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The Farthest Post: Fort Astoria, the Fur Trade, and Fortune on the Final Frontier of the Pacific Northwest

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The Farthest Post: Fort Astoria, The Fur Trade, and Fortune on the Final Frontier of the Pacific Northwest

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BA, University of Michigan, 2001

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of History

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Master of Arts

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The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the motives, objectives, and character of the men who engaged in John Jacob Astor's early nineteenth-century fur trade expedition into the Pacific Northwest. Following Captain Cook's voyages to this region in the latter part of the eighteenth century, news spread rapidly of a rich and plentiful fur trade with the natives. This news sparked numerous entrepreneurial voyages in both Europe and America, for the furs that could be acquired relatively easily in the Pacific Northwest could then be sold at lofty prices in Canton, where they were in high demand. It was projected that a veritable fortune awaited the company of men that could most quickly reach the shores of the Pacific Northwest, and command the trade with the native peoples there.

Histories of this region have correctly identified the fur trade as the key economic factor which attracted European and American explorers, merchants, and entrepreneurs to the Pacific Northwest, and which led eventually to an international rivalry over its shores. In hindsight, the Nootka Sound Controversy of 1790 and subsequent treaty, which ended Spanish claims to the area, seems to be the obvious consequence of an increasing foreign interest and presence in the Pacific Northwest - an interest and presence that grew rapidly after the discovery of the fur trade. A closer study of the individual voyages, both overland and oversea, which made up this foreign encroachment, yields a slightly less straightforward story.

The Astor expedition was chosen as the subject for this study not because of its unique character, but rather because the experiences and events encapsulate the nature of many voyages to this isolated and perilous region. Tragedy and failure marked numerous European and American voyages to the Pacific Northwest, and the projection of great wealth to be made in the fur trade proved little more than a chimera, as the availability of saleable furs quickly became exhausted. For this historian, the question became not how an international rivalry over the Pacific Northwest came about, but why it came about at all? What motives, in the face of consistent adversity, could have induced so many to persistently risk and lose their lives? In describing the attempt to establish a fort on the Columbia River, this study endeavors to sketch a portrait of the kind of the men who engaged in Astor's American Fur Company expedition, investigating their backgrounds, identities, and the nature of their character and beliefs.
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my parents who spent innumerable long and agonizing hours trying to impart their passion and enthusiasm for learning to me, an often indolent and unwilling recipient. Thank you for patiently persevering. I will never forget the day I finally realized that hard work would not, in fact, kill me.
THE FARTHEST POST
INTRODUCTION

In the early years of the nineteenth century, inhabitants of the New American Republic became increasingly aware of the rich resources and possibilities that existed in the distant territory of Oregon. Following Meriwether Lewis and Williams Clark's famed expedition to the Pacific Ocean, reports of the Oregon territory began to circulate in the East, firing the imaginations of many Americans. One of these was the great entrepreneur, John Jacob Astor, who had already made and lost several fortunes before he became fascinated with the idea of establishing a fur trading post on the mouth of the Columbia River, ideally situated to receive all trade from the Northwest interior. From his inception of Fort Astoria, Astor promoted the venture as a specifically American one. In his own words, he grandly claimed that it was to be a nationalistic undertaking that would "employ and introduce into this trade as many young Americans of respectable connections and of good moral character as possible."\(^1\) Astor was probably more purely interested in successfully monopolizing the fur trade in the Pacific Northwest than in patriotically recruiting a wholly American party to fulfill his business scheme. His success, after all, had come as much from calculation and cautiousness as it had from boldness and risk-taking. His splendidly contrived advertisement of the venture stands out because of the marked contrast to the reality of the recruitment process, and of the

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\(^1\) James P. Ronda, *Astoria and Empire* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990) 52.
men who were to become the Pacific Fur Company. Despite initial intentions, the final make-up of Astor’s Pacific Fur Company did not turn out to be entirely American. Primarily composed of experienced voyageurs from Canada, the Company engagés claimed French, Scottish, and Irish heritage, but all were decidedly British subjects when it came to the likelihood of war.

War was an imminent possibility during this period, and as relations between England and France worsened, America’s trade, their ships and crews, were jeopardized. Though Astor touted American nationalism in order to gain governmental sanction and protection in the face of threatening foreign powers, the motley participants in his company were not particularly interested in furthering American empirical claims over the Pacific Northwest. Indeed, the men who were employed were more interested in gaining personal fortune. Under the Embargo Act of 1807, thousands of seamen and traders had been put out of work as trade was strangled. Thus in 1810, after the Embargo was lifted and Astor began to recruit for his project, there were a great number of eager men searching for gainful employment.

In addition to this basic need, other personal concerns and motivations also played a part in inspiring men to collaborate in Astor’s project. Some of these concerns and motives were recorded in personal diaries and journals, where men speak of the fame to be gained in partaking in a daring exploit, and the envied reputations of experienced traders and mountain men. The inherent goodness of expanding trade, exploring territory, and establishing a presence farther west is not questioned in these writings. Instead, the honor and purpose that was to be gained, even in a failed expedition, appears to have filled these men with strong motives and confidence in the nature of their work.
Journals and diaries thus provide a deeper look into the motives of the men who undertook these types of precarious ventures, rounding out the economic and imperial aims that are visible in the paper trail left behind by Astor. Understood as a whole, the motives of individuals who undertook western venturing reveal a unique outlook towards the dangers and hostilities of the fur trade. This outlook, contrary to the arguments of many economic historians, did not place financial gains at the center of worldly success, though a prosperous outcome was undoubtedly hoped for. The desire for adventure, fame, and reputation, based upon a trading venture perceived as honorable to all participants, was also an important factor in uniting an assorted group of European peoples, possessed of otherwise different cultural heritages, ideas, and languages.
CHAPTER 1
ASTOR’S AMERICAN FUR COMPANY AND THE OVERLAND EXPEDITION

The objective of Astor’s venture was the establishment of a trading outpost on the Pacific Northwest coast, so as to make fur trade and trapping in the interior of the continent more accessible to Chinese markets. Fort Astoria would be the farthest northwest trading post ever organized by a trading company. Astor’s idea was not a new one. Spanish explorers had long cruised the coastline of the Pacific Northwest, as had Russian traders before the voyages of British and American explorers. In 1778, Captain Cook sailed this coastline in search of a Northwest Passage, through the North American continent, which would connect fellow British traders with the rich markets of the Far East. Although a passage did not exist, the discovery and exploration of the Pacific Northwest opened that territory to the imaginations of enterprising men. The strategic commercial and imperial importance of the coast was early noted by both British and American explorers. In 1792, the American ship Columbia, under the command of Captain Robert Gray, sailed into a large bay at the latitude of 46° 15' and laid anchor in the mouth of what would become its namesake river.\(^2\) The possibility of national enterprise in the exploration and occupation of this territory was realized immediately by these initial voyagers. The fifth mate of the Columbia, who noticed the river’s resources

\(^2\) Ronda, *Astoria and Empire* This was Captain Gray’s second voyage to the Pacific Northwest. The first voyage in 1788 consisted of the Columbia and her escort the Lady Washington. These ships were the first American vessels to reach the Northwest Coast, i.
and the presence of the Chinook Indians, eager for trade, astutely observed, “This river in my opinion would be a fine place for a factory.” A post on the Columbia, linked to other posts in the interior and farther north, would allow merchant ships to “engross the whole trade of the Northwest Coast.”

These early voyages of discovery played an important role, informing the commercial world of new possibilities on the other side of the American continent. It would be the commercial dreams of merchants and traders that would inspire actual movement into this fresh territory and lay the foundation for national claims. The excitement of unclaimed territory and the possibility of great wealth to be made in trade with the native inhabitants spurred the imaginations of wealthy merchants, fur traders, and young men who were simply in search of prospects and good fortune. Some of these men undertook the risky profession of becoming “wintering partners,” employees of the fur trading companies in which they also held shares. It was these ambitious individuals who trekked into unfamiliar land, gambled on their ability to survive, and established trading posts in the interior of the American continent. Survival and success depended partly upon the skill of the wintering partner and often upon the generosity and aid of the Indians with whom the partners traded.

Even more important to the survival of the trade was the ability to supply the interior posts with food and trade goods. The two largest fur-trading companies in the late eighteenth century both operated out of Canadian territory. The North West Company’s supply houses were in Montreal, while the Hudson’s Bay Company sent supplies from its namesake bay. For the North West Company, as interior posts were established farther

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3 Ronda, Astoria and Empire, 35.
west, the difficulty of trekking overland to supply distant posts became a significant drain upon profits and resources. The Nor’wester Peter Pond, one of the earliest extensive explorers of the Northwest territory, was the first to propose the idea of a convenient post on the Northwest coast. Instead of supplying the far interior posts of the rich Athabasca country by making a grueling journey across the continent from Montreal, Pond aimed to link those interior houses to a post on the Pacific and to use merchant ships to expediently transport supplies, trade goods, and furs.

If the Canadian partners of the North West Company had heeded Pond, as well as other explorers such as Alexander Mackenzie, whose exploration of the Athabasca and Great Slave Lake region provided information that touted the territory’s great potential, trade in the Pacific Northwest might well have been entirely dominated by Canadian and English fur trading interests. Mackenzie, in particular, realized the strategic importance of establishing a northwestern post, and made note in his journals of the ideal situation that existed on the mouth of the Columbia River. The Columbia River was “the line of communication from the Pacific Ocean, pointed out by nature...the most Northern situation fit for colonization.” From a post on this river “the entire command of the fur trade of North America might be obtained.”

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4 Franchère, Gabriel. *The Journal of Gabriel Franchère*, W. Kaye Lamb, ed. and Wessie Tipping Lamb, trans (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1969) 3. Peter Pond’s fellow wintering partner was Alexander Mackenzie, who was inspired by Pond’s ideas for the Northwest and would later make his own exploration of the territory in search of a river connecting Slave Lake to the Pacific Ocean. Both Mackenzie and Pond, convinced of a river link to the Pacific, advocated the cooperation of the Northwest and Hudson’s Bay Company in order to gain access to the Hudson Bay. This would allow the Northwest Company to supply its far western posts by ship instead of overland from Montreal.

British had left, as yet, no permanent posts or settlements. Russian traders laid claim to the far northern site of Sitka, but their presence was seasonal and their aims, though both commercial and imperial when it came to the northwestern interior, were limited by the problem of supplying outposts from a base twelve thousand miles away in St. Petersburg. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, therefore, the Pacific Northwest territory represented a final commercial and national opportunity for expansion. By establishing posts linked from the Atlantic to the Pacific, English and Canadian interests would dominate the fur trade, strengthen alliances with Indians, and preempt other imperial claims to the territory.

