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Ways West

Columbia had been sometimes a sullen ship, though invariably a lucky one; John Jacob Astor's *Tonquin* sailed into a nightmare, with a murderous and delusional martinet for a captain. Well launched upon his rise to becoming America's richest man, Astor in the summer of 1810 outfitted *Tonquin* for a voyage around Cape Horn to the Pacific Northwest, where his advance agents were to establish a depot at the mouth of the Columbia River for the collection of Rocky Mountain furs for the China market. A hard and canny buccaneer, Astor meant to challenge and ultimately dominate the two British Canadian trapping and trading firms, the 140-year-old Hudson's Bay Company and its parvenu rival, the North West Company. He dispatched two expeditions to the Oregon Country in 1810: a party of overlanders under the New Jersey merchant Wilson Price Hunt and the shipborne contingent in the star-crossed *Tonquin*.

Trade and wealth were Astor's obsessions, and he had an instinctive feel for the precise points at which his interests and those of the United States might intersect. His hired memorialist Washington Irving would write in 1836 that Astor intended the Columbia outpost as "the germ of a wide civilization" that would attract settlers from the United States. Astor may or may not have been aware of the dictum of the geographer Thomas Hutchins, an early prophet of American transcontinental destiny. "If we want it, I warrant it will soon be ours," Hutchins said in 1784, the same year, coincidentally, that the

German-born Astor arrived in the United States. Robert Gray had staked the first American claim to the Oregon Country with *Columbia*'s reconnaissance of the estuary of the great river in May 1792. A party from George Vancouver's British exploring expedition trumped the Americans in October of that year, venturing a hundred miles upriver and raising the British standard. In 1805–1806, the Lewis and Clark transcontinental expedition wintered over near the mouth of the Columbia, the second American penetration of "the Oregon of the Spaniards." Now Astor's American Fur Company aimed to plant a trading colony there, the first permanent white presence in the region.[1]

With foreigners controlling the fur trade in U.S. territory on the upper Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, Astor complained that he had to travel to Montreal to buy American pelts to sell to his U.S. customers—with a substantial markup to cover British profits and his own added expenses. Lewis and Clark having shown the way, Astor proposed a line of trading forts from the Missouri to the Pacific. He sought the U.S. government's blessing and assistance, adumbrating the prospect of a Pacific empire in return. "The intention is to carry on the trade so extensively that it may in time embrace the greater part of the fur trade on this continent," he wrote President Thomas Jefferson early in 1808. "Every exertion shall be made to forward the wishes of the government in these relations with the Indians & it is believed that the trade will in time . . . have advantages to the country." Jefferson responded with enthusiasm: "You may be assured that in order to get the whole of this business passed into the hands of our own citizens and to oust foreign traders who so much abuse their privileges by endeavoring to excite the Indians to war on us every reasonable facility & patronage in the power of the Executive will be afforded." Astor chartered the American Fur Company in April 1808 with the goal of forcing the British out of the fur trade and establishing a monopoly of his own.[2]

Initially Astor proposed a partnership on the Columbia with the North West Company. When the North Westers rebuffed him, he hired away a legion of the company's experienced traders and prepared to go it alone, setting up a subsidiary, the Pacific Fur Company, for the purpose. In the early days of the trade, Americans exchanging Pacific Northwest furs for Canton silks, tea, nankeens, and porcelain had returned home with fabulous profits—"an average clear gain of a thousand per cent every second year," according to one of Astor's new

John Jacob Astor, America's first tycoon. Astor's trading emporium on the Columbia established a firm U.S. claim to the Oregon Country. Washington Irving would memorialize the fur trading enterprise in *Astoria* (1836). (Library of Congress)

employees, the ex-North Wester Alexander Ross. So the prize glittered. Astor himself advanced the start-up capital, $200,000 out of his own copper-bottomed assets, and agreed to bear all expenses and losses for the first five years. Oddly for so pawky an operator, he chose Hunt, a man with no experience of the wilds, to lead the overland voyage and assigned the former North Wester Alexander McKay, a veteran of trapper-explorer Alexander Mackenzie's epic march across Canada to the Pacific in 1792–1793, to command the *Tonquin* party.[3]

Hunt's overlanders set out from Lachine near Montreal in early July 1810. Two separate parties of partners, clerks, mechanics, and voyageurs pushed south from the St. Lawrence in bark canoes, bound for New York City via Lake Champlain and the Hudson. The second band of Canadians reached the metropolis on August 4, taking the inland passage along the eastern shore of Manhattan Island to their lodgings in Brooklyn. The voyageurs in their piebald uniform—blanket coat, striped shirt, leather leggings, and deerskin moccasins—created a sensation. "We sang as we rowed," Gabriel Franchère, one of the clerks, wrote in his journal; the singing and the novelty of the canoes drew

dense crowds to the water's edge to catch a glimpse of these wild exotics of the forest.[4]

