



The Wilkes Exploring Expedition in the Pacific Northwest

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On April 19, 1841, the men on board the United States exploring vessels *Vincennes* and *Porpoise*, two weeks out of Honolulu, felt a change in the wind. The warm air blowing up from the tropics was overwhelmed by a great surge from the north, and within 24 hours the temperature dropped 30 degrees. Only a third of the way on their journey from the Hawaiian Islands to North America, the crews already felt the continent's cold breath.

Nine days later they raised Cape Disappointment, the headland at the entrance of the Columbia River. The bar spanning the river mouth was marked by an unbroken line of white breakers forbidding passage. To men grown used to the brilliant foliage of the tropics, the majestic gloom of the American coast inspired feelings of awe, but perilous as it was, the scene was a thoroughly welcome one, and it had the feeling of home. Two years and four months had passed since they had last seen the continent's shore as they sailed out of Norfolk, Virginia, to the sound of brass bands and booming cannon, full of hope and enthusiasm for the voyage they were beginning.

On that languorous August day in 1838 they had been 490 officers, sailors and civilians on board a naval squadron of six sailing ships. Largest was the three-masted sloop-of-war *Vincennes*, the flagship of the expedition's commander, Lieutenant Charles Wilkes. Forming a lovely line behind *Vincennes* as they passed the Virginia capes were the storeship *Relief*, the brig *Porpoise*, the sloop-of-war *Peacock*, and the schooners *Flying Fish* and *Sea Gull*. They made up the United States Exploring Expedition or, as it came to be known, the Wilkes Expedition.

It was the first maritime expedition sponsored by the government and, like many government projects, it was sired by hope and born in controversy. In the early days of the republic, many Americans regarded scientific research as something suspect, the idle pastime of bored aristocrats. This and a fervent desire to minimize government expenditures kept the nation from giving science the kind of support it had long enjoyed in Europe. It had taken considerable skill and effort on the part of Thomas Jefferson to persuade Congress to appropriate the \$2,500 needed to finance the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804-06.

The pride engendered by the stirring reports of those Western explorers obscured the fact that pilots leaving United States harbors had to rely on British charts. This irony was lost on government accountants who brought about the dismissal of Ferdinand Hassler, a Swiss geodesist hired by Jefferson to provide the country with charts of its own coasts. They thought his services were too expensive. Europe's low opinion of America's intellectual environment surfaced in a sympathetic note sent to Hassler by the explorer Admiral A.D. von Krusenstern. "In Russia," he wrote, "your talents would have been better appreciated."

The scientific maritime expeditions mounted by European nations, beginning with James Cook's first voyage in 1768, were the space probes of their day. Cumulatively they revolutionized human understanding of the natural world and individually they brought glory to their sponsors. American navigators were making significant voyages of their own, but these were private affairs. The precious information they put in their logs was considered to contain business secrets, and the logs were routinely destroyed when they returned home. As the fame and import of scientific voyages grew, an increasing number of Americans ached to see their own nation make a public contribution to the expansion of human knowledge and win renown.

The man who eventually realized the dream was Jeremiah Reynolds, an enterprising newspaper editor from Ohio. His enthusiastic advocacy of a national maritime expedition grew out of his early fascination with the ideas of John Cleves Symmes Jr., an eccentric Western visionary who believed the earth was hollow and that its habitable interior could be reached through openings at the poles. In an age when people could still believe unicorns frolicked in Louisiana, Symmes' theory was no stranger than others floating in the popular mind, and he developed a wide following, particularly among fellow Westerners who seemed delighted that one of their own could have come up with such an imaginative idea. They hailed him as the "Western Newton," and beginning in 1822 Congress was bombarded with memorials from Western legislatures calling for an expedition to be sent in search of "Symmes' Hole."

Reynolds became Symmes' agent, but in time he became less enamored with the notion of a hollow earth than he was with the possibilities of polar exploration. Reynolds appealed to any group who would listen and gradually broadened his theme to call for a national maritime expedition to benefit commerce and science. In 1828 he seemed near success. Support was widespread; several naval officers including an eager young lieutenant, Charles Wilkes, offered their services, and the government overhauled the sloop-of-war Peacock to serve as an exploring vessel.

But the bill that would have funded the expedition was killed in the Senate, and eight more years of tough lobbying were required before Reynolds succeeded in getting full congressional approval. The interdepartmental strife and bickering generated during this period delayed the program two years more. But in 1838 the expedition, which many despaired of ever seeing, finally began to take shape.