Two circumstances, however, allowed for a competitor to arise and challenge the interests of British and Canadian traders in the Northwest. First, the North West Company became embroiled in an internecine struggle that pitted wintering partners, such as Pond and Mackenzie, and their continental strategies against the Montreal agents who supplied the trade goods, marketed the furs, and did not wish to see their interests merged with those of rival companies. These agents and merchants of the North West

6 James R. Gibson, *Imperial Russia in Frontier America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) 9. British interests in trade along the Pacific Coast were spearheaded by Cook's third voyage, which explored the territory from Cape Fairweather to the Icy Cape. During the Nootka Sound Controversy of 1789-90, the British ousted the Spanish presence in the Northwest, leaving Russian and British merchants to ply the fur trade along the coast. Still, the interior of the continent was left largely untouched and no permanent posts were established by either power.

7 Gibson, *Imperial Russia*, 44. In fact, Russian interests in the Pacific Northwest were never truly for occupation of the land. It is aptly noted in Gibson’s book, “The Russians did not live here as a people, but as a company of fur-traders only, with a single eye to the getting of skins....” Russians generally thought the Northwest uninhabitable, “where permanent fogs and dampness of atmosphere and want of solar heat and light, leaving out of the question anything like agriculture, made it impossible to provide even a sufficient supply of hay for cattle, and where a man...to escape from scurvy must constantly live upon fish, berries, shellfish, sea cabbages, and other products of the sea.” This aversion to settlement was indicative of a larger reluctant imperial power. Russian monarchs in the late eighteenth century, such as Catherine the Great and Emperor Paul I, generally gave imperial consent and sanction, but little more to encourage the monopolization and engrossment of the Pacific Northwest and the fur trade there (Ronda, *Astoria and Empire*, 66).

8 Ronda, *Astoria and Empire*, 8.
Company were not at all in favor of cooperating with the Hudson’s Bay Company in order to gain access to the bay, because they feared that such cooperation would result in the erosion of both their position in their own company and profits. As a result, partnerships split and rival companies cropped up, which severely curtailed cooperation between trading houses and, consequently, the profitability of the trade. It was not until 1804 that Canadian traders reincorporated, but valuable time had been lost.9

In addition, the American purchase of the Louisiana Territory in 1803 opened up the far western regions of the continent to the ambition and imagination of Americans. Immediately after the purchase, President Thomas Jefferson sent the expedition of Lewis and Clark to chart the new territory and to discover its resources. It did not take long after that for John Jacob Astor, a wealthy entrepreneur who had become a leading figure in the American fur trade, to become inspired by news of this expedition that crossed the Rockies, and he soon blazed a route to the mouth of the Columbia. Astor had already positioned himself in cooperation and communication with Canadian fur traders, which was a necessity of the trade, and he was as privy to the continental ideas and aspirations of Pond and Mackenzie as any Canadian trader. Astor wasted no time and by 1808 had established the American Fur Company and was looking for an opportunity to make a move towards the Pacific Coast.

9 Ronda, Astoria and Empire, 21. In addition to these inter-trading house struggles, neutral trade was disrupted by the Napoleonic wars which led to the United States leveling a non-intercourse embargo on both British and Canadian trade. While this embargo was difficult to maintain, it posed a serious threat to the Michilimackinac Company, which received all its trade goods through Montreal. The repeal of the embargo in April 1809, followed by its re-imposition in August and modification in May 1810, made profitable trade nearly impossible. These circumstances disadvantaged the Canadian trading houses even further, allowing Astor’s American Fur Company a growing place in the trade (Franchère, Journal, 6).
Astor's chance arrived with the first official visit by a Russian representative to the young America republic. Andrei Dashkov was sent to petition the US government on behalf of the Russian-American Company. These Russian fur traders had long lost patience with American ships that not only took a significant portion of their profits, but often traded firearms and ammunition to the Indians in exchange for furs. Both threatened and annoyed by this Yankee practice, the Russian-American Company was also forced to rely heavily upon those same American ships to supply their posts and provide them with access to Chinese markets. Russian ships were denied admittance to the largest Chinese port of Canton, where European ships were able to sell their furs for the highest prices. By 1800, the Russian-American Company had decided that a commercial treaty with America would solve many of its problems in the Pacific.

Dashkov’s purpose was to propose a commercial treaty to President Madison that would prohibit arms trading with the Indians of the Pacific Coast. But he was also ordered, for the immediate alleviation of the Russian-American Company’s most pressing problem, to find an American merchant who would deliver regularly-scheduled provisions to the posts in Russian-America.

It is not precisely known how Astor came to be acquainted with Dashkov. In the version written by Washington Irving in the 1830s, the U.S. government, though it had no mandate to interfere with commercial traffic, did not wish to disrupt friendly relations.

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10 Ronda, Astoria and Empire, 70. Andrei Dashkov would later become the consul general at Philadelphia and the charge d'affaires to Congress. Astor and Dashkov were consistent commercial allies during the unfolding events of the War of 1812. The Russian dependency upon American ships for supplies, and Astor's need for a neutral flag to sail under resulted in frequent attempts of cooperation between Astor and the Russian agent.

11 Ronda, Astoria and Empire, 67. The threat this weapons trade posed to the Russians manifested itself in instances of armed attack, as when Tlingit Indians, armed with British and American guns, fell upon the Russian headquarters at Sitka.
with the Russian Empire because of the offensive practices of American traders. Irving wrote, "In this dilemma the government had applied to Mr. Astor, as one conversant in this branch of trade, for information that might point out a way to remedy the evil."12 Whether or not this truly happened, Astor did become acquainted with Dashkov's proposal and recognized a prime opportunity to gain a foothold in the North Pacific and China trade while ameliorating the frustration of the Russian traders. Astor agreed to use his ships to supply goods regularly to the Russian-American Company, after which the ships would be chartered by the Russians to sell their furs in Canton. As part of this agreement, a branch of the American Fur Company would establish its own post on the banks of the Columbia River, and in this manner Astor proposed "that if the Russians moved south while the American traders moved north, the British would be eliminated as a power in the Northwest."13 The effectual check that would be put on the North West Company's plans for this area was also an inherent part of this scheme. Astor would begin his American monopolization of Pacific trade with the ousting of one imperial power, thereby leaving the farther reaches of the Northwest territory to the interests of the Russians.14

Astor promoted the American Fur Company as a national venture for the benefit of American officials, but this was not his primary aim and therefore did not prevent him from seeking cooperation with the Russians if it was beneficial to his larger

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13 Ronda, *Astoria and Empire*, 72.
14 Ronda, *Astoria and Empire*, 78-86. The contract between the Russian-American Company and the Pacific Fur Company stipulated that both sides would not hunt or trade on the territory of the other. However, actual territorial boundaries were left undefined, the Russian trading company insisting that only governments could draw boundaries.
monopolizing plan. Aware that the monopolization of trade by any private company was not something that an American president such as Madison would countenance, Astor continued to seek approbation of his commercial movements, but kept the details of his Russian contract out of any official knowledge.15 With the Russians as allies, Astor had only to find wintering partners and to prepare for movement into the Pacific Northwest.

By the spring of 1810, Astor had created the Pacific Fur Company and found partners in Alexander McKay, a participant in Alexander Mackenzie’s explorations, Duncan McDougall and Donald Mackenzie, and David and Robert Stuart, both Scottish immigrants. All of these men were from Canada, experienced traders, and previous employees of the North West Company. While Astor had spoken enthusiastically of hiring promising young American men for his American fur-trading venture, the plain facts were that a trading project such as this needed highly skilled, informed, and experienced men. Knowledge of the territory, its rivers, tracks, resources, and inhabitants, was crucial. The more time a man had spent in the interior, the more he knew, and the more valuable he became to fur trading companies such as Astor’s. Men such as these, Astor was convinced, were to be found in Canada. One of only two Americans who joined with Astor was St. Louis merchant William Price Hunt, a mere twenty-six years old, whose experience in actual voyaging was small. Astor’s intention in making Hunt a partner was apparently to have at least one American in a position of

15 Ronda, Astoria and Empire, 79.
authority, but Hunt’s inexperience would lead to conflict with the more seasoned
Canadian members of the team.16

Wilson Price Hunt was delegated to hire a group of dependable men and lead
them overland to the mouth of the Columbia, where they would meet the second party of
Astor’s Company voyaging there by sea. Having chosen a site on that river, the two
groups would establish Fort Astoria, the farthest northwest trading post. In the late
summer of 1810, Hunt and Donald Mackenzie, one of the seasoned Canadian traders who
was a partner in the company, began their recruitment of Canadian voyageurs in Montreal
and Lachine. After engaging a few Canadians in these trading towns, they planned to
pick up more American frontiersman in St. Louis before heading up the Missouri River.
The decision to hire a combination of Canadian and American frontiersmen had been
reached after a serious dispute between Hunt and Donald Mackenzie as to whether
Canadian voyageurs or American trappers would be better suited to the venture. Hunt
held little respect for the traders in Montreal; he “detested the volatile gaiety and ever-
changing character of the Canadian voyageurs.”17 His opinion of what type of man to
engage was based on more than just a stereotype, however; he had practical reasons for
not wanting to hire Canadian men. Sincerely interested in making this project a success,
Hunt sought advice from Lewis and Clark, who had recently returned from their voyage
of exploration to the Pacific Ocean and therefore possessed the most current geographical
and situational knowledge of the territory. From these men, as well as from other
trappers experienced in the territory, Hunt attempted to be as informed as possible before

16 Irving, Astoria, 39. Irving wrote, “As this gentleman was a native born citizen of the United States, a
person of great probity and worth, he was selected by Mr. Astor to be his chief agent, and to represent him
in the contemplated establishment.”
the enterprise. He learned that the Indians along the route to the Pacific Northwest were not accustomed to trading patterns commonly used between Canadians and more eastern Indians. Therefore, many furs would have to be acquired by the party's own trappers or hunters, and these were skills that were more often held by American frontiersmen. Canadian voyageurs, used to plying the rivers and the Indians for furs, 'had neither the experience nor the temperament' for hunting and trapping. Although young and inexperienced, Hunt was not naïve and was fully determined to find "Yankee" traders. Mackenzie, however, was of the opposite opinion: he believed that no trade project into the Northwest Territory could be achieved without seasoned Canadian voyageurs.

