



WashingtonHistory.org

THE LONG WAIT FOR STATEHOOD

Why it Took Washington 36 Years and Idaho 26 years to Achieve Their Goals

By Merle Wells

Columbia Magazine, Fall 1988: Vol. 2, No. 3

Washington waited 36 years for statehood after it was created as a territory and Idaho waited 26 years. Why did it take so long? Next year are their centennials, coming along belatedly. They could have occurred much sooner had it not been for an unusual set of circumstances involving political considerations on the national scene and prolonged wrangling among those who lived in Eastern Washington and what became Idaho over boundaries and the location of capitals.

The settlers in northern Oregon who petitioned Congress in 1851 and again in 1852 for a separate territory asked only for that part of northern Oregon lying west of the Cascades—now known as Western Washington. But when Congress acted and created the territory, it was not the Cascades but the Rockies that became the eastern boundary. And when Oregon achieved statehood in 1859, Washington's southern border, instead of being a line extending eastward from the Columbia River along the 46th parallel, was established 280 miles to the south, on a line parallel with California's northern border.

Thus Washington at one time included the Bitterroot Valley, as well as territory that later became part of Glacier Park in Montana, the area of South Pass, much of what became Wyoming, and all of present southern Idaho. This region of the West was largely uninhabited and parts of it were even unexplored.

When settlers did come, they found that they were under a government whose seat was several hundred miles to the west, reachable only by many days or even weeks of arduous travel by canoe and horseback. Their dissatisfactions soon led them to advocate moving the territorial capital from Olympia to Walla Walla, a proposal not at all acceptable to Puget Sound residents. But their strongly expressed desires for a territorial division that would free them from west-of-the-Cascades dominance turned out as successfully as did northern Oregon's bid for independence from the Willamette Valley in 1852. Idaho Territory was created in 1863. It was a huge rectangle embracing far too much area, like the original Washington Territory, and the next year, 1864, Montana Territory was created out of northeastern Idaho, leaving in Idaho a narrow northern portion known as its panhandle.

The northern and southern parts of Idaho then began to voice a familiar complaint—they were too far apart. Communication lay somewhere between difficult and impossible. The northerners wanted a change in this situation and the result was a long-running squabble about boundaries and jurisdictions that extended for over a quarter of a century, a battle lengthened greatly by delays of statehood.

North Idaho emerged from this period with a sense of identity separate from that of the rest of Idaho, and Eastern Washington to a great extent found that it could identify better with

northern Idaho than with Western Washington. Sectional controversies erupted frequently in the last part of the 19th century and sometimes occasionally after 1900.

Actual settlement east of Walla Walla did not get well started until 1860 when the village of Franklin came into being far down in Washington's share of the Cache Valley, near Salt Lake. No one in Franklin paid any attention to what was going on in Olympia, and Washington's territorial administrators never noticed that they had become responsible for a community more than eight hundred miles away. But later in 1860, gold discoveries at Pierce created an entirely different situation. A succession of Clearwater and Salmon River gold rushes suddenly resulted in a majority of Washington's citizens being in the far-off mining country. Such a development could not be ignored.

Promoters of Walla Walla rejoiced when Idaho's gold rush suddenly brought population and lucrative business opportunities to their newly settled community. Washington had emerged as an important mining territory in only a year or two, with prospects of early state admission by 1862. A greatly enlarged Walla Walla could become the state capital and have a glorious future scarcely anticipated before 1860. Considering that Nevada became a state in 1864 with no more population than an undivided Washington would have had, such a possibility was not totally unreasonable.

Olympia dissented. Even before the abrupt population shift complicated matters in Washington, a Vancouver scheme to become territorial capital had gained a legislative majority. Preserving Washington intact, or even returning it to its original boundaries, would leave Olympia and other Puget Sound communities exposed to disaster. Promoters of Lewiston—a new commercial center established close to Idaho's mines—concurred with Olympia's leaders. They preferred to return to something close to Washington's original 1852 preference for a Cascades boundary between two territories. That way, Olympia could remain the capital of Washington, and Lewiston might become capital of a new mining state or territory, depending upon how fast new settlers appeared.

By 1862, Olympia and Puget Sound leaders felt they could afford to retain a large Eastern Washington farming area as a part of the state so long as they could get rid of all those miners. Actually, after 1862 the danger to Eastern Washington of being outvoted by the people in the mining region had passed, but there was no way for that to be realized. Unaware of how unnecessary their efforts were, Olympia partisans prevailed upon Oregon's congressional delegation—Senator B. F. Harding and Representative John R. McBride—to beat down a Walla Walla plan supported by Captain John Mullan to restore Washington's original boundaries. Under this plan Boise Basin would have become part of a large new territory of Montana, for even Walla Walla's promoters conceded that Washington hardly could expect to retain that important gold rush country.