Its commander, Charles Wilkes, was selected from far down on the naval list. Personality was not a strong point in his favor. Reynolds had earlier judged Wilkes, a prickly New York aristocrat, to be "exceedingly vain and conceited," but unlike most naval officers, he had a genuine aptitude for science and had demonstrated skills in navigation and hydrography. He was one of the very few who could operate the sophisticated equipment that had been purchased for the expedition and, more importantly, he had a reputation for getting a job done. Wilkes' appointment provoked howls of indignation from senior officers, but once in charge he cracked the whip with singular resolve.

It was to be a navy show. Wilkes loathed civilians and sought to cut as many as possible from the expedition's rolls. Even Reynolds was unceremoniously excluded from the enterprise he had worked so hard to create. Wilkes believed he could fill scientific positions from the officer and medical corps at less cost, and when he found he could not, he grudgingly allowed a few civilians to remain, among them geologist James Dana, conchologist Joseph Couthouy, naturalist Titian Peale, gardener-botanist William Brackenridge and philologist Horatio Hale.

When the squadron finally set sail the mood on board was high. They were to explore parts of the South American coast, look for evidence of an Antarctic landmass, and survey and map island groups in the Pacific. They were also to gather information about the western coast of North America, particularly the area called Oregon, where the United States shared sovereignty with Great Britain-and to survey San Francisco Bay.

But the tensions and disputes normal among men in close quarters on a long cruise were exacerbated by Wilkes'

obstinate, overbearing nature, and morale began to sag. Wilkes claimed he played the martinet to maintain discipline, but he seems not to have been acting. Innately suspicious, he frequently imagined mutinous cabals. Officers were demoted or sacked and sent home, and seamen flogged with depressing regularity. Naval regulations forbade more than 12 lashes with a cat-o'-nine-tails, but on one occasion Wilkes had 50 meted out. He complained to the scientists that their specimens smelled bad.

Nor was the trip without tragedy. The Sea Gull was lost with all hands in an Antarctic storm. On the Pacific island of Malolo the murder of two midshipmen by Fijian natives prompted an attack in which the Americans destroyed two villages and killed 87 natives.

Yet, in spite of these tribulations and disasters, the expedition was enormously productive. Ill-charted island groups were mapped with precision, new islands were discovered and , in early 1841, 1,500 miles of the Antarctic coast (now called Wilkes Land) was charted, confirming its continental dimensions. All the while, the "scientifics" were busy amassing huge collections of specimens, identifying new species, and collecting artifacts and information from the exotic cultures they encountered. When the slow sailing Relief was sent home in May of 1839, her hold was crammed with what had been collected up to that time.

As 1840 drew to a close, the men on the remaining four ships longed for the expedition's end. During their stay in Hawaii, Wilkes fought with his officers, dismissed Couthouy and ran a marathon 18-day session of courts-martial. When the sailors' enlistments expired and neither the promise of extended liberty with an advance in pay or the threat of being marooned succeeded in producing enough reenlistments, he had the resisters jailed and flogged until they changed their minds. Sullenly, the expedition resumed its course. In December the Peacock and Flying Fish were ordered to conduct surveys in the central and southern Pacific and afterwards to rendezvous with Wilkes at the Columbia River.

In 1841 the territory called Oregon encompassed the land from Russian Alaska to Spanish California and from the Pacific to the Continental Divide. Since 1818 the United States and Great Britain had agreed to occupy it jointly, but for most of that time only Britain had maintained a presence there, through the agency of the Hudson's Bay Company. Small numbers of Americans began to drift in after 1828, and by 1836 a few missionaries had established themselves in the Willamette Valley and in isolated locales east of the Cascades. These and a sprinkling of mountain men formed the American community, which by 1841 was numerous enough to spur the British to bring in 120 Canadian settlers from the Red River in an attempt to forestall an American takeover.

Wilkes came at a crucial time in Northwestern history. Oregon had begun to loom as an issue in the national consciousness, and diplomats from both countries realized that the terms of joint occupancy could not be extended indefinitely. The American proposal to extend the national boundary along the 49th parallel to the sea was countered by Britain, which wanted it extended only to the Columbia, whose banks would become the border the rest of the way to the Pacific. Wilkes came to show the flag in the disputed region, but also to collect information toward a better basis for a decision.