Mackenzie's opinion was based on ten years of experience in the northwestern territory. A previous member of the Northwest Company, he sought Canadians from the rough towns of Lachine and Michilimackinack. According to him, American frontiersmen were objectionable engagés because they were too independent, were not as inclined to suffer privations, and were more demanding in the fare they required for a voyage. It was said that "the sapient Yankees, accustomed to the good things of St. Louis, must have their dainties, their tea, their coffee, and their grog." Yankee men not only had more particular demands than the rough and tumble Canadians, but they were also less inclined to sign on to ventures that were rumored to be full of hardships.

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18 Ronda, Astoria and Empire, 51. Hunt had previously been offered a position by Manuel Lisa, a Spanish-born explorer and fur trader. Lisa was planning a trading project to Sante Fe, an area as well known for affording fortune as death or imprisonment at the hand of the Spanish. Lisa invited Hunt to join, but after thoroughly calculating the risks, Hunt wisely declined. Although Hunt did not have actual experience in the frontier, this chance to assess a venture probably gave him a better idea of what was necessary in order to have a successful one.
19 Lavendar, David, The Fist in the Wilderness, 128.
Mackenzie therefore looked upon the American frontiersmen with more than a little contempt.

The compromise to hire both types of frontiersmen was reached when it was decided that a number of Canadians would be hired in Lachine and Michilimackinac and a greater number of American engagés in St. Louis. Hunt and Mackenzie soon discovered that this task was more difficult than either they or Astor had previously presumed. Both American frontiersmen and Canadian voyageurs during this era were fiercely independent and self-reliant, as their line of business required and encouraged. They traveled in a territory where survival was ensured through determination, wits, hardiness, and plain luck (which often came in the form of generous Indians). Rough habits formed out in the territory led to a similarly unrestrained style of hard living and excess back in eastern trading towns. The wild, wary, and independent nature of the fur traders and trappers soon revealed itself to be an obstacle to the hiring of a dependable overland party.

21 A distinction must be made between these two groups by nationality, not so much because of their allegiance to either nation, but because of the varying nature of their heritage, lifestyles, skills, and experience. Canadian voyageurs were used to plying a trade with Indians of the Northwest Territory, traveling mostly by waterways and rivers in large canots du maître. A voyageur was skilled with a canoe and paddle, accustomed to certain trade patterns, and knowledgeable concerning the Indians and the territory extending west of Montreal. American frontiersmen, as their name suggests, were more accustomed to overland travel, though they often used river travel when possible. Whereas a voyageur was a fur trader, a frontiersman could better be described as a fur trapper. The Indians that frontiersmen encountered and engaged were tribes in the more southern western plains and beyond. These Indians - Sioux, Sauk, Potowatomi, and Omaha - were known at the time for their hostility, and therefore were not sought out as suppliers of furs, but rather viewed as trade inhibitors, requiring negotiation or material pacification. Frontiersmen were thus skilled in methods of negotiation and pacification, as well as being expert trappers and hunters. At the time of Astor’s undertaking, the success of Canadian trading patterns and voyageur skill and hardiness were more established than the practices of frontiersmen. Astor himself had more confidence in experienced Canadians than in American frontiersmen, though he suggested that Americans be hired for his project. His confidence and preference are evidenced by the fact that four of the five original partners he chose for his undertaking were Canadian traders.
The intentions of Hunt and Mackenzie proved to be little more than wishful thinking when it came to the actual choosing and hiring of skilled and reliable men for the journey. A clerk hired on to the company described the motley assortment of men who made a living trading fur and exploring the frontier. It was difficult to find able-bodied men, "for in the morning they were found drinking, at noon drunk, in the evening dead drunk, and in the night seldom sober." Frontier traders were reputed for their habit of "carousing." On returning from the ardors of the frontier, they often spent their earnings in a matter of weeks, even days, on frivolities and drink. After their wages were gone, they racked up bills, confident that the next trading position would easily be found in the booming fur trade. The temperament of these men matched the autonomous nature of the business. Not inclined to follow the law or the will of a distant national government, they and their trade thrived in the open territory, the only regulation of the trade coming from the nominal authority of competing fur trading companies. In Mackinack, the central supply town for trade on the western frontier, it was observed of the trappers and traders that "these dissolute spendthrifts spin out, in feasting and debauchery, a miserable existence, neither fearing God nor regarding man, till the knife of the savage, or some other violent death, dispatches them unpitied." Hunt found the search for skilled and loyal Americans among this wild lot disheartening. Choosing responsible men from the pool of recruits consisted more of a simple sobriety test than a determination of their frontier skills and experience.

22 Lavendar, *The Fist in the Wilderness*, 112.
23 Ross, *Adventures*, 172. Irving adds a descriptive passage on Canadian voyageurs who "Like sailors... generally preface a long cruise with a carouse. They feast, they fiddle, they drink, they sing, they dance, they frolic and fight, until they are all as mad as so many drunken Indians" (Irving, *Astoria*, 105).
Hunt and Mackenzie attempted to select only the most promising recruits. Turning away large numbers of unfit men, unfortunately, caused a great deal of resentment and ill-will. In consequence, “those who had been rejected put every iron in the fire, out of pure spite, to discourage those already engaged, or about to engage.”²⁵ In Lachine, wild stories were traded in the local taverns which maligned the Pacific Fur Company. It was rumored that the project was poorly organized and had insufficient financial backing, and that great “horrors...dangers, and privations” awaited those who joined the company. If its employees “were fortunate enough to escape being scalped by Indians, they would assuredly be doomed, like Nebuchadnezzar, to eat grass, and never return to tell the sad tale of their destruction.”²⁶ The ill-intended predictions concerning this project, like that which claimed that Hunt’s expedition would “pass through howling wildernesses infested by savage tribes...where the traveler was often obliged to subsist on grasshoppers and crickets, or to kill his own horse for food,” were hardly prophetic, as such experiences had doubtless been had by many of the frontiersmen before.²⁷

The fact that rumors were based on real experiences highlights the genuine dangers of the territory through which Hunt hoped to lead a group. It is not difficult to see why rumors such as these quickly and easily caught hold of the imaginations of prospective employees. Those malcontents who spread rumors of disaster did so with such effectiveness that “not a man could be afterwards got to engage.”²⁸ Traders and trappers, though hardened, did not relish putting their lives on the line for an overly arduous or risky trading project, especially one that was surrounded by ill-fated rumors. The

²⁵ Ross, Adventures, 171.
²⁶ Ibid, 176.
²⁷ Irving, Astoria, 103.
²⁸ Ross, Adventures, 176.
Yankees whom Hunt was interested in engaging “kept aloof, viewing the expedition, as an army views a forlorn hope as destined to destruction.” If they were not assured that the undertaking had a strong chance of being a success, they were not inclined to take part.

As Hunt came to realize, the right circumstances had to be present before traders, trappers, and interpreters could be persuaded to offer their services for such a project as he proposed. Wages or shares in the company made the project attractive, but success and therefore profits depended upon the quality and skills of those who undertook the venture. Engaging a number of prestigious men was essential. If well-reputed men were associated with the company, detrimental rumors could be discredited. Like valuable territorial and geographic information on the frontier, sufficient assurance could be garnered by the trusted word or association of a well-known frontier trader.

Hunt was unsuccessful in hiring enough men until he signed a few highly regarded traders. Three prominent American frontiersmen lent the Pacific Fur Company their prestigious experience in the territory along the route to the Pacific Ocean. The first was Ramsay Crooks, a native of Scotland. Just twenty-two years old, he was already an experienced trapper and trader on the northwestern frontier of the Missouri, but his more recent attempts as an independent trader had proven disappointing. On the eastern side of the Missouri River, in a place known as the Black Snake Hill, Crooks and his partner Robert McClellan became frustrated with uncooperative and hostile Indians, as well as with larger competitive companies that were shutting out small independent trading

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29 Ibid, 173.
projects such as theirs. The fact that fur prices had fallen quite low due to the anti-British embargo enacted by Jefferson in December 1807, severely inhibited the fur trade, and this finally forced Crooks and McClellan to abandon their posts. Fortunately for them, the dissolution of their own company coincided with the repeal of the Embargo Act in March 1809 (causing fur prices to jump) and their introduction to the eager Hunt. Crooks and McClellan lost no time in taking advantage of this opportunity.  

Robert McClellan’s engagement was particularly fortuitous for the reputation of the expedition, because he was famed to be “one of the first shots in America, nothing could escape his keen eye and steady hand; hardy, enterprising, and brave as a lion.” His reputation was well-known in St. Louis where “marvelous stories were told of his exploits.” Crooks and McClellan brought with them another experienced trader, Joseph Miller, who had been an officer in the United States army but had resigned and taken up beaver trapping and trading with the Indians on the frontier. He was a valuable addition to the company “on account of his education and acquirements, and his experience in the Indian trade.”

One last and crucial engage for the overland party was the interpreter Pierre Dorion, Jr., whose father had accompanied the expedition of Lewis and Clark to the Pacific Ocean. The elder Dorion, a French Canadian, had spent much of his life living among

31 Lavendar, *Fist in the Wilderness*, 103-108. Lavendar also notes that McClellan and Crooks were probably frustrated by the growing monopoly of the St. Louis Missouri Fur Company, which had received a license from Governor Meriwether Lewis, allowing them to dominate all trade “from the mouth of the Platte to the head of the Missouri” At their spot on the Black Snake Hills, Crooks and McClelland were 175 miles south of their normal trading territory, a fact that suggests they were being hemmed in by the Missouri Fur Company.
32 Ross, *Adventures*, 177-78.
various Indian tribes and acquiring their languages. Although he was familiar with many tribes, and was reputed to be with as many native women, "his regular or habitual wife was a Sioux squaw." Dorion's engagement with the Pacific Fur Company did not end the dispute over his whiskey bill. The St. Louis Missouri Fur Company was, of course, not pleased at having lost such a valuable employee, especially as Dorion was particularly needed to communicate with the aggressive Iowa, Sioux, and Potowatomi Indians. Manuel Lisa, a senior partner in the Missouri Company, attempted to force Dorion back into the company by acquiring a warrant for his arrest. With the help of Hunt's men, Dorion was able to escape Lisa, but the Missouri Fur Company was now greatly suspicious of Hunt's intentions and Lisa was instructed to follow them up the Missouri to make sure Hunt did not attempt to infringe on territory licensed to them (Lavender, *Fist into the Wilderness*, 150-52; Bradbury, *John Travels in the Interior of America in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811*. [Liverpool, 1817], 14).