Astor's people and Captain Jonathan Thorn, the master of *Tonquin*, clashed from the outset. A U.S. Navy officer on half-pay leave, the thirty-three-year-old Thorn struck the Astorians as violent, rigid, secretive, and peevish. "He was accustomed to exact obedience, being obeyed at the smallest demand," Franchère observed, "and was concerned with duty only." To Ross, he went out of his way to make everyone packed into the ninety-four-foot-long ship as miserable as he allowed himself to be. Even Irving, who out of loyalty to Astor attempted a published defense of the captain, called him "dry and dictatorial." As for Thorn, he stigmatized his passengers as dirty, boastful, noisy, lazy, and lax about discipline—in a word, *lubberly*. The journal-keeping habits of Ross and Franchère particularly grated on him. "The collecting of material for long histories of their voyages and travels appears to engross most of their attention," Thorn wrote Astor. And the Scots aboard tormented him by murmuring conspiratorially among themselves in Gaelic, raising the specter of mutiny in the captain's mind.[5]

Perhaps anticipating trouble, Astor advised Thorn before *Tonquin* sailed to take care to promote harmony aboard. "To prevent any misunderstanding will require your particular good management," he wrote. But the captain made scant effort to restrain himself when McKay, as head of the traders, challenged him for assigning the five Astorian mechanics to berths with the common seamen. They were passengers, McKay insisted, not foremast jacks. Thorn informed McKay that "he would blow out the brains of the first man who dared to disobey his orders on board his own ship," according to Alexander Ross. This set the tone for the entire voyage—rankling hatred between the partners and the psychotic Captain Thorn.[6]

Tonquin, 269 tons, pierced for 22 guns (but carrying only 10), with 21 crewmen and 33 passengers, warped away from the wharf on the morning of September 6, 1810, and floated out into the stream. The wind died presently, leaving the ship adrift under limp sails off Staten Island and unable to make an offing. A fitful southwesterly breeze finally carried *Tonquin* out to sea. With rumors of an armed brig from British Halifax lying just over the horizon, Astor had asked the senior naval officer in New York City for an escort to see his investment

safely away. Franchère and Ross recalled that *Tonquin* sailed in company with the frigate USS *Constitution* for a day or so as a precaution against an encounter with the British vessel, which Astor supposed to be a North West Company hireling.[7]

In the event, the brig failed to appear. To Thorn's disgust, the restless heaving of the ship caused an epidemic of seasickness among the Canadians. Miserable and disoriented, others fell victim to the blue devils. "I found myself sailing on the open sea with nothing between the depths of the water and the immensity of the sky on which to fix my eye or attract my attention except the frail machine that bore me," wrote Franchère. "For a long time I remained with my eyes straining toward the coastline that I could no longer see and that I despaired of ever seeing again."[8] *Tonquin* struck the trades on October 4. The next morning, lookouts reported a distant view of the Cape Verde Islands to the northwest. The ship wallowed in a dead calm all day on the eighth. The men captured a shark and made a meal of it; Franchère thought it ate like sturgeon. The sun bore down with an intensity the Canadians had never before experienced, the mercury reaching 108°F on October 16. *Tonquin* crossed the equator six burning days later. Conditions gradually turned cool and rainy as the ship dropped down the map. Beginning on November 10, hard gales damaged the rigging and started several leaks. Scarcely had that fifty-hour storm blown itself out when a second struck, a true widowmaker, dismounting six guns (for a time, they rolled about on deck like thunder, according to Ross) and sending the people below to the pumps. With water running short, Thorn reduced the ration to three gills a day (about three-quarters of a pint), torture for hard-worked men on a salt-meat diet. He altered course for the Falklands so the water casks could be refilled and greenstuff taken aboard.

Tonquin dropped anchor between two bald, treeless islands on December 4. The second mate, John Mumford, led a detail ashore in search of water. He found none, though he did return with several geese and two seals. With the barometer falling, Thorn stood out to sea that evening. He discovered a safe anchorage on the sixth—Port Egmont, as it turned out. Shore parties reported a flowing spring of freshwater and abundant geese, duck, seals, and penguin eggs. One group came upon the headboards of the graves of two British whalers, the names almost obliterated. The men set to recarving them. Another

scythed grass for the ship's livestock. Two of the Astor partners, Duncan McDougall and David Stuart, moved off in search of game. Then, quite without warning, Thorn flashed out the order to embark.[9]

The shore detachments did not respond to the summons promptly enough to satisfy Thorn. He ordered *Tonquin* to weigh and sailed off, stranding McDougall, Stuart, McKay, the clerks Franchère and Ross, and three or four others. The castaways raced down to the beach, wrestled the launch into the surf, and began to row furiously. An hour passed, then another. Robert Stuart, a nephew of David Stuart, persuaded himself that Thorn really intended to maroon the men. Drawing two pistols, he confronted the captain on his holy quarterdeck and demanded that he put ship about. According to Thorn, the wind shifted providentially just then and *Tonquin* lost way. Stuart sheathed the pistols. The launch closed fast and McDougall and the others heaved themselves aboard. To the end, Thorn insisted he had intended to abandon them in the Falklands, as an encouragement to the others.[10]

"Had the wind (unfortunately) not hauled ahead soon after leaving the harbor's mouth, I should positively have left them," he wrote Astor.[11]

After ten days of fog, rain, and piercing cold, Thorn doubled Cape Horn on Christmas Day. Curving northward into the Pacific, *Tonquin* caught favorable winds and sped on a great spread of sail into the new year of 1811. Fishing from the rail, the men caught several large tuna on January 17. The ship crossed the equator on the twenty-third. Thorn made landfall on February 11, raising Mauna Loa volcano on the island of Hawaii in what were then known as the Sandwich Islands, and in due course *Tonquin* glided to anchor in Kealakekua Bay. Natives in outriggers raced alongside with cabbages, yams, watermelons, and poultry for sale. Franchère, Ross, and others ventured ashore. A Hawaiian guide led them to the place where islanders had killed Captain Cook in an argument over a small boat on the same date thirty-two years before. Franchère noted the coincidence, then—to be on the safe side—returned to the ship.