Unable to enter the Columbia, Wilkes headed north, narrowly avoiding shipwreck off Point Grenville, and spending an anxious, rainy evening feeling his way into the Strait of Juan de Fuca. The next day the two ships swept up the strait, their crews awed by the vast forests mantling the cloud-wreathed shores, and anchored in Discovery Bay. Captain George Vancouver had come here exactly 49 years before, and while the land looked much as it had then, its people had experienced considerable change.

In Vancouver's time the native people had been trading with Westerners for little more than a decade. They wore skins and blankets and were eager to trade their bows and arrows for copper. While still in the strait, the Vincennes was boarded by the crew of a large canoe, and one of the natives wore corduroy pants and a scarlet capote. He spoke enough English for Wilkes to direct him to take a letter to the Hudson's Bay Company post at Fort Nisqually requesting the services of a pilot and interpreter.

Wilkes was unsure of the reception he would receive from the Company, but soon learned that they intended to give him whatever service they could. Piloted to the fort, the Vincennes and Porpoise anchored in the roadstead off Sequelitchew Creek, where the flora of the new land continued to exert its fascination. "The forrist trees," wrote John Dyes, taxidermist on the Vincennes, "of the largest size grow to the Very Warter's Edge where you may cut a mast or stick for a Line of Battle Ship. I never saw Sutch large forrist trees in any part of the world before." And the great ramified inlet on which they sailed in from the sea elicited similar rhapsody. "Nothing," wrote Wilkes, "can be more striking than the beauty of these waters without a shoal or rock or any danger for the whole length of this Internal Navigation, the finest in the world."

It was to prove an extremely significant observation, and it underscored the conviction many felt that since the United States had a claim on these shores, Britain must surely yield its own. Some, like R. B. Robinson, the purser's steward on the Vincennes, were "astonished that our Country should let them get such a secure footing as they already have got on this land."

When the Peacock and Flying Fish failed to rendezvous with him at the Columbia, Wilkes began to fear that they might have come to grief somewhere in the Pacific. With only half his resources available for the work ahead, he doubled his efforts. After Wilkes landed at Fort Nisqually, chief trader Alexander Anderson aided him in the construction of two log cabins, one to serve as an observatory for the instruments used to determine and check longitude, and the other for the use of chart makers. Next, Wilkes divided the expedition into groups and sent them off to survey the region. The Porpoise and two of Vincennes' longboats were sent north to chart Admiralty Inlet, and others were manned and sent out to explore Hood Canal and the intricacies of Puget Sound above the narrows.

Their work added some detail to Vancouver's earlier chart. A new inlet, Hammersley, was added to the clutch at the head of the Sound; the eastern arm of Hood Canal was mapped, and the north arm of Port Orchard was found to connect with Admiralty Inlet, making the land east of it insular rather than peninsular. Wilkes named it Bainbridge Island. To strengthen the American connection to waters the British had discovered, Wilkes affixed names (some 261 in all) to prominent features of the waters and land around them. An indifferent speller, he sometimes took liberties with the names of those he honored. Hammersley Inlet was named after midshipman George Hammersly, and McNeil Island after William Henry McNeill, captain of the Hudson's Bay Company steamer Beaver. The name of Ketron Island was an attempt to reproduce that of William Kittson, a helpful Company carpenter. When confronted with the nominal complexity of George Musolas Colvocoresses, a Greek immigrant serving aboard the Vincennes, Wilkes simply shortened the surname to Colvos and used it to identify the passage west of Vashon Island. Another misnomer involved Wilkes' mistaking the dogwoods flowering above a cove on the Kitsap Peninsula for apple trees, which led him to name the place Apple Tree Cove.

Besides surveying the Sound, Wilkes sent out parties to examine the interior. One led by Robert Johnson, a lieutenant on the Porpoise, was taken on horseback by native guides over Naches Pass, thus becoming the first American party to cross the Cascades. They passed down the Yakima River valley to the Columbia and traveled the long route up its banks to the Hudson's Bay Company posts of Fort Okanogan and Fort Colville. Under the June sun they traveled next up the Spokane River to the Tshimakane Mission where they met Mary Walker, the hardy wife of missionary Elkanah Walker. Her commanding manner succeeded in securing

fresh horses for them from the Spokane Indians, and she stayed up late that night sharing her passion for natural history with Johnson and his men. From Tshimakane the party crossed over to Henry Spaulding's mission at Lapwai on the Clearwater River, and then down the Snake River to Fort Walla Walla where they met Marcus Whitman. On July 15, 60 days after they had left, the party returned, saddle-sore and weary, to Fort Nisqually. They had been awed by the immense country they had seen, but not favorably impressed. Recalling the vast stretches of sage and bunch grass north of Fort Walla Walla, William Brackenridge, a gardener but no prophet, was emphatic: "Not two acres out of a hundred would produce wheat that would pay the farmer for his trouble."