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36 Ibid, 112.
earlier. Marie and her children were among those who survived the overland journey, which clearly testified to their skill and hardiness - especially since Marie had to endure regular beatings from her husband in addition to the hardships of travel.\(^{37}\)

Crooks, McClellan, Miller and Dorion's celebrated status attracted men to the company and helped to dissipate wild rumors. Their engagement strengthened the reputation of the company and attracted willing participants in a way that the offering of wages and bonuses could not. Their geographical knowledge, which was the most current and extensive to be had at the time, improved the expedition's likelihood of success. Although Hunt was forced to be satisfied with a Canadian majority and only a handful of Americans, his first strategy for hiring experienced frontiersmen had, for the most part, worked, as “Canoemen, hunters, trappers, and interpreters were no longer wanting.”\(^{38}\) The employment of a second strategy would finally swell the number of the overland party to a solid sixty men.

In his desperation to spark the enthusiasm of capable men and to mollify their fears, Hunt hit upon a plan to counteract destructive gossip and further bolster the prospects and prestige of the project. Hunt needed a visual symbol that would connote his company with success and his employees with status. The men of the Northwest Company, rivals of Astor and his company, generally wore feathers in their caps “and affected the

\(^{37}\) Lavendar, *The Fist in the Wilderness*, 151. In his journal, Bradbuy noted how Dorion treated his wife on the first day of their journey up the Missouri. “They had quarreled, and he had beaten her,” wrote Bradbury, “in consequence of which she ran away from him into the woods, with a child in her arms, and a large bundle on her back.” Though a man had been sent in search of her, Marie was not found, but on her own returned to join the party the next day. A resilient and resourceful spirit obviously characterized this woman, qualities which would have to be fully relied upon during the overland trip (Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior*, 13-14).

\(^{38}\) Ross, *Adventures*, 173.
‘brave.’ This habit had come to symbolize their superiority to the “Southwesters”, i.e., to anyone who traded farther south in American territory. The North-westers regarded all other traders with contempt, stigmatizing them “with the inglorious name of pork-eaters” because of the latter’s purported habits of soft living. Hunt attempted to broadcast in a identical manner the fame and reputation that would ensue from taking part in the Pacific Fur Company. He thus distributed feathers to be placed in the caps of the few who had already been engaged, so that they too might be able to claim attachment to a prestigious new company, one that “was to eclipse the Northwest.” The ploy had its desired affect as willing recruits, attracted by the prospect of burnishing their reputations, came in droves to sign on to the distinguished new company. The possibility of becoming heroes, therefore, played an important role in influencing men to partake in what would most likely be a perilous expedition. A project that promised to gain for its participants honor and admiration proved more successful in engaging men than one which simply promised fortune.

Finally, in Montreal the services of several clerks were engaged to complete the company. Clerks were essential for the recording of business affairs, the keeping of accounts, logs, and inventories. Often these men also kept journals simply out of habit, or as a record of their experiences to regale family members with upon their return. Of the clerks engaged in Montreal, several wrote journals. The most reliable and detailed account, especially of events at Fort Astoria itself, was kept by Gabriel Franchère, a French-Canadian whose ancestral home was in the small town of Vitrés in Brittany.

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39 Irving, Astoria, 102.
40 Ibid, 102.
41 Ibid, 104.
Another clerk, Alexander Ross, also kept a detailed journal, and wrote an expanded account of the Astorian adventure that was later published in London in 1849. In his version of the recruitment process in Montreal, conducted primarily by Alexander McKay, Ross recalled the “gilded prospectus of the new Company” and the “flattering hopes and golden prospects held out to adventurers” which resulted in a crowd of prospective participants all eager “to share in the wonderful riches of the far west.”

The attractive aspect of fortune coupled with adventure also moved Franchère. Upon hearing of the company’s plans, he went directly to sign with McKay, noting that, “The novelty of the voyage led me to seek employment in the new association.” Franchère signed a five-year contract, during which time he hoped to advance himself significantly and to secure his own fortune. Whatever the nationalistic aims promoted by Astor for the sake of official American support, the motives of the individual men who made up the company were for the possibility of great wealth and the daring of the exploit. Any notion of their position as national agents of expansion was not part of the job description advertised in the trading houses of Montreal.

Once the recruitment was finished, the company split into two parties, as Astor had planned. Those traveling by sea headed east, to board Astor’s recently purchased ship, the Tonquin, on which they would sail from New York, around the South America, to arrive first at the Columbia River and to establish an outpost with supplies from the ship. The overland party planned to follow the trail blazed by Lewis and Clark. Departing from Lachine on July 5, Hunt and his mostly Canadian party made their way towards St.

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42 Alexander Ross, Adventures, 9.
43 Franchère, Journal, 44.
Louis, by way of Mackinack. But first, approaching St. Anne’s on the Ottawa or Grand River, the voyageurs requested to go ashore so that they might make their last vows at the chapel of St. Anne, patron saint of the Canadian voyageurs, as was traditional before embarking upon a hazardous voyage. Despite their wild ways, the Canadians were, in fact, not ready to travel into dangerous territory until they had made themselves right with God. And so, “prostrated on the ground, they received the priest’s benediction.”

Though their behavior did not suggest they were devout Catholics, these voyageurs were still evidently devout enough (or superstitious enough) to view their lives as unfolding within a divinely ordained creation, where the blessing of a man of God meant both the protection and sanction of divine power.

The party traveled from Mackinack across Lake Michigan to Green Bay, from whence they followed the Wisconsin River down to Prairie Du Chien, before drifting south on the Mississippi River. On September 3, they finally arrived in St. Louis, “the last fitting-out place for the Indian trade of the southwest.”

Although Hunt was leading an outfit for a primarily commercial purpose, he was aware of the intellectual implications of his voyage. In St. Louis, Hunt invited two English naturalists, John Bradbury and Thomas Nuttall, to accompany the overland journey.

Bradbury, a member of the prestigious Linnaean Society, had been commissioned by the Botanical Society of Liverpool to make a collection of American plants. After a visit to Monticello in the summer of 1809, he was advised by Thomas Jefferson to visit St. Louis and to explore the Upper Louisiana and Illinois Territory “for the purpose of

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45 Irving, Astoria, 106.
discovering and collecting subjects in natural history.”

Thomas Nuttall, a self-taught botanist from Liverpool, arrived in Philadelphia in 1808 and began aiding Dr. Benjamin Smith Barton in the preparation and organization of the numerous botanic samples collected during the expedition of Lewis and Clark. Instead of retaining Nuttall as an aid, however, Barton decided to send him on a further western expedition to collect specimens throughout the territory of the Great Lakes and western plains. Nuttall had no previous experience and few instruments, yet his career “would prove to be one of the most productive in nineteenth-century American science.”

Hunt’s inclusion of these two men indicated his interest in making this commercial undertaking a contribution to the scientific and cultural knowledge of the frontier territory as well.

The motley assortment of trappers, voyageurs, interpreters, clerks, and scientific men that made its way up the Missouri River was unlikely to have fit Astor’s initial concept of the party. Despite initial intentions to engage mainly American frontiersmen, the group instead was comprised of a majority of French Canadians, many of them half-Indian, including Pierre Dorion. The Scottish heritage of Donald Mackenzie and Ramsay Crooks, and the English nationality of the naturalists, as well as Dorion’s full-blooded Iowa wife, imparted the outfit with a diverse character, similar to the character of the crew on the Tonquin.

46 John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior*, 9. Bradbury had, at first, intended to make New Orleans his base of operations. However, while a guest at Monticello, Jefferson advised him that “the whole of the country round New Orleans is alluvial soil, and therefore ill suited to such productions.” Bradbury therefore changed his destination to that of St. Louis, where he was employed during the winter of 1810 when he met Hunt.

The group traveling towards the Pacific Ocean numbered sixty men, which was also contrary to preliminary intentions because it was twice the size of the group that Hunt and Astor had discussed. The reason for the increase lay mainly in the advice of Ramsay Crooks, whose experience in the Southwest led him to insist on the necessity of a larger party as a safeguard against Indian war parties. The precise route Hunt intended to take also underwent changes in the last days before embarkation. After conferring with both Lewis and Clark, Hunt changed his plan from tracing their route to following one that trailed the Yellowstone River to the Rockies. This more southerly trail would strategically avoid Blackfeet, Sioux, and Arikara Indian tribes that were steadily increasing in hostility towards trading parties. Upon further advice garnered along the route, Hunt had reason to change his plans several more times. Adaptability, always advantageous when traveling, was a characteristic that Hunt, unlike Captain Thorn of the Tonquin, fortunately possessed.

Hunt’s party wintered at the mouth of the Nodaway, 150 miles north of Fort Osage. Traveling up the Missouri River towards this camp on January 17, Hunt encountered another famed explorer in John Colter, a man who had accompanied Lewis and Clark on their expedition. Colter was now married, but he was still living on the frontier, trapping and hunting for his living. Colter confirmed the advice of Lewis and Clark and added even more current information. Having just returned from an extensive internal voyage, he was quick to regal Hunt’s party with a long story of his encounter with a hostile Blackfoot tribe. Apparently, during the Lewis and Clark’s journey of exploration, Clark had shot and killed a Blackfoot Indian he discovered attempting to

48 Ronda, Astoria and Empire, 129; Lavendar, Fist in the Wilderness, 151.
steal a horse. The Blackfoot, in consequence, "were thirsting to revenge the death of their companion." They ambushed Colter and a fellow trapper while the two were alone in the woods. Colter’s partner attempted to escape, but instead “he was made a riddle of” by the arrows of the Blackfoot. According to Colter’s telling of the story, he was almost as unfortunate as his partner, but he managed to escape by deceiving the Blackfoot chief. The chief demanded to know if Colter could run. Colter, knowing a bit of their language and customs, “knew that he had now to run for his life, with the dreadful odds of five or six hundred against him, and those armed Indians.” He cunningly replied that he was a very poor runner, upon which the chief led him out three or four hundred yards and released him, while the “horrid war whoop” sounded the chase. Running for all he was worth, naked feet impaled by the thorns of prickly pear bushes, blood gushing from his nostrils due to near superhuman exertion, he finally arrived at a river and dove, beaver-like, under a raft of drift timber lodged against the bank. There he waited until the Indians, “screeching and yelling,” as he put it, “like so many devils,” finally wandered away in defeat. Fascinated and entertained, as all present must have been, Bradbury recorded Colter’s tale in his journal as an adventure that merited retelling due to its “singularity.” Stories of daring and bravery in extraordinary situations were traded on the frontier and were the way men acquired reputations among their fellow...