With trade in pork a royal monopoly, the Hawaiian king's representative on Hawaii advised Thorn to sail for the capital on Oahu and negotiate for hogs there. A double pirogue with a crew of twenty-four ferried the king himself to *Tonquin*'s anchorage in the roadstead opposite Waikiki. Tall, robust, running to fat, and majestic of carriage, King

Kamehameha I wore European clothes and carried a sword at his side. The traders' dealings with the king, especially the pretensions of the vain, rank-conscious Duncan McDougall, spurred Thorn to new heights of churlishness. "It would be difficult to imagine the frantic gambols that are daily played off here," he wrote Astor; "sometimes dressing in red coats, and otherwise very fantastically, and collecting a number of ignorant natives around them, telling them that they are the great eris of the Northwest, and making arrangements for sending three or four vessels yearly to them from the coast with spars &c.; while those very natives cannot even furnish a hog to the ship."[12] True, Kamehameha did drive a shrewd bargain for meat, demanding payment in Spanish dollars because he wanted to buy a frigate from his brother, King George of England, to protect his coasting fleet of small schooners. Thorn took aboard a hundred hogs, some goats and sheep, poultry, and a quantity of sugarcane for fodder. To work off his bile, he had two sailors flogged for overstaying shore leave by a few minutes. A third hand, absent overnight, appeared the next day to accept his flogging; instead, Thorn had him thrown overside. Islanders fished him unconscious from the sea and returned him to the ship. Thorn refused to allow him aboard.

Tonquin departed the Sandwich Islands on March 1, 1811. Inky clouds piled up to the northeast, and the weather turned cold and stormy. Thorn denied the Astorians' request to break out warm clothing stowed with the cargo, this latest outrage touching off a mutinous colloquy in Gaelic. Cape Disappointment advanced into the sea out of a thin curtain of rain on March *22*. With seas tumbling violently over the bar, Thorn called for a boat to be lowered and sent the first mate, Ebenezer Fox, and four men to reconnoiter a passage. Irving speculated that Thorn chose Fox as punishment for alleged slackness earlier in the voyage. McKay interceded, urging Thorn to recall Fox. This probably sealed the first mate's doom. He pushed off, and within moments the boat vanished into the mists.

The wind dropped, and the skies cleared on the twenty-fourth. The shock of Fox's misadventure lingered, though, and the early spring sun failed to burn off the pall that hovered over *Tonquin*. The deserted shore looked forbidding and hostile. "The country is low," Ross noted with disquiet, "and the impervious forests give to the surrounding coast a wild and gloomy aspect."[13] A chaotic sea continued to pound over the bar. Thorn sent Mumford in the longboat to sound

a channel; he judged the surf too heavy and retreated to the ship. McKay and David Stuart then took to the boat to search for Fox but could find no safe place to land.

With a shift of the wind to the northwest, Thorn plotted a fresh assault on the entrance. The pinnace led the way, *Tonquin* following under light sail. The ship scraped bottom half a dozen times, breakers lifting and crashing over the stern as though in time with each bump. The breeze died with the ebb, and night closed in with *Tonquin* still caught upon the bar. Light airs sprang up out of the offing on the first of the flood and carried the ship into Baker Bay without further incident. Thorn anchored in the lee of Cape Disappointment at about midnight. Of the pinnace and its crew of five there was no trace.

Ross and others alleged later that Thorn had deliberately refused to stop as *Tonquin* swept past the pinnace on the approach to the passage. The captain himself took a search party ashore, returning presently with a sailor named Stephen Weeks. Mountainous waves had overturned the boat, according to Weeks. Clinging to the hull, Weeks and two of the Sandwich Islanders righted it with the last reserves of their strength and hauled themselves aboard. One of the islanders died at about midnight. At first light Weeks, somewhat recovered, manhandled the boat through the surf and onto the beach. After a short rest, he wandered along an Indian path for several hours before encountering Thorn. Searchers eventually found the surviving islander on the beach, half dead with cold and fatigue. The two others in the boat's crew were presumed dead, bringing to eight the number of fatalities chargeable to Thorn's attempts to enter the river.

With a Clatsop Indian guide, Thorn, McKay, and David Stuart pushed upriver in the longboat to scout a site for the trading post. The other partners remained on board *Tonquin*, doing business with Chinooks peddling sea otter and beaver skins. Despite prodding from Thorn, who seethed with impatience to land his cargo and be off, McKay and Stuart found nothing suitable along the northern bank. McDougall and David Stuart with several clerks set out on April 4 for a reconnaissance of the southern shore. They settled provisionally on a site at Point George (now Smith Point) seven miles from the river's mouth. After a courtesy call at the northern bank village of the paramount Chinook chief, Concomly, the party shoved off for the return to the ship, a Chinook canoe following at a discreet distance. A gale