Wilkes himself led another party from Fort Nisqually down the Cowlitz River to the Columbia and Fort George, earlier the site of John Jacob Astor's post, Astoria. From there he and his men made their way to the Hudson's Bay Company headquarters at Fort Vancouver, where they were greeted warmly by its Chief Factor, John McLoughlin. During the following week McLoughlin and his assistant, James Douglas, entertained Wilkes and his men and freely gave of the information they had acquired about the region. Not surprisingly, Wilkes was favorably impressed by the order and discipline maintained at the post, and he greatly enjoyed the affable company of McLoughlin and Douglas on tours of their establishment and during the long after-dinner conversations with brandy and cigars.

His impression of the American missionaries in the Willamette Valley was less positive. He may have been predisposed to such an impression. On his way up the Willamette Valley he met the Reverend Jason Lee camped on the river bank and observed condescendingly that his party was "...annoyed with mosquitoes & sandflies-being Methodists however they were used to such accommodations before they left the U. States." Almost without exception he judged his countrymen to be "low, vulgar and unclean," and he compared their settlements unfavorably with the Canadians', which were marked with "cheerfulness and industry." When a group of Americans approached him with their plans for a provisional government, he was not sympathetic. He was determined, however, to assert the American claim to the region, and upon his return to Fort Nisqually, he had the Fourth of July celebrated with all the show and pomp he could muster.

Once the festivities were done he put his men back to work surveying, moving Vincennes down Sound while another overland party descended the Chehalis River to Grays Harbor. On July 27 he received word that the Peacock had been wrecked trying to cross the Columbia bar.

The ship and its precious cargo of specimens, charts and instruments were lost, but all the men survived, and the Flying Fish had entered the river unscathed. The incident underscored what Wilkes had already come to believe-that the Columbia was not a safe entryway into the region, and that if U.S. claims to the Oregon Territory were to be meaningful, they must include Puget Sound.

Unwilling to risk the Vincennes on the bar, he sent it ahead to San Francisco Bay where it met another overland party, sent to explore the interior of Oregon south of the Columbia and northern Spanish California. The Porpoise and Flying Fish surveyed the Columbia as far as The Dalles. Wilkes had hoped to send another party across the Rockies to scout a route for emigrants coming into the territory, but the wreck of the Peacock eliminated that possibility. To replace the Peacock, he purchased the brig Thomas W Perkins from the Hudson's Bay Company and rechristened it Oregon. By October 31, the expedition had completed its work and headed home. On June 11, 1842, the Vincennes entered New York harbor, and by July 2, the rest had landed.

They had hardly done so when Wilkes filed charges against several of his officers and they against him. In the resulting furor, the public's interest waned and was soon diverted, to the romantic accounts of John Charles Fremont's explorations of the West, and to the Mexican War.

Nevertheless, the Wilkes Expedition had an immediate effect upon the negotiations in process on the Oregon question. Barely 20 days after the Vincennes docked in New York, a report on the expedition containing Wilkes' views on the value of Puget Sound was delivered to the Senate. There, it helped to crystallize the negotiating position from which the Americans never retreated.

For those interested in the history of the Pacific Northwest, the Wilkes expedition provides a window through which to view the region at a crucial time in its history. Aside from the official published report, Wilkes and several of the expedition's members kept journals of their experiences which have proven to be veritable gold mines of information. But perhaps the greatest tribute to the expedition was that it was not the last. In spite of its shortcomings, the difficulties it encountered and the controversy that constantly surrounded it, it made a more than handsome return on its original investment. The work of its "scientifics" profoundly affected the development of American science, and their accomplishments inspired other men and other expeditions. If the expedition did not immediately win the renown its creators had hoped for, its contribution to knowledge was far greater than they could have dreamed.

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