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50 Bradbury, *Travels*, 19
51 Ibid, 19.
52 Ibid, 19.
frontiersmen. As men such as Colter became famous on the frontier, encounters with them also became a source for stories.

Farther up the Missouri, a chance meeting with another backwoods celebrity provided Bradbury with more material for his journal. Hunt and his fellow partners stopped at the village of Charrette, originally founded by French colonists and now home to an elderly Daniel Boone. An eager Bradbury, seeing “an old man standing on the bank” and being assured by Hunt that it was Boone, hurried ashore to meet him. Bradbury was even equipped with a letter of introduction from the Kentuckian’s nephew, a Colonel Grant, for even to this Englishman, the “patriarch of Kentucky” was a well-known man, already approaching legendary status. Boone, though eighty-four years old, was still leading the life of a hunter on the frontier and “had lately returned from his spring hunt, with nearly sixty beaver skins.”

Encounters with great frontiersmen such as Boone and Colter were a source for stories, just as a visit to Cook’s place of demise had been for the voyageurs on the *Tonquin*. These experiences afforded the commercial venture an adventurous aspect, regardless of whether the project was a success or not.

On the morning of April 21, 1811, the party left their winter camp on the Nodoway. All sixty members traveled in four *canots*, which were thirty to forty-foot birchbark canoes and were the trademark of the Canadian voyageurs. Making their way north into the Upper Missouri country, the voyageurs powered the boats with measured paddle strokes, keeping their rhythm steady by singing songs “which were generally responsive betwixt the oarsmen at the bow and those at the stern.” Bradbury noticed a favorite

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among their tunes and scratched a few of the verses into his journal, remarking upon its “frivolity”:

_Derrière chez nous, il y a un étang._

_Yes, ye ment._

_Trois canards s’en vont baignans,_

_Tous du long de la rivière,_

_Lегèrement ma bergère,_

_Lегèrement ye ment._

_Trois canards s’en vont baignans,_

_Yes, ye ment._

_Le fils du roi s’en va chassant,_

_Tous du long de la rivière,_

_Lегèrement ma bergère,_

_Lегèrement, ye ment._

_Le fils du roi s’en va chassant,_

_Yes, ye ment._

_Avec son grand fusil d’argent,_

_Tous du long de la rivière,_

_Lегèrement ma bergère,_
The voyageurs’ spirit was supposedly unquenchable and gave them a reputation for being both lighthearted and frivolous. While Captain Thorn found their inane songs and jocose manner unbearable, Hunt was more accommodating. Allowed to carry on as they might, the voyageurs’ voices rang out across the Missouri River banks, keeping the company’s mood light, despite incessant spring rains.

The group arrived at their next prolonged stop in the Omaha village of Tonwantonga on May 10. The Omaha lodges’ “gay and fanciful appearance” was noted by the travelers. The village consisted of about eighty lodges painted with undulating bands of red and yellow and “decorated with rude figures of horses, deer, and buffaloes, and with human faces, painted like full moons.” Here, Bradbury and Nuttall added extensively to their plant collections, talking with the Omaha and observing their daily rituals and the site of their burial grounds. For his knowledge of medicinal plants, Bradbury earned himself an Omaha name, Wakendaga, meaning “the one who heals with plants.” Though invited afterwards by a group of Omaha women to spend the night, he declined, considering his plant samples a sufficient reward. The party’s boatmen were not made of the same stern character. As the company’s ledger books revealed, supplies of vermilion and calico were purchased from the company store in notable quantities and exchanged with the Indian women in a brisk and bawdy trade.

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56 Bradbury, Travels, 12.
57 Irving, Astoria, 126.
58 Bradbury, Travels, 67-68; Ronda, Astoria and Empire, 147.
For Hunt, the stay with the Omahas presented an unexpected, and undesired, opportunity to play the diplomat. Two rival chiefs presented themselves to Hunt, seeking an official solution to their rivalry. Big Elk and White Cow were each “contending for the sanction of the United States” as the principal power in the tribe and demanded that Hunt should confer this sanction. Not wanting to act as an official agent or representative of federal policy because he did not consider himself vested with such authority, Hunt begged off this request. But it was plain that the Indians considered Hunt and his men representatives of their nation and negotiated with the party under this misconception. Hunt certainly considered himself an American and, in accordance with Astor’s intentions, of an American trading project. But his refusal to engage in any official negotiations or to act as a government agent reveals that he considered himself and the project to be autonomous, at least in so far as it did not represent national aims or purposes. Astor was hard at work in the East attempting to attract official attention in order to turn his commercial project into a national claim (thus garnering national support and aid), but his men in the field were attempting to distance themselves as much as possible from appearing as agents of the American nation.  

Ironically, regardless of both the disinterest of American officials and the aversion on the part of Astor’s men to the role, those who encountered the men of the Pacific Fur Company, be they Indians or rival traders, consistently perceived them to be agents of a specifically American project and representatives of that government.

Hunt and his party reached the Arikara villages, located on the Upper Missouri near the border of present-day North and South Dakota, by June 12. It did not bode well for

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their intention of crossing the mountains and reaching the Pacific Ocean before winter
that the party was delayed here until mid-July. The problem centered around the
acquisition of horses, which were needed to conduct the next leg of the journey. Hunt
planned to travel in a southwesterly direction from these villages, across the western
plains to a pass over the Great Divide, a route that would avoid the threat of the
Blackfeet. Then he intended to follow the course of rivers that were sure to join up with
the Columbia. The voyageurs’ skills were rather useless now, but all employees were
needed to ensure the safety of the party. Hunt therefore calculated that he would need
150 horses to mount his entire party, which included Dorion’s wife and two children.

But the Arikaras were unwilling to trade for so many horses. They were enduring a
food shortage, and their extra supplies, buried in deep caches, had been ruined by seeping
water. The Arikaras thus needed food goods more than the material trade Hunt could
offer; they hoped to get this aid from the Cheyenne later in the year, and therefore would
only trade Hunt thirty ponies from their herd. This was desperate news for Hunt. He
decided to send Crooks and Bradbury to make an appeal to the St. Louis Missouri Fur
Company at Fort Mandan for as many horses as they could spare in exchange for a large
supply of trade goods, the expedition’s boats, and the two howitzers mounted in them.
When Crooks returned with fifty additional horses, Hunt had no choice but to be
satisfied. The number of horses was now sufficient to carry the partners, a clerk, the
Dorions, and the company’s supplies and trade goods. The remainder of the party soon
realized they would be walking to Astoria.

With more than half the party walking, progress was made at a rate of about nine
miles per day. Even at this slow pace, members of the party became ill due to
overexertion. Finally, Hunt was forced to make a longer pause. But this stop proved to be fortuitous, for Hunt was able to acquire a number of horses from some Cheyenne Indians whose camp had been found nearby. The entire party could now be mounted, two men to each horse, allowing the party to pick up its pace. By mid-September, 145 days from their camp on the Nodoway, Hunt and his party came in sight of three snowy and jagged peaks.

The Grand Tetons (a crude French appellation) were called the Pilot Knobs by fur trappers. It was claimed that a branch of the Columbia could be found on the eastern side of these mountains, after which it cut west “through a howling canyon.” From this information and the advice of the trappers who accompanied him, Hunt noted in his journal, “This was the place where we had been led to hope that we might pursue the journey by water.”60 The horses, therefore, were presumed to be no longer needed. Losing the hard-earned mounts, 180 in all, the company men set about building boats from the only source of wood they could find - cottonwoods which covered the banks of the Snake. Cottonwood is soft and ill-suited for making canoes. The unavoidable choice of wood would turn Hunt’s poor decision to follow the river into a disaster. Though none of the company realized it, they were quite mistaken in believing it to be the Columbia. This was, in fact, the Snake River, whose “rugged and boiling channels” would prove impossible to navigate by boat.61

The canoes ready, the party followed the Snake southwest towards what is now the border of Idaho and Oregon. The course of the river immediately grew rougher and

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60 Lavendar, *Fist in the Wilderness*, 163; Hunt’s quote from: Ronda, *Astoria and Empire*, 177.
series of churning rapids increased in frequency. On October 20, two boats were suddenly swamped in the white water. Although their crews escaped, valuable merchandise and provisions were lost, which placed the company in a even worse position for encountering their voyage. The next day, the party came upon the Idaho Falls, where the river was “confined between two perpendicular mountains,” allowing for a width of no more than sixty feet at some points. Hunt’s men pulled the canoes through the narrow gap in the canyon by lines from the shore. Despite precautions, the canoe carrying Ramsay Crooks and four others rammed into a boulder, which split the soft cottonwood of the canoe into pieces. All managed to flounder to shore except the boat’s steersman, Antoine Clappine, who was lost in the raging current of the river and presumably drowned.62

Horrified by the accident, Hunt decided to make a shore camp and scout the river ahead before continuing. If the course of the Snake continued in this way, another route was necessary. Trudging down both sides of the banks, the scouts came upon a indisputably impossible portion of the river to navigate. Falling swiftly over a small cascade, the waters formed a huge and turbulent whirlpool between the canyon walls, then shot through a narrow slot of less than forty feet in width. The men named this terrifying spot Caldron Linn, “after the Scottish word for a whirlpool at the base of a cataract.”63 Still assuming that this river was the Columbia, a broad and gentle waterway, Hunt decided that the party would continue to follow the path of the Snake, but along the banks by foot until such time as the river would acquire its reported characteristics. To

62 Lavendar, The Fist in the Wilderness, 165.
63 Lavendar, The Fist in the Wilderness, 165.
retain their supplies, the men dragged the canoes by towropes. But this soon proved exhausting work and the canoes, once only a few provisions were left, were abandoned.

The party now split into two groups, each taking a side of the river in order to better feed themselves from their dwindling food supplies and from their scavenging attempts. The river banks and surrounding woodlands were mostly devoid of game, and not even the few Indians they encountered could help “as those few were destitute themselves.” All those in Hunt’s half of the group feasted when they managed to kill a wolf that had been prowling around the camp. The others survived on chokecherries and the boiled soles of worn moccasins. Even the “putrid and rotten skins of animals were resorted to in order to sustain life.”\(^4\) Upon being forced to slaughter and eat one of the horses, Hunt wrote, “I ate it reluctantly…because of my fondness for the poor beast.”\(^5\) But sentiment could not overcome hunger, and most of the men were becoming emaciated and ill for lack of nourishment. A dearth of fresh water even drove some of the Canadians to drink their own urine. One poor voyageur, delirious from starvation, threw himself into the river and was immediately swept away and drowned. Another by the name of Michael Carriere simply “gave up in despair” and, though the others attempted to encourage him and placed him upon a horse, he disappeared a few days later.\(^6\) The party being unable to find either Carriere or the horse, presumed them both dead.