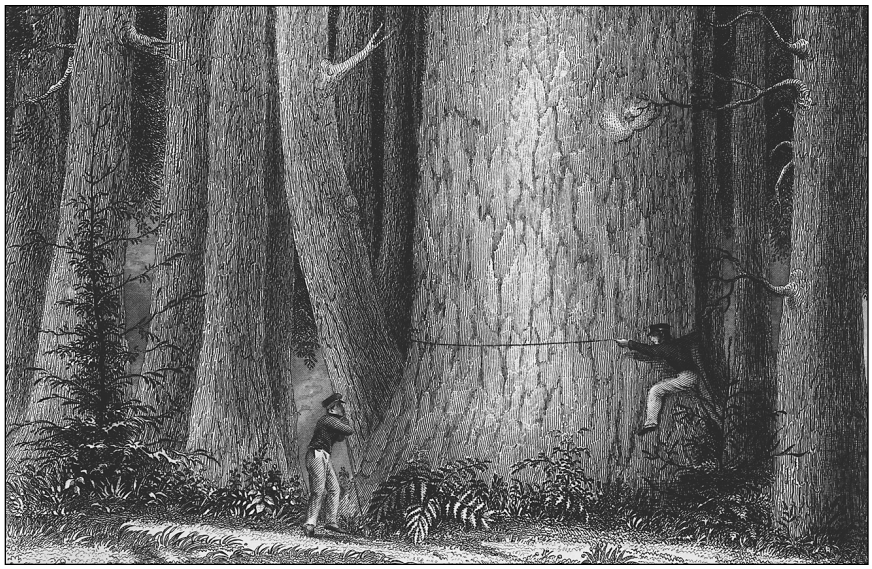
sprang up suddenly and—nobody could say later quite how it happened—the boat capsized, spilling its contents into the chop.

From the first, Ross had observed the Chinook watermen with something approaching awe. Robert Stuart flatly called them "the most expert paddle men any of us had ever seen." Their canoes, too, had a suggestion of classical purity about them. "If perfect symmetry, smoothness and proportion constitute beauty," he wrote, "they surpass anything I ever beheld." Even Irving regarded them with respect. "They seem," he reported in *Astoria*, "to ride the waves like sea fowl." The Indians were indifferent to the cold and as comfortable in the water as out of it. They so impressed Ross, in fact, that he half-seriously accused them of staging the accident. When the canoe tipped over, four of the Chinooks slid silently into the river, rounded up the eight flailing passengers, helped them back aboard, and steered the vessel safely to shore.[14]

"The Indians all the time never lost their presence of mind," Ross remarked. "Instead, it was supposed, from the skillful manner in which they acted afterward, that the sordid rascals had upset us willfully, in order to claim the merit of having saved us, and therewith a double recompense for their trip."[15]

A contingent from *Tonquin* landed at the bottom of a small bay along the southern edge of Point George and pitched camp in a grassy area near a stand of trees just coming into leaf. "We imagined ourselves in an earthly paradise—the forests looked like pleasant groves, the leaves like brilliant flowers," Franchère wrote in his journal.[16] It was a commanding site, the estuary here narrowing to six miles in width, with a usable harbor. The men set about taking down trees, clearing away the underwood, and burning stumps. *Tonquin* came up and anchored in the bay. Thorn landed ready-cut frame timbers from the ship and by the end of April the artisans had laid the keel of *Dolly*, a thirty-ton coasting schooner.

As the exhilaration of arrival wore off, visions of paradise dissolved in the muscle-tearing reality of the work at hand. The forest crowded in on the site, stupendous firs of astonishing girth. "Incredible as it may appear," wrote Robert Stuart, "we found some of them 7 and 9 fathoms in circumference, and 250 to 300 feet long."[17] Even with four men to a team, it sometimes took two days to fell a single tree. Stumps had to be blown apart with gunpowder, roots grubbed out by



The Astorians marveled at the girth of Oregon's rain forest pines. "Incredible as it may appear," wrote Robert Stuart, "we found some of them 7 and 9 fathoms in circumference, and 250 to 300 feet long." (Library of Congress)

hand. According to Ross, the people were two months in clearing *one* acre. Falling trees badly injured two men, and an accidental detonation of powder destroyed the hand of a third. Ross found the climate enervating: cool, overcast, rain every other day. The post's Hawaiian gardeners planted Indian corn, potatoes, turnips, and greens; the Astorians subsisted in the meantime on a monotonous diet of ship's fare, salmon and boiled camas, a native root staple—farinaceous, nutritive, with a faint taste of licorice. From mid-June, wild fruit came into more or less constant supply: white strawberries ("small but delectable," Franchère thought), then red and orange raspberries, and eventually currants and cranberries.[18] McDougall, irascible and aloof, dined in state off private stocks he had carried out from New York, Ross claimed, while everyone else looked on hungrily. There were rumors of an uprising, talk of returning to the States. Four men deserted, were taken captive upstream, and had to be ransomed from the natives.

Indians milled about the encampment, touching off confrontations and, according to Ross, a number of assaults. The Astorians lived in a constant state of apprehension. The dripping woods were haunted and sinister, so thickly grown that a man could barely see a hundred

yards ahead. Ross blamed some of the trouble on the friendly Chinooks, suspecting them—rightly, as it happened—of turning the hinterland bands against the whites to reserve the trade for themselves. Still, he had confidence in Concomly, the Chinook chief. Rising fifty in 1811, one-eyed, quick-minded, tenacious of memory, wealthy, holding immense authority over the estuarine tribes, Concomly had been openhanded with Lewis and Clark in 1805 and seemed to regard the arrival of Astor's party as a business opportunity rather than an invasion.