When they insisted upon giving away all of the northern mining region in 1862, Olympia's partisans were getting rid of fewer than a thousand people. Florence and Elk City would have gone to Montana anyway, so they excluded only 525 miners around Pierce, 276 residents of Lewiston and 158 pioneers around Missoula and Deer Lodge.

But their success created outlandish problems for Idaho. Once Montana's difficulties were taken care of in 1864, North Idaho began to agitate for another interior territory that would incorporate Eastern Washington and western Montana as well. Walla Walla responded

favorably to such an arrangement, but Missoula (supported by Montana's legislature) preferred to be excluded. Idaho's legislature endorsed the Lewiston-Walla Walla proposal for a new Columbia Territory, but Boise agents quietly sabotaged that kind of reorganization when Congress was ready to consider such a possibility in 1868. A pattern of public support and quiet resistance to boundary reform continued for two decades, with devastating results that had a major impact upon Washington and Idaho state admission movements.

Threatened by Walla Walla's designs to return to Oregon—a plausible arrangement, since Oregon was only six miles away, and Walla Walla's transportation connections were closer to Portland than to Puget Sound—Lewiston's civic leaders deferred their agitation for a new interior Columbia Territory. Their new suggestion for boundary reform simply would have returned the narrow strip of North Idaho to Washington. They anticipated that Washington then could be divided so that Lewiston finally would gain its own interior Columbia Territory—a project that still might succeed if Walla Walla resisted any more inducements to rejoin Oregon.

Some Olympia leaders were hesitant about accepting North Idaho back into their territory. But so long as this did not cause Washington to be divided, they felt that North Idaho partisans by then offered no serious threat to the political dominance of Puget Sound. The projected Northern Pacific Railway project promised to bind Washington and North Idaho together, although its initial destination was to be Portland.

North Idaho's campaign to achieve any kind of boundary adjustment failed again in 1874. John Hailey, Idaho's popular congressional delegate who represented Boise interests, quietly torpedoed Lewiston's boundary plan even though it had solid northern support. Northern Idaho was then granted a two-term congressional delegate who had gained Idaho legislative endorsement for a Columbia Territory proposal almost a decade earlier. But instead of trying to resurrect that project, Lewiston's boundary reformers eagerly endorsed a conflicting proposal. Walla Walla promoters dusted off their 1862 plan to get Washington admitted as a state, and Lewiston's ambitious developers reversed their 1862 interior territory preference to join in advocating it. For more than a decade, then, Lewiston voters continued to display their unanimity for the admission of Washington and North Idaho combined as a state.

For more than 20 years after 1864, no one in Lewiston surpassed Alonzo Leland as a proponent for North Idaho boundary reform. As a Portland surveyor, attorney, newspaper editor and anti-slavery leader for a decade prior to Idaho gold discoveries in 1860, Leland had gained invaluable experience in political warfare. He specialized in fighting Salem, Olympia and Boise combines that opposed his own community's interests, and had no trouble in identifying suitable occasions to engage in battle. Few politicians came even close to matching his talent for selecting issues that he could support with excellent, irrefutable reasons—but ones that were doomed to failure when they should have succeeded.

After he arranged to have North Idaho participate in Washington's constitutional convention at Walla Walla in 1878, he served as a delegate in that small, select body. He declined an offer to serve as temporary president in convening Washington's constitutional assembly but went on to serve as a committee chairman and to have substantial influence in preparing the application for admission as a state that would include North Idaho. But some of the delegates wondered why an Idaho attorney was so active in their convention. Leland and his Lewiston associates got a 96.4 percent North Idaho constitutional ratification vote—decidedly more than Walla Walla was able to deliver in Washington. But Congress declined to respond to the appeal of the Walla

Walla convention and so Leland had to mark up a fourth major failure in his efforts to join North Idaho to Washington.

Undiscouraged by successive setbacks, North Idaho voters continued to express their overwhelming preference for a new territorial boundary. When Idaho's one territorial congressional delegate reflected Boise interests and objected to the Washington-North Idaho state admission project, the northern group held an 1880 referendum to express support for returning their section to Washington—a proposition that prevailed by an almost unanimous vote, 1,208 for and two against. Even though 31 voters abstained from recording their preference, a more solid endorsement would have been difficult to obtain. Boise's two North Idaho friends could be tolerated as political pariahs because they had no influence anyway. But no one else had enough strength to get action in Congress just then.