On Christmas Day, Hunt’s party arrived in the Grand Ronde Valley in Oregon and Marie Dorion gave birth to her third child. The waters of the Columbia lay close at hand. Donald Mackenzie’s half of the party, having struggled up from the Snake River directly

\(^5\) Ronda, *Astoria and Empire*, 188.
to the Columbia, arrived at Fort Astoria ahead of the others on January 19. The haggard and wasted company had survived the seemingly endless and disastrous overland journey. In only a few days more, Hunt and his group would also reach the Columbia, their long-desired goal. Hunt expressed his relief upon seeing the great river at long last, writing in his journal: “We had traveled 1751 miles, we had endured all the hardships imaginable, With difficulty I expressed the joy at sight of this river.”67

On the afternoon of February 15, 1812, Hunt and his party in six canoes paddled up to Fort Astoria. Hunt and the company men had finally reached their journey’s end. They had been plagued by hardships, death, and deprivation, but they hailed it as a triumph nonetheless to find themselves upon the Columbia at last. The company now enjoyed their reward, being “surrounded by friends after so long a journey.”68 Alexander Ross, the clerk, was quick to make thanks “To that Being alone who preserveth all those who put their trust in Him, were in this instance due, and at all times, our thanksgiving and gratitude.”69 The trip had lasted over ten months, during which time most had nearly starved, five men had died (by Ross’s account) and many had, in fact, abandoned the party to return home. The experience appeared to be a disaster. Yet those who arrived considered their efforts a success and thanked a divine power for their preservation.

Immediately after their arrival, Astor’s ship the Beaver, sent from New York to reinforce and supply the company at Astoria, arrived in the bay of the Columbia. In a council between the primary partners of the company, it was decided that Hunt would board the Beaver to visit the Russian settlements, and that Robert Stuart and a party of

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67 Ronda, Astoria and Empire, 194.
68 Ibid, 194.
69 Ross, Adventures, 183.
sixty men would journey back to St. Louis to with dispatches for Astor, while David Stuart, Donald Mackenzie, and the others would remain at the post “in order to keep in check the North-West Company.”\textsuperscript{70} Perhaps if Hunt (a superior businessman, if not trader) had stayed, the Pacific Fur Company would not have lost their claim to this highly valuable and strategic post. For it was shortly after Hunt departed aboard the \textit{Beaver}, that the remaining partners were confronted by members of the Northwest Company and persuaded to give up their post, completely destroying any possibility of success for Astor’s plans. The explanation behind what occurred between the partners who stayed on at Fort Astoria in Hunt’s absence and the Northwest Company men was recorded in the journal of Gabriel Franchère, a clerk aboard the \textit{Tonquin}. The history of this party’s sea voyage matched Hunt’s experience for fatalities, trials, and adventure.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, 195.
CHAPTER II
THE VOYAGE OF THE TONQUIN AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ASTORIA

The company men on board the Tonquin consisted of the primary partners Alexander McKay, Duncan McDougall, and David and Robert Stuart, as well as eleven clerks, thirteen voyageurs, and various skilled men who would ply their crafts in the setting up and running of the post. All of these men, in order to engage in trade and reside within the limits of the United States, had taken oaths of naturalization as American citizens. But before leaving New York, the four partners had become worried about the possibility of war breaking out between England and America and the personal consequences this would have. Impressment was a well-known threat. McKay “thought it in the part of prudence to have an interview with the minister plenipotentiary of his Britannic majesty, Mr. Jackson, to inform him of the object of our voyage, and get his views in regard to the line of conduct we ought to follow in case of war.” It was McKay’s aim to receive affirmation that he and the company men would be respected as British subjects in the event of international conflict. McKay intimated to the British minister that the venture was a purely commercial one, and that he and the men under him considered themselves British citizens. Jackson assured McKay that in the case of war they “should be respected as British subjects and traders.” Satisfied with this answer, McKay communicated the news to the rest of the party, reassuring the men that they “had nothing
to apprehend on that side.” Although these men would be trading under American sanction, they did not wish their connection to an American outfit to be perceived as involvement in anything more than a neutral commercial project. The members of the Pacific Fur Company had no intention of promoting American imperial aims, regardless of how their mission was portrayed to American officials. While the *Tonquin* sailed under the American flag, the symbol did not represent fealty on the part of its passengers.

On the morning of September 6th, 1810, the *Tonquin* weighed anchor and sailed out of New York harbor with a full crew of twenty-one as well as the Pacific Fur Company’s party of thirty-three. The *Tonquin*, which Astor had purchased just a month before, was a three-masted ship weighing 269 tons, and was ninety-four feet long and twenty-five feet wide. Though her hull was pierced for twenty-two guns, she carried only ten, since the forward ports were filled with dummy cannon. Astor chose a United States Navy lieutenant by the name of Jonathon Thorn to captain the ship. Although well reputed, Thorn was a man whose skills as a seaman were better fitted to military commands than commercial ventures. Thorn took a dislike to the Canadian traders and voyageurs that he was ferrying to the Columbia, and he found their behavior lazy and insubordinate in

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71 Franchère, *Journal*, 47. McKay did not reveal his talks with the British minister to Astor, an action which Irving considered an abuse of Astor’s confidence, not only because they had decided to remain British subjects, but because McKay and the other partners had “laid open to [Mr. Jackson] the whole scheme of Mr. Astor, though intrusted to them in confidence, and dependent, in a great measure, upon secrecy at the outset for its success…” (Irving, pg. 45). But Astor had required only the naturalization of the employees so that they might legally work in America. He was just as concerned with avoiding problems with the British, taking steps on his own part to ensure the reasonable safety of his venture. While McKay was seeking security from British officials, Astor was negotiating with Commodore John Rogers, a senior naval officer in New York, to have an official escort out of New York and past British ships. It is not apparent that Astor was concerned with anything, be it citizenship or national loyalty, as long as the venture was allowed to be successful (Ronda, *Astoria and Empire*, 99; Franchère, *Journal*, 50).

72 Franchère, *Journal*, 50. Astor signed the actual registration papers for the *Tonquin* just two weeks before the September sailing. He purchased the ship from Edward Fanning, discoverer of Fanning Island and one of the first men to engage in trade in China and the Pacific. Fanning had personally commissioned the construction of this ship that was specifically designed for trade routes in the Pacific. Fanning was able, in his “excellent ship” to sail the route to China and back in ten months with a full cargo (Ronda pg. 95).
comparison to the quick compliance and ready obedience to his authority that he was accustomed to in the Navy. Franchère summarized an opinion in his journal that was most likely shared by the other company men, when he described Thorn as “A precise and rigid man, naturally hot-tempered, expecting instant obedience at the slightest sign, considering only his duty and caring nothing for the discontented mutterings of his crew, asking advice of no man and following to the letter the instructions that he had received from Mr. Astor – such, approximately, was the man who had been appointed to command our ship.” Thorn’s dictatorial manner almost immediately lost him the respect of both his crew and passengers. Conditions aboard the ship only worsened as the voyage continued.

By the time the Tonquin approached Cape Horn, the ship had begun to experience a severe water shortage. Thorn had forbidden any stops thus far, fearing an encounter with British ships that might lead to a conflict the voyage could ill afford. Rations “had been cut progressively” wrote Franchère “and we were reduced to three and half-pints a day for each man, which was very little considering we had no fresh food.” Finally, on December 6th, the ship reached the Falkland Islands and anchored in Port Egmont. The passengers went ashore while fresh water was conveyed to the ship. On the morning of the eleventh, Captain Thorn gave a perfunctory signal that the ship was ready to embark, “raised anchor and got under way.” Eight men, of whom Franchère was one, had been

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73 Franchère, Journal, 56. Washington Irving knew Captain Thorn personally and described him as “an honest, straightforward, but somewhat dry and dictatorial commander, who, having been nurtured in the system and discipline of a ship of war, and in a sacred opinion of the supremacy of the quarter-deck, was disposed to be absolute lord and master on board of his ship.” Thorn’s dislike for Canadian voyageurs and Scottish traders with whom he embarked was immediate. “He had set them down as a set of landlubbers and braggadocios, and was disposed to treat them accordingly” (Irving, Astoria, 46).

74 Franchère, Journal, 55.
hunting on the other side of the island. Hearing the signal, they still did not return in time to board the ship that was quickly heading out to sea. Fearing they would be abandoned completely “on the bare rocks of the Falkland”, Franchère and the others jumped into their long boat and began rowing frantically towards the ship. Three hours later, they reached the *Tonquin* and boarded her, but even this would have been impossible had it not been for the intervention of Robert Stuart: “Seeing that, instead of waiting for us [Thorn] continued on his way, Mr. Stuart, whose uncle was with us in the boat, determined to blow the Captain’s brains out – which he would have done, if the latter had not turned the ship about to let us come aboard.”

The relationship between the company men and Thorn was deteriorating rapidly. Thorn “forbade the partners the starboard side of the quarter-deck; the clerks, the quarter-deck altogether; and as for the poor mechanics and Canadians, they were ruled ever after with a rod of iron.” In retaliation, the men of the company resorted to infuriating the captain in any manner they could.

The diverse origins of the partners and *voyageurs* were a prime source of the disgust Thorn held for them. The men of Astor’s company “made it now a point to speak nothing but the Scotch dialect; while the Canadians on the forecastle spoke French – neither of which did the captain understand; and as both groups frequently passed hours together, cracking their jokes and chanting their outlandish songs, the commander seemed much annoyed on these occasions.” Relations were not improved by the passengers’ flagrant use of cultural differences to segregate themselves and to provoke their commanding

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75 Franchère, *Journal*, 56.
captain. If they had been involved in a truly nationalistic mission, and had been loyal citizens of the nation itself, the American captain’s orders might have been taken more seriously and cooperation attempted. But these men did not perceive themselves as having a larger national purpose. Their function lay in the establishment of profitable trade. The voyage aboard the *Tonquin* was merely the first leg of a larger adventure in which they hoped to make their fortune. By now, most of them felt that the adventure was turning out to be more of a disaster, but the end was in sight as they made their way up the Pacific coast of North America and came in sight of the Hawaiian Islands, the last supply stop before the Pacific Northwest coast.\textsuperscript{77}

The snow-capped mountain of Mauna Loa, on the island of Hawaii, was sighted on February 11\textsuperscript{th}. From their anchorage in the Bay of Kealakekua, the passengers could see “a strip of low land covered with coconut and banana palms, among which may be seen the huts of the Islanders.”\textsuperscript{78} Here, finally, Franchère’s craving for adventure, entertained from the first days of his enlistment in the company, was rewarded. Kealakekua Bay, off the island of Hawaii, was the site of Captain Cook’s demise thirty-two years earlier. This event was almost legendary to the passengers of the ship. All took the first opportunity to see the site of the murder, where the coconut palms still attested to Cook’s fate by “holes made by the bullets shot from the ships that he commanded.”\textsuperscript{79}

Franchère was fascinated by the island people and made extensive entries in his journal about their appearance, habits, and communities. While exploring the islands, he

\textsuperscript{77} Franchère, *Journal*, 50. Franchère early on had a foreboding of the trip’s outcome. Upon leaving New York, he readily admitted “had it been suggested to me, I should readily have turned back. True, the overcrowding of the vessel, the great number of new faces among which I found myself and the brutal way the ship’s officers treated our young Canadian boys, all made me fear a troublesome journey.”