Reports reached the Astorians that a party of white traders, doubtless North Westers, had established an outpost up the Columbia beyond a distant rapids. In early May, therefore, the Clatsop subchief Coalpo led McKay, Robert Stuart, and a small band upstream on a reconnaissance. Like William Broughton twenty years before, Franchère found the Willamette region charming: groves of oaks and poplar, spring wildflowers in bloom, glimpses of the prairie through a screen of trees. They approached fast water on May 8 just above the place Lewis and Clark dubbed Strawberry Island. Small groups of Indians were harvesting salmon below the falls; the whites amused themselves by shooting seals basking on the rocks. Coalpo refused to push on from there, saying the natives beyond were hostile. The expedition turned back for Point George, arriving on May 14 without having confirmed the existence of the rival post.

The traders laid the foundations of their first building, sixty feet long and twenty-six feet wide, on May 16 and christened the place Astoria two days later. Work parties finished unloading the ship under Thorn's surly glare. With McKay and two other traders aboard, *Tonquin* weighed on June 1 and dropped down to Baker Bay to await a breeze that would vault her over the bar. Nobody mourned Thorn's departure. Even so, the Astorians, alone ashore now, felt vulnerable, for no guns had been mounted nor palisades raised as yet, although work progressed satisfactorily on the barracks, storehouse, and powderhouse.

In mid-June two Indian messengers—both women, it turned out, although one dressed like and attempted to pass as a man—arrived with a note from the North Westers. The rumors evidently had foundation in fact; the British were on the ground, perhaps in force. McDougall decided to send a trading party under David Stuart up the Columbia as far as the Spokan country to establish a rival station. Stuart at once began to prepare for the mission, and by July 15 he was

ready to set out. Just before he embarked, someone sighted a large and stylish canoe dashing around Tongue Point and bearing for the fort. The canoe carried the legendary trader-mapmaker David Thompson with a crew of seven voyageurs and two Indian guides. The Union Jack streamed out from the stern.

For Thompson, who had immigrated to Canada as a Hudson's Bay Company clerk in 1784, arrival marked the completion of the greatest of his wilderness journeys: twelve hundred miles down the Columbia from near its source in an upland lake in what is now southeastern British Columbia. Born in 1770 in London of Welsh parents, his speech in midlife still showed traces of Cambrian cadences. His widowed mother entered him for the navy but he signed articles with the Hudson's Bay Company instead, his London charity school paying five pounds for a seven-year apprenticeship. Thompson served the company at Churchill Factory and elsewhere in the Canadian interior until 1797, when he defected to the North Westers. The Lewis and Clark expedition and then the Astor venture rekindled the North West Company's interest in the Oregon Country. Thompson had discovered the true source of the Columbia on an 1807 expedition. Now he set out to become the first European to scud down the length of the great river from its headwaters to the Pacific.

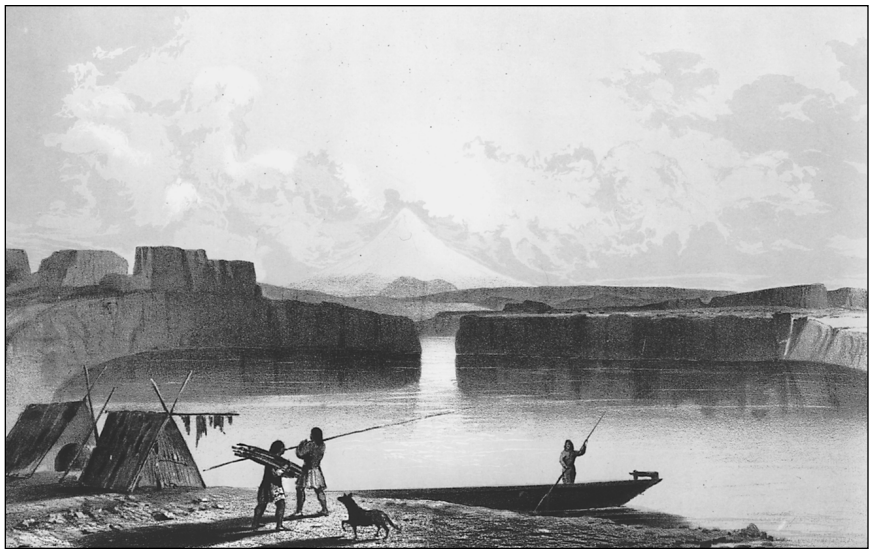
Thompson had marched with twenty-four men in late 1810 for a treacherous winter crossing of the Rockies. Warlike Piegan Indians barred him from Howse Pass, so he struck northward in a long deviation for the defiles of the Athabasca River. A number of his voyageurs lost heart and drifted away. The remainder passed most of December on the eastern flank of the Rockies near the entrance to present Jasper National Park. The ascent began on December 30. The mercury dropped to twenty-six degrees below zero, too cold for the pack animals, so Thompson shifted the provender to dogsleds and turned the horses loose. He reached Athabasca Pass at six thousand feet above sea level on January 10, 1811. One of the men probed the snowpack with a twenty-foot-long pole, vainly seeking soil or rock. "I told him while we had good snowshoes it was no matter to us whether the snow was ten or one hundred feet deep," he wrote in his journal. Such assurances, no matter how rational, no longer appeased the people. Cold, eternal snows, fear of the unknown, even the towering fissured pines of the western slope: the eerie silence and the alpen strangeness unnerved them. Another five men petitioned for

their release and retraced their steps eastward.[19]

The expedition wintered on the Wood River, sheltering in a snow hut reinforced with split cedar sides. Thompson oversaw the construction of a cedar canoe, its components stitched together with thread spun from pine roots. With the advent of spring he gathered the little band together for the downriver voyage, pushing out into Clark's Fork River, a Columbia tributary, on June 5, 1811. Three days later he commenced the long portage that led to Kettle Falls, reaching this landmark on the present Washington–British Columbia line on the nineteenth. Here the people—five métis, two Iroquois, and two local Indians—built a canoe large and sturdy enough for the descent to the sea.