State admission plans ran into trouble regardless of what territory sought recognition. Close attention was being paid to national political hazards in admitting, new states, and Washington's application for admission, with or without North Idaho, encountered an unanticipated obstacle early in 1882. Dakota, with a large population, failed to gain Senate acceptance just then because its Yankton County had incurred congressional displeasure for having repudiated an issue of railroad bonds. After rejecting Dakota, Congress was reluctant to approve Washington-North Idaho. Idaho's congressional delegate still was complaining about such a plan anyway, but he scarcely needed to.

Then, after 1882, an even more serious blockade terminated all state admission prospects for six more years. Republicans controlled the Senate. Dakota and Washington were Republican territories. But the House in 1882 went Democratic and continued so until 1888. The Democrats had learned an important lesson in 1876 that they did not forget. That year they agreed to admit Colorado—a Republican territory where voters then voted against a Democratic presidential candidate who otherwise would have won. After 1882, the Republican Senate rejected Democratic territories and the Democratic House of Representatives turned down Republican territories. North Idaho's goal of rejoining Washington now had to be accomplished prior to state admission. It almost happened. But, as always, Boise intervention defeated the effort.

Until 1882, Idaho had a long, unbroken record of voting Democratic. So after 1876, an Idaho state admission campaign would have been futile. Then, during a year of national Democratic triumph, Idaho switched and voted Republican in 1882. That shift resulted partly from a southeastern anti-Mormon campaign and partly from a Republican decision to support North Idaho's desire to rejoin Washington. Such a promise turned out to be totally empty, because Washington-North Idaho had no chance for congressional approval—nor did any other territorial proposal at that time.

When Idaho's Republicans renewed their Washington-North Idaho admission pledge in 1884, however, they exposed southern Idaho to a more serious hazard. In order to regain power in 1884, Idaho's Democrats had to give northern voters a better offer. They brought back John Hailey—who had beaten down North Idaho's application for a return to Washington in 1874—as their congressional candidate. Because of Hailey's well-known opposition to any kind of boundary reform, the Democrats had to guarantee that North Idaho would be allowed to unite with Washington prior to state admission. Hailey won by a narrow margin and held to his campaign promise. He got his Democratic House colleagues to pass legislation transferring

North Idaho to Washington Territory, February 24, 1886. Then on April 10, Senate Republicans cheerfully adopted a Washington-North Idaho admission act unacceptable to House Democrats. A syndicate of Boise Republicans, who had carefully refrained from endorsing anything beyond a Washington-North Idaho admission plan, blocked Senate consideration of Hailey's proposal. That way, both southern Idaho political parties adhered to their campaign pledges, but North Idaho's aspiration for boundary reform still was being denied.

North Idaho's near unanimity in deciding to become part of Washington then began to dissipate just when Congress showed serious interest in their project. A gold rush to Murray and other Coeur d' Alene mining camps brought in a mining population that favored Montana, rather than Washington. Lead-silver discoveries in 1884 transformed that area. Although Coeur d' Alene lead-silver bonanzas were mostly owned and managed from Spokane, miners generally preferred not to return to a territory that had rejected them more than two decades earlier. Destined to produce more than 80 percent of Idaho's mineral wealth, they did not complain much about remaining in a mining territory where they could retain legislative control—an advantage that they could not anticipate in Washington. And although almost no one wanted to go to southern Idaho, they now had rail transportation that made such a trip more feasible by indirect routes through Washington and Oregon, or through Montana. Rivalry between Palouse farmers (oriented toward Washington) and Montana miners (more numerous and powerful) for control of Idaho's Coeur d' Alene area shattered North Idaho unanimity and directed that area's major centers away from a Lewiston-Moscow element that had battled so long to rejoin Washington.

South Idaho's willingness to part with North Idaho—a surprisingly broad-minded example of liberality expressed repeatedly over two decades—finally began to disappear in 1886. Conditions had changed greatly since 1880, with new transportation patterns and new sources of population. That would make Idaho eligible for state admission about as soon as Washington could anticipate that honor. Idaho could not carelessly give away a large, essential section if statehood were to be realized without the same kind of undue delay as that which plagued Dakota and Washington-North Idaho for several intolerable years.

John Hailey hardly could boast much about his congressional achievements in getting approval for immediate delivery of North Idaho to Washington. A Republican United States Senate was protecting him from success there, a defense for which he could not take credit. Contesting Hailey's reelection campaign, Fred T. Dubois got bold enough to oppose letting North Idaho go at all. With Coeur d' Alene mining support and a little help in Moscow, Dubois managed to supplant Hailey in Congress. Prepared to lead an Idaho state admission movement in place of a territorial dissolution campaign, he planned to bring in a new era to Idaho development.