\textsuperscript{78} Franchère, *Journal*, 59.

\textsuperscript{79} Franchère, *Journal*, 60.
discovered the *morais*, or “places of sacrifice.” Though only priests could enter, Franchère was still able to observe the crudely carved wooden statues to which sacrifices of “dogs, pigs, poultry, and vegetables” were left near the idols until they decomposed.\(^8^0\) Passing through the villages, *Tonquin* passengers “found groups of Islanders amusing themselves with a variety of games” and made note of the local women’s “amorous” nature, which Franchère commented, was “to be expected in this climate.”\(^8^1\) The beauty and fruits of the islands were so impressive, Franchère observed that, “Nature has showered her bounties on these Islanders, who enjoy a healthful climate and can live almost without working.”\(^8^2\) To many of the ship’s crew the appeal of island life, after the strain of the past months under Thorn’s iron command, was too great. John Anderson, the botswain, “having had several misunderstandings with the Captain during the crossing, deserted the ship, preferring life among the natives.”\(^8^3\) Several others also made the attempt, but Anderson was the only one who succeeded in disappearing so completely that he could not be made to return.\(^8^4\)

Besides sightseeing and enjoying the exotic offerings of the islands, “a brisk trade commenced” between Astor’s men and the islanders. They took on board “a hundred pigs, more or less, a few goats, two sheep, a quantity of poultry, two canoe-loads of sugar-cane to be used as pig-feed, two canoe-loads of yams, *taro*, and other

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\(^8^0\) Franchère, *Journal*, 65.
\(^8^1\) Franchère, *Journal*, 65-66. Ross, similarly, found the Hawaiian women “handsome in person, engaging in their manners, well featured, and [having] countenances full of joy and tranquility; but chastity is not their virtue” (Ross, *Adventures*, 46).
\(^8^2\) Franchère, *Journal*, 68. Franchère noted, however, that it was mostly the chiefs who were able to enjoy life on the islands, and who made the common islanders “work without hope of any reward.”
\(^8^3\) Franchère, *Journal*, 61.
\(^8^4\) Ross, *Adventure*, 31. Franchère contradicts Ross here and notes that islanders who retrieved other deserters actually offered bring back Anderson too, but “the Captain was unwilling” (Franchère, *Journal*, pg. 61).
vegetables.” These supplies would be needed in making a settlement on the Columbia. The partners took on board a sufficient supply of foodstuffs to last them until the arrival of another supply ship from Astor. But fate would not allow the entirety of those goods to ever reach Astoria. As the Tonquin sailed away from the “hospitable shores” of the Hawaiian Islands, headed towards the colder regions of the Pacific Northwest, she drew nearer and nearer to a final catastrophe.

On March 24th, 1811, nearly seven months since their departure from New York, the crew and passengers of the Tonquin arrived at Cape Disappointment on the mouth of the Columbia River. Astor’s men immediately set about landing their supplies and searching for a suitable site for the “Establishment.” The search proved difficult and the weather was miserable. It was not till April 12th that the partners decided upon Point George for the establishment of their post. By this time, Thorn was impatient to be getting on. He “wished to take advantage of the summer months to sail up the Coast,” since the other half of his mission was to explore farther north. For this purpose, Alexander McKay volunteered to accompany the ship and to “learn everything necessary about trade on this coast.” The partners unloaded as many of the supplies as they were able to fit into their newly constructed storehouse, but the remainder they left aboard the Tonquin, assuming that it would be returning in a couple of months.

With the Tonquin sailing out towards the Pacific again, and the company men freed from her oppressive hull and commander, it was now time to turn to the task of establishing a fort. Spring was already well advanced, “the weather was magnificent”

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86 This Cape had been named by Captain Cook during a miserable first voyage to the Pacific Coast.
87 Franchère, Journal, 77.
88 Franchère, Journal, 84.
and Astor's men "worked with a will" to hew and chop down the giant Douglas firs, hemlocks, and alders that flourished at their site on the banks of the Columbia. The venture was finally taking shape and proceeding with promise. There were no signs that any other European traders had set up a post along the coast, and the Indians seemed more than inclined to do a busy trade of furs and food items in exchange for the company's trade goods; Astor's men had simply to continue the arduous labor involved in keeping their post and await the return of the Tonquin and the arrival of their sister party, traveling overland from St. Louis. But the Tonquin would not return, and though Hunt and the overland party did arrive, another party was following close on their heels with news of war from the East.

On the other side of the continent, international events were forming that would magnify the importance of the post on the Columbia and change what had been a "neutral" commercial establishment into a symbol of national occupation. By 1806, the North West Fur Company had consolidated with its competitors in Montreal and was eagerly regaining the footing it had nearly lost in the competition for domination of the fur trade in the Pacific Northwest. Two major expeditions led by Simon Fraser and David Thompson set out from Montreal to explore the western territory beyond the Rocky Mountains, with the intention of building “a series of staging posts and eventually a major entrepôt on the upper reaches of the Columbia.” With both of these men converging on the Pacific, Montreal appeared ready to challenge the advance of the Pacific Fur Company. Yet Fraser returned by 1808, not having found the Columbia, and David Thompson was so delayed crossing the continent that he did not arrive on the
Columbia until June 1811, only to find the Astorians, fresh off the Tonquin, there to welcome him.\textsuperscript{89}

Imperial power, however, was on the side of the Canadian fur traders. The North West Company, warming to the challenge posed by Astor’s project, was soliciting governmental aid from England. The company’s London agent met with British foreign secretary Marquis Wellesley and spelled out “the imperial consequences of a western fur trade dominated by Americans.” If Astor was not above touting nationalistic aims for the sake of his own commercial ambitions, neither were the partners of the North West Company. Nor were they less inclined than Astor to take every measure possible to ensure the success of economic monopolization. While they were petitioning British officials, the North West Company decided to send a large expedition to the Columbia, predicting the probability of en route transformation into a more official attack, once support from the crown had been secured.

It was this group, led by George McTavish, that arrived at Astoria on April 11\textsuperscript{th}, 1813, shortly after Hunt’s departure on the Beaver. At the end of the previous year, the influential president of the British Board of Trade, Lord Bathurst, had agreed to provide the North West Company with the protection of the Royal Navy. At the same time as McTavish’s advance towards the Pacific, the Isaac Todd was being outfitted by the North West Company for a voyage to the Columbia, escorted by the H.M.S Phoebe. McTavish

\textsuperscript{89} Ronda, Astoria and Empire, 22. Fraser found a river in May 1808 that he was convinced was the Columbia. However, when Fraser and his party finally reached the outlet of the river that now bears his name, they found themselves almost 400 miles north of the actual Columbia, on the Strait of Georgia, opposite Vancouver Island. This waterway, being extremely treacherous, was not useful as a commercial route, and Fraser returned to Montreal not having reached the body of the Pacific Ocean. Thompson was delayed by an extensive exploration of the upper Columbia and the Canadian Rockies. While his expedition resulted in the discovery of two important passes, Howse and Athabasca, his six-year journey delayed his arrival on the mouth of the Columbia until 1811.
informed the residents of Fort Astoria that his arrival was preliminary to that of a British convoy whose "principal object" was "to destroy and if possible totally annihilate any settlements which the Americans may have formed on the Columbia River." The Canadian fur traders had been successful in emphasizing the Pacific Northwest's strategic importance. Having attracted the support of British imperial power, the North West Company had transformed commercial expansion in the Pacific Northwest into a quest for imperial domination.

News of the war declared between America and England and the arrival of McTavish and his party were all the signs the partners of the Pacific Fur Company needed to decide they would have to abandon the post and, with it, their hopes for fortune. After holding a "council of war" in which the facts -- "trading under the American flag, being almost all born British subjects, having no hope of receiving help, [and] all American ports being blockaded," -- the partners resolved to abandon their post the following spring, unless Hunt returned or support and provisions came from the East. The partners' determination to leave the post was augmented by a severe shortage of food supplies. By the time news of the war reached the Astorians, they had already ceased trading with the Indians for furs and were using their trade goods to acquire much-needed food. Astor's men had relied upon the return of the Tonquin and the remaining food supplies that lay aboard her. But the Tonquin never returned. Rumors were not confirmed until much later, but the ship, her crew, Alexander McKay and Captain Thorn were all at the bottom

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90 Ronda, Astoria and Empire, 256-7.
91 Franchère, Journal, 117. The actual abandonment of Astoria was delayed until the spring of 1814, a lack of provisions and horses to carry goods deterring the company men beginning the long trek back down the Missouri. During this time, the partners made a second arrangement to sell the post and all its goods to the men of the North West Company.
of the Templar Channel, off the western coast of Vancouver Island. The circumstances of the *Tonquin*'s demise were related to Franchère and others by perhaps the only survivor of the experience, a half-Indian, half-British man who had been taken aboard the *Tonquin* to serve as interpreter. This man, George Ramsay, claimed that Captain Thom, while engaged in trade with natives farther up the coast, had insulted one of the chiefs, “rubbing his face with the skins that the latter had brought to trade.” The Indians retaliated the next day by boarding Thom’s ship with packets of furs, as if they were seeking to continue trade. Meanwhile, the rest of their people came alongside the ship until the crew and commander of the ship found themselves “surrounded by Indians swarming onto the ship from all sides.” Ramsay claimed to have seen the natives murdering both McKay and Thom, before he jumped into the sea and made for shore. Apparently, either Thom or members of the crew set the ship’s magazine aflame, and while “400 or 500 of [the natives] were busily plundering it, it blew up with a horrible din” and “arms, legs and heads were flying in all directions.” With the *Tonquin* and its crucial supplies lost, and the arrival of aid from the East not predictable, it was impossible for the men at Fort Astoria to maintain their post.