High water and a racing current swept the voyageurs downstream. They logged seventy miles the first day, July 3, traversing agreeable country, thinly wooded with broad short-grass meadows that Thompson judged excellent for sheep. On the ninth, the expedition passed the mouth of the Snake; just below, the Columbia widened out to nearly nine hundred yards bank to bank. Thompson came ashore briefly to parley with a band of Wallawalla Indians. When they asked him to put up a trading post at the site, the self-consciously imperial North Wester nailed a proclamation to a tree pegging out a British claim to the country. Thompson caught sight later that afternoon of "a high mountain, isolated, of a conical form, a mass of pure snow without the appearance of a rock"—the dormant volcano Broughton had called Mount Hood.[20]

They approached a major rapids on July 12, the paddlemen maneuvering skillfully along a stretch of river forced between high basalt walls rising at right angles to the course of the stream. "These breaks formed rude bays," he noted; "under each point was a violent eddy, and each bay was a powerful dangerous whirlpool." Thompson had reached The Dalles, the Columbia there contracting to a width of sixty yards. He had experienced nothing like it in a quarter century in the wilds. "Imagination can hardly form an idea of the working of this immense body of water under such a compression, raging and hissing as if alive," he marveled. The north bank Wishrams and the Wascos of the south bank, traders and tollkeepers of The Dalles, impressed him as physically different, too, from the Plateau tribes, as though an ethnic as well as geographical frontier had been crossed. "They are



Three Native Americans along the shore of The Dalles, the Indian trading mart above the Columbia River Gorge. A gorge and rapids made the river unnavigable here until the end of the nineteenth century, when a canal and locks opened. This image dates from around 1855. (Library of Congress)

not so tall as the tribes above the rapids," he noted, "but strongly built, brawny, fat people." The voyageurs steered for shore and hauled the canoe out of the maelstrom, carrying craft and contents along a well-trodden path to calmer water a mile downstream. Thompson noted that the country here was softer in appearance and greener. He camped for the night near a Wasco settlement of log houses and divided two fat salmon among the people for dinner.[21]

Rounding Tongue Point, the North Westers glimpsed the broad, shining Pacific opening out before them. Thompson thought they seemed disappointed somehow. "Accustomed to the boundless horizon of the Great Lakes of Canada, they expected a more boundless view, a something beyond the power of their senses which they could not describe," he decided. At Point George, four low log huts huddled together in a rough clearing—"the far-famed Fort Astoria of the United States," Thompson, perhaps a bit let down himself, remarked with a tinge of sarcasm. The canoe nudged gently into the mud and he stepped ashore, the voyageurs, a rough-and-ready honor guard, making way for him deferentially.[22]

Thompson's journals reveal no hint that he regarded the Astorian presence as a setback. The Canadian scholar Arthur S. Morton has argued that the North West Company had aspired to dominate the lower Columbia at least since 1801, and that word of the Astor venture lent renewed urgency to Thompson's task. Morton faults him for "mistaken leisureliness and misjudgements" in his choice of route and in failing to negotiate a safe passage at Howse Pass or, failing that, to brush the bristling Piegans aside. The delay, Morton claimed, cost the North West Company—and Britain—the chance to be first in the field at the mouth of the Columbia.[23]

Thompson evidently believed that the much-discussed North Wester–Astor joint venture had finally gone through. He suggested as much to Duncan McDougall—that the North Westers were trading partners rather than business rivals. A shrewd operator, Thompson may have been practicing upon the Astorians, bluffing to cover his tardy arrival; or he may simply have been relying on outdated information. Whatever the case, McDougall greeted his old trader colleague like a long-lost brother. "Nothing was too good for Mr. Thompson," wrote Ross; "he had access everywhere; saw and examined everything; and whatever he asked for he got, as if he had been one of ourselves." Thompson wrote dismissively of Astoria in his journal; the site lay exposed and difficult to defend, and he judged the Astorians' stock of trade goods as low in quality, though doubtless "good enough for the beggarly natives about them." As it happened, Ross agreed, blaming Astor—a vulpine trader who ought to have known better and probably did—for the post's inventory of old metal pots (instead of guns), white cotton (instead of beads), and molasses (instead of blankets). "In short," he complained, "all the useless trash and unsaleable trumpery which had been accumulating in his shops and stores for half a century past were swept together to fill his Columbia shops." Still, Ross regarded Thompson as a commercial and political spy and dismissed the North Wester's warnings of the difficulties of operating in the interior as so much cant—and a feeble effort, too, as most of the Astorians had considerable experience in the backcountry trade. McDougall at any rate opted to go ahead with David Stuart's voyage, arranging for Stuart to travel in company with Thompson as far as the Spokane.[24]

Meanwhile, masses of Indians were assembling in camps along Baker Bay for the summer fishing. A band from the north brought

word, nobody knew how reliable, of *Tonquin*. The ship had been destroyed, these Indians reported, together with chief trader McKay, Captain Thorn, and all the crew.

