the fate of the proposed constitution document and the election of state officials. If the voters approved, the constitution would be submitted without much doubt of acceptance by the new Republican-controlled Congress. The delegates had ducked the thorny questions of voting rights for women, prohibition of liquor and the location of the new state capital. These items were submitted as separate actions. The male voters-women could not yet vote- disapproved of both prohibition and women's suffrage. They voted to keep the capital in Olympia. They registered their approval of the final document by a vote of 40,152 to 11,789. On November 11, 1889, President Harrison issued a proclamation admitting Washington into the Union. The news reached Olympia by telegram sent from the office of Secretary of State James a. Blaine to Governor Elisha P. Ferry. Since the State Department wired "collect," the governor had to pay 61 cents to read, "The President signed the proclamation declaring Washington to be a state in the union at five o'clock and twenty seven minutes this afternoon."

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