With no other option before them, the men of the Pacific Fur Company set about preparing to return home. Before they left and abandoned the post to McTavish, they witnessed the arrival of the British corvette *Raccoon*, one of the convoy escorting the *Isaac Todd*. The *Raccoon*, commanded by a Captain Black, had been sent ahead to take possession of Astoria for England. On the evening of December 12th, 1813, Black came

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92 Franchère, *Journal*, 123-6. Franchère actually states that the ship “perished at Newiti,” a place name that has disappeared. However, the most probably sight of the *Tonquin* destruction is off the Clayoquot Sound in the Templar Channel.
ashore “took a British flag that he had brought for the purpose and raised it to the top staff; taking a bottle of Madeira, he smashed it against the pole, proclaiming in a loud voice that he took possession of the establishment and the country in the name of His Britannic Majesty and named it Fort George.”93 The post was now as much a symbol of English imperial occupation as it was of commercial expansion. The North West Company’s success represented a loss to America’s national interests. But for the men of the Pacific Fur Company, the defeat of Astoria meant a personal loss. “After crossing the seas,” wrote Franchère, after Astoria had been handed over to the North West Company, “and enduring all the fatigues and privations that I was exposed to in building the post, I lost thus in one moment all my hopes of fortune.”94 The hopes of that diverse group of partners, clerks, and voyageurs were dissolved; dreams that had been tied to the commercial aspect of the venture, not to any larger national aims, were shattered.

The Pacific Fur Company had met with unequivocal failure. When Hunt finally returned, he was appalled at the loss of the post, the company’s furs, and supplies. However, even Hunt had to agree that the decision to hand over the post had been unavoidable, in light of the arrival of British reinforcement. He and his men were independent traders with neither the reinforcements nor sanction that a national power could afford. Faced with the imperial power of the English, there was no option but to back down. The plans of the Pacific Fur Company had been destroyed. Astor’s men had survived their overland and sea voyages only to be met with the prospect of a long trip back home.

93 Franchère, Journal, 133.
94 Ibid, pg. 130.
Several partners returned to New York again by sea voyage. Alexander Ross, along with Donald McLennan and another clerk, engaged with the Northwest Company and stayed on the Columbia. Gabriel Franchère, though tempted to engage with the prestigious Canadian company, decided instead to return home with the group who traveled back by land. In a final meeting between the members of the dissolved Pacific Fur Company, Ross recounted Hunt’s last speech to his men in which he expressed his regret at the “failure of the enterprize.” The only consolation, Hunt surmised, “was that every man had done his duty.” The undertaking thus remained a brave and admirable project. Failure was the result of uncontrollable circumstances, but the attempt had been made and duty had been fulfilled. The honor that could be retained from the venture did not appear to depend so much upon overall success as in the simple execution of the duty.

In Montreal, Franchère finally found himself once more among family and friends, who actually never had expected to see him again, “a rumor having reached them that I had been massacred with Mr. McKay and the crew of the Tonquin.” Yet after an absence of “four years, one month and six days,” he was home, “thanks to Divine Providence which protected me in the midst of my perilous journey, in which so many others met death.” Franchère had survived the venture, enduring four years of hardship, tragedy, and absence from his home and family. He had nothing of material value to show for his experience. Yet, in his perception of the venture, simply his safe return home merited thanks to a divine providence for the ordeal. The commercial project, though a failure in

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96 Franchère, *Journal*, 188.
its economic purpose, remained a worthwhile undertaking within a divinely orchestrated creation.

Astor's conceived the Pacific Fur Company as a scheme to shut out Canadian and British fur companies and to monopolize the fur trade in the Pacific Northwest. Realizing the obstacle that foreign powers could be to his venture, Astor tried from the outset of his planning to secure the sanction and aid of the U.S. government. He attempted to attract government support by emphasizing the national purpose of the project and the importance of dominating trade on the Pacific Northwest coast. An American presence on the Columbia would secure the nation's claim to that territory, thereby advancing the national economy and promoting commercial expansion. This nationalistic talk, however, was specifically for the benefit of American officials. In reality, Astor was willing to take whatever means necessary to enable the success of his commercial project. He hired the most experienced men he could find, regardless of their nationality or moral behavior. He made an attempt to ally with the Russians in order to shut the British out of Pacific Northwest trade, and he even hired a British ship to sail out of London to the aid of Astoria when the conditions of war had restricted American ships. For Astor, as well as the men of his company, the establishment of a post on the Columbia was more a commercial than nationalistic effort.

Astor's attempt to safeguard the venture, through personal schemes and appeals to national power, could not ensure its success. The ocean voyage alone, although it was a familiar route in the China trade by the early eighteenth century, posed many dangers and, as this story witnessed, could still be treacherous. For those traveling the overland route, even more, the Pacific Northwest was unfamiliar and filled with natural hazards.
and native threats. No fully accurate calculation of the risks to be taken in traversing the territory could be made due to the inherent uncertainty of both the geography and the inhabitants. The success of the project could thus by no means be guaranteed.

Yet, the men whom Astor hired did not allow this absence of assurances to prohibit them. Primarily concerned with their own personal advancement and the acquisition of fortune, they also possessed an eagerness for adventure in new territories that outweighed their fears of the outcome. Their dreams of fortune were not tied to the greater purpose of laying a claim to the territory for America, regardless of how Astor advertised the venture. They were a culturally diverse group and the national identification of the venture did not interest them, unless it presented trouble to the success of their mission. In the same way, their adventurousness was not so much connected to the certainty of their prosperous success as it was inspired by a divinely-oriented worldview that motivated them to encounter the unknown with confidence in its divine origin and orchestration.

Thus, although no personal assurances from Astor as to the project’s profitable outcome could be made (and no official assurances from the government were given) to the men who risked their lives and fortunes to cross the continent and establish a fur-trading post on the mouth of the Columbia, personal assurance is exactly what the men of this era perceived themselves as having through a worldview that claimed their participation in a divinely ordained creation, inspiring them to encounter the unknown and seek from it a livelihood and even, perhaps, prosperity.
CONCLUSION

The study of exploration in the New World is the study of men such as those who joined the Pacific Fur Company and spearheaded the trade in the Northwest. It is the investigation of a unique era in the North American experience that can unveil for the present era, often quite dramatically, the manifestation of a worldview that permeated the eighteenth century and influenced the nineteenth century. Some historians have attempted to analyze afresh these exploratory ventures using an economic and imperial model of interpretation that eschews “lapsing into romance or antiquarianism.”97 While evaluating the Astorian expedition, James Ronda stated that it “had not been planned as a heroic venture. The journey was to be part of a commercial venture. Fort Astoria and the ways to get there represented profit and empire, not romantic westering.”98 According to his view and the views of like-minded scholars, the romanticization of exploration has thus obfuscated a better understanding of the true nature and motives behind exploration. The economic argument does indeed help to explain the movement of men west. It is impossible to imagine the organization of large-scale projects requiring expensive supplies and labor without the incentive of even greater profits to be gained in the undertaking. John Jacob Astor’s motives in sinking extraordinary amounts of money

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98 Ronda, Astoria and Empire, 195.
into the Pacific Fur Company cannot be understood unless one considers what he hoped to gain economically from it.

However, an argument that focuses heavily on economic incentives and imperial aims seems both unsatisfactory and lifeless because it ignores the diverse motivations behind the drive for exploration. National aims do not seem to have played a role at all in the minds of the men who undertook travel into this new territory. Neither Hunt nor the other men appear to have considered themselves agents of a nation-state. Even Astor's own attempts to involve the American government, it could be argued, were aimed more towards the securing of military protection and material aid than with involving the U.S government in his trading enterprise. Since trade on the frontier appeared to prosper from the lack of official regulations, it would have been contrary to Astor's interests to involve the government too heavily in his project.

Potential profits also fail completely to explain exploratory and trade projects, simply because success on these commercial ventures was so uncertain. In the case of the Pacific Fur Company, in which all interests were heavily disappointed, the project was a disaster and should have been an example to other trading companies of the impracticality of extending trade so far west. It would seem that any potential for profit could hardly outweigh the significant amount of time away from home, the possibility of failure, the certainty of hardship, and, most significantly, the frequent fatality that such a project represented. Yet men continued to undertake these projects, and these were very often the same men who had endured adversity and tragedy before. What can have prompted men to undertake projects that not only often ended in their demise, but which first required them to endure a series of unimaginable hardships and deprivations? What
did these men perceive themselves as accomplishing when their entire project not only failed but met with such tragedy? And from where did their perceived sense of moral duty originate?

Men who have left behind personal accounts of their ventures, such as Franchère, Ross, and Hunt, must be considered within their cultural, ideological, and religious environment or they become empty characters whose motives are irrational and mysterious. Concepts of bravery and adventure did play a role in the motives of explorers and traders, as can be seen in their writings. These concepts are not romantic projections constructed by idealistic historians, but actually reflect the attitudes and perceptions that men held about themselves and their actions at the time. Rather than discredit the adventurous aspect of exploration and the courageous nature of the explorers’ character, historians must question and examine the perception of adventure and bravery in the journals and diaries of explorers and incorporate this into their historical analysis. This can be accomplished if economic motivations are paired with an understanding of the cultural, religious, and ideological environment that influenced how these individuals perceived the continent.

The words of both Alexander Ross and Gabriel Franchère in the conclusion to their journals stand out as clues, as do the final prayers and desires for absolution of the Canadian voyageurs. Besides these incidents in their narratives, these men, despite the failures they experienced, considered their expeditions overall successes. This attitude points to a unique world perspective. Piecing together these cultural cues, it is possible to understand the worldview according to which these men perceived their lives, in which divine purpose was juxtaposed with the uncertainty of the future. Where neither national
nor personal assurances could be made as to the overall success of the project, a religious rationale often ensured the individual his own success within a larger cosmic purpose, regardless of worldly success or failure. Within this context, exploration and trade were considered admirable and worthy undertakings, apart from, or regardless of the material success of the venture. This perspective, which saw the use and development of a divine creation as mankind's purpose, has been applied before to early colonial development. In the same way, encountering unknown territory, together with its inherent hardships and even the possibility of untimely death, became a heroic venture, to be undertaken with courage and daring because it was the divinely intended purpose of man.
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