THE ASTORIANS EXHAUSTED the stores landed from *Tonquin* by midsummer. McDougall sought to buy venison from the Clatsops but discovered they were up to all the shifts of bargaining—"the ordinary cost of a stag," according to Gabriel Franchère, "was a blanket, a knife, some tobacco, a little powder, and some balls." The garden looked beautiful, yet except for radishes, potatoes, and turnips, nothing matured. In compensation, the turnips grew big as pumpkins, up to thirty-three inches in circumference and fifteen pounds in weight. All the same, these were anxious weeks as the river tribes gathered. The departure of David Stuart's expedition left the post shorthanded. The Astorians suspended all regular business to concentrate on strengthening the fort's defenses, throwing up a ninety-foot-square stockade with two bastions each mounting two four-pounder guns. McDougall launched a diplomatic offensive as well. Convening a council of the chiefs, he flashed a vial that he claimed contained smallpox and threatened to draw the cork should Astoria come under attack. (No idle threat: the British commander Henry Bouquet had distributed pox-infected blankets to Ohio Valley tribes during Pontiac's Rebellion fifty years earlier.) Disease had greatly reduced the coastal tribes since first contact with Europeans—by some estimates, tribal populations were down one-third to one-half by the first decade of the nineteenth century. The Indians felt obliged to take the man they now denominated "the great smallpox chief" at his word.[25]

The barracks were finished in late September, *Dolly* slid into the river on October 2, and on the fifth, three men returned from the interior to report the founding of a trading post on the Okanogan River some six hundred miles northeast of Astoria. David Stuart's party built a sixteen-by-twenty-foot factory out of driftwood and, according to Ross, extracted a promise from the local chiefs "to be always our friends, to kill us plenty of beavers and to furnish us at all times with provisions."[26] But there had been no sign of Wilson Price Hunt's overlanders, no word from Hunt or any of his band. And the Indians were withdrawing to their winter quarters inland now, leaving the Astorians isolated and facing famine.

With the coming of the rains, the scribblers Captain Thorn had so despised were at leisure to bring their journals up to date. Ross, Franchère, and Stuart closely observed the Native Americans of the lower Columbia and set down reports dense with ethnographic detail, much of it accurate. Even when sympathetic, though, the Astorians' accounts presented the native culture as static and primitive: Indian ways did not accord with the whites' notions of progress. The Chinooks, Clatsops, Clackamas, and the others no doubt found the traders just as compelling a study; unfortunately, they left no written record of their impressions. Accounts of weird customs, quaint rituals and beliefs, and outlandish apparel lay mostly on one side. Clatsop ethnographers did not record, for example, their reaction to the appearance of Duncan McDougall in one of the great eri costumes that had so appalled Captain Thorn at Waikiki. In the Pacific Northwest in the year 1811, the ability to shape perceptions and ultimately, perhaps, events lay with the Euroamericans and their powerful written language.

Robert Stuart noted that Captain Gray's 1792 excursion into the river had passed into Chinook folk legend. Word of *Columbia*'s appearance spread rapidly, causing surprise at first, then panic and dread when the ship ghosted over the treacherous bar. All but a few old people fled the riverfront villages. Wrote Stuart, "Some imagined that the ship must be some overgrown monster come to devour them, while others supposed her to be a floating island inhabited by cannibals, sent by the great spirit to destroy them and ravage their country." (Events in due course would show this initial suspicion to have been dolefully close to the mark.) A boat's crew from *Columbia* landed and, distributing presents, soon assuaged the old people's fears. Post-*Columbia* traders reported that shipwrecked Spanish sailors evidently had once lived among the coastal tribes. But the Chinooks told Stuart that Gray's men were the first whites they had encountered. Traders and Indians met fairly frequently after 1792. Then Lewis and Clark materialized from beyond the mountains in the autumn of 1805 and wintered among the hospitable Clatsops. By 1811 the estuarine bands were long accustomed to doing business with whites.[27]

Alexander Ross counted ten distinct tribes in the vicinity of the mouth of the Columbia, mustering a total of perhaps two thousand warriors. "All these tribes appear to be descended from the same

stock, live in rather friendly intercourse with, and resemble one another in language, dress, and habits," he wrote. "Their origin, like that of the other aborigines of the continent, is involved in fable, although they pretend to be derived from the musk-rat." Stuart concluded that no two tribes spoke the same tongue, although each seemed to understand that of its neighbors on either side; thus each tribe "may be said to comprehend three different languages." All the lingual variants were "filled with gutturals like those of the Scottish Highlanders," Franchère remarked. The coastal tribes seemed, even before the regular visits of whites, to be declining in population.[28]