An utterly unanticipated challenge to Idaho admission plans brought rejoicing in Lewiston and Moscow and dismay farther south shortly after Dubois' election. Senator William M. Stewart of Nevada had joined in an 1869-70 campaign to raid southern Idaho in an attempt to gain some much-needed population for Nevada. By 1886, Nevada's abysmal shrinkage led Stewart to enlarge that effort. He offered to grant southern Idaho immediate state admission by having it become a part of Nevada. (Southern Idaho already had a population larger than all of Nevada, and such a consolidation might have made Boise capital of Nevada—an attraction that somehow lacked appeal.) Even though he got little southern Idaho encouragement, he went ahead with his plans. Just before Congress adjourned in 1887, he got his old Senate colleagues to go along with his scheme.

Senate approval for Hailey's legislation to transfer North Idaho to Washington, however, provoked successful retaliation in Boise. As always, whenever loss of North Idaho threatened to occur, Boise leaders got busy and combated any such action. In this emergency, Governor E. A. Stevenson, who had gone along with an 1867 legislative endorsement for dividing Idaho and letting Lewiston become part of Columbia Territory, no longer tolerated such a loss. An appointee of President Grover Cleveland, he had more strength than a Republican such as Senator Stewart could muster. Cleveland went along with Stevenson's pleas not to act upon Hailey's and Stewart's bipartisan legislation to release North Idaho to Washington. Without Cleveland's approval, Stewart's program collapsed and southern Idaho could avoid merger with Nevada. Lewiston and Moscow victory celebrations gave way to shock when word of Cleveland's decision intruded upon their celebration. North Idaho had been swindled again. Dubois undertook a yearlong campaign to generate sentiment for Idaho admission, with at least partial success in North Idaho. Scarcely anyone preferred Stewart's Nevada offer, but traditional North Idaho partisans of Washington saw no point in abandoning their campaign. In Congress, though, Dubois prevailed upon a unanimous House Committee on Territories to preserve Idaho intact. In a decisive report, February 29, 1888, Idaho was assured of state admission without North Idaho.

A successful resolution of both Washington's and Idaho's state admission campaigns emerged from national, as well as territorial, election results in 1888. All of them went Republican, with a House of Representatives so evenly balanced that Congressional Republicans had to admit new Republican states as fast as they could in order to deal effectively with Democratic opposition to their management of Congress. Dakota abruptly was transformed into two Republican states, rather than one, as originally was projected. Washington had no trouble whatever in qualifying as a Republican state in 1889, but any more consideration of including North Idaho had to be abandoned. Montana, long a Democratic bastion, was transformed into a Republican state, and Idaho and Wyoming were admitted with unexpected haste. With barely more than 62,000 people, Wyoming was awarded statehood that had been denied to Dakota with ten times that number in 1888.

Most important for Eastern Washington was stabilization of an unsatisfactory state boundary less than 20 miles from Spokane. North Idaho felt still greater outrage, but had to accept what had become an inevitable disability.

A long series of Olympia and Boise victories, gained under adverse circumstances, accounted for Washington's failure to reclaim North Idaho during two decades of battle over territorial boundaries. Olympia partisans had no way of anticipating that their 1862-63 effort to rid Washington of their Idaho mines had become entirely unnecessary, even before they managed that difficult achievement. Had they been willing to accept congressional restoration of Washington's original boundaries, some awkward problems still would have become evident by 1864. Lewiston, Pierce, Missoula, and even later Butte would have remained in Washington. Boise, or some nearby mining town, would have become capital of Montana (as present southern Idaho would have been known), while Virginia City most likely would have managed to become capital of some new territory—perhaps with Montana's present boundaries—in 1864. Florence, Elk City, Mount Idaho and later Grangeville would have had to stay with Boise in a clumsy Montana configuration that still would have had unsatisfactory boundaries. A minor adjustment, involving only a small strip of territory and very little population, might subsequently have been achieved.

Pacific Northwest geography was far too complex for there to be any easy solutions for territorial boundary problems, but if Congress had been foreseeing enough to adopt Western Washington's original 1852 proposal for a modest new territory lying entirely west of the Cascades, boundaries for the inland area would surely have been far more satisfactory than the ones that were adopted. Putting Washington's eastern boundary at the Rockies rather than the Cascades created an ungovernable area and led to the long period of turmoil before boundary lines could be finally established, and preventing Washington and Idaho from becoming states long before they did.

Merle Wells is the former director of the Idaho Historical Society and former Idaho state historic preservation officer. This prolific author of many historical accounts of Idaho and the surrounding areas is widely considered the dean of Pacific Northwest history.

MLA Citation:

Wells, Merle. "The Long Wait for Statehood: Why it took Washington 36 years and Idaho 26 years to achieve their goals." Columbia Magazine. 2.3 (Fall 1988): 18-23. Date accessed <http://columbia.washingtonhistory.org/magazine/articles/1988/0388/0388-a1.aspx>.