The native men were muscular, well made, and strong, but not tall. They let their thick black hair grow long, wearing it pleated or wound in tresses. Compulsively smooth-chinned, they plucked out such whiskers as appeared and deemed it "uncouth to have a beard, calling the whites by way of reproach long beards," according to Stuart. In summer the men often went about naked; in winter, they wore a loose skin garment draped over the body like a shift. They sallied forth in all weathers without shirt, leggings, or shoes. Concomly and some of the subchiefs dressed resplendently in robes of luminous sea otter. A broad-brimmed, cone-shaped hat of coarse grass, woven tight enough to be waterproof, surmounted the heads of men of all classes. For battle, warriors donned as body armor a vest made of round sticks the length and thickness of arrow shafts.[29]

Franchère found the men to be patient and industrious artisans. They worked with the simplest of tools, such as a two-inch chisel wrought from an old file and an oblong stone for a hammer. Wrote Franchère, "With these wretched instruments and some wedges made of hemlock knots, oiled and hardened by firing, they cut down cedars twenty-four to thirty feet in circumference, dig them out, and fashion them into canoes; or they split and transform them into beams and planks for their houses." He judged their workmanship first-rate. Ornaments such as the human or animal heads carved on the prows of canoes could be fiercely beautiful.[30]

Each village answered to its chief, chosen according to his wealth in wives, slaves, and goods. The head man presided over a portable settlement of long, narrow dwellings built of cedar. Three or four families inhabited a lodge, their quarters divided by partitions. A fire burned day and night in the middle of the building, smoke venting through an opening at the ridgepole. With the coming of spring the

coastal tribes dismantled their winter villages and carried them down to the river, recycling the beams and planks to construct square sheds for drying and curing fish, roots, and berries. The movable villages were sovereign. Tribal councils settled intervillage disputes with a payment of tribute, although in more serious cases—murder or the theft of a woman—war would sometimes break out. Battles were stylized affairs with Stone Age weaponry, even if they were fierce enough in their way. When one or two men had been killed the fighting ended, the victor compensating the vanquished with gifts of slaves or other property.

Ross described the native women as stout and flabby, with handsome features, fair complexions, and prominent eyes. Along with a skin shift like the men's, they wore a fringed cedar-bark petticoat that fell from the waist to the knees. Ross found it simple, practical, and titillating. "It does not screen nature from the prying eye," he wrote. "In a calm the sails lie close to the mast, metaphorically speaking, but when the wind blows the bare poles are seen."[31] The women customarily applied fish oil to their hair and skin (it kept off mosquitoes and other stinging insects), and sometimes painted their bodies with red clay. For ornament, they favored metal wrist and ankle bracelets, glass beads (preferably blue), and three- or four-inch-long white shells (*haiqua* in the whites' transliteration). The latter served as currency as well, at an exchange rate of a six-foot-long string of shells for ten beaver skins.

Slaves drew the heaviest work. In the Chinook division of labor the women were more active than the men in trade, and they also carried water and wood, cured fish, collected camas and baked it in loaves, preserved fruit, and wove mats and baskets. To prepare fresh fish, a woman plunked a red-hot stone into a square cedar kettle filled with water. She dropped in the fish at the boil and covered the kettle with rush mats to trap the steam. (The Astorians commended this method of cooking salmon, although they noted that overindulgence in the rich, fatty fish caused an explosive diarrhea.) The women closely and affectionately attended their young, often to their cost. "Children are suckled at the breast till their second or third year," observed Ross, "and the mother, in consequence, becomes an old hag at the age of thirty-five." Stuart characterized Chinook and Clatsop women—the younger ones, anyway—as inconstant, although he did not elaborate. Ross, either more scandalized than Stuart or more

inclined to gossip (perhaps both), found them coarsely sensuous and shameless. Suitors could scarcely afford to be scrupulous about a potential bride's past. "It must be admitted that few marriages would occur if the young men wished to marry only chaste young women, for girls have no qualms about their conduct and their parents give them complete liberty in that respect," Franchère wrote. (The Indians in this at least did not differ greatly from the whites. By some estimates fully a third of early nineteenth-century American brides were pregnant on their wedding day.) But once a marriage had been contracted, the spouses remained faithful. Adultery was rare—and punishable, for offending women, by death.[32]

No traveler to the lower Columbia failed to mention the coastal tribes' most striking physical characteristic. As a matter of common practice, a mother placed her baby's head into a wooden press, leaving the contraption in place long enough for "a ridge [to be] raised from ear to ear, giving the head the form of a wedge," wrote Ross. "The more acute the angle, the greater the beauty," he went on. The result shocked many whites at first, although Ross for one accepted head-flattening with cosmopolitan tolerance. "All nations have their peculiar prejudices," he remarked. "The law of the land compels a South-Sea Islander to pull out a tooth; a northern Indian cuts a joint off his finger; national usage obliges a Chinese lady to deform her feet; an English lady, under the influence of fashion, compresses her waist; while a Chinook lady deforms her head." Ross stressed that the coastal Indians alone observed the custom, never those of the interior.[33]

The river tribes organized their lives and rituals around fish. Columbia River salmon—the famous chinook *(Oncorhynchus tshawytscha),* the best-known of the species and, according to Stuart, "by far the finest fish I ever beheld"—appeared in vast shoals from late May through the middle of August, surging relentlessly upstream toward their spawning grounds in the upper Columbia basin a thousand miles from the Pacific. David Thompson described the reproductive process in detail. "The female with her head cleared away the gravel, and made a hole to deposit her spawn in, perhaps an inch or more in depth by a foot in length; which done, the male then passed over it several times, when both covered the hole up with gravel," he wrote. Citing Salish Indian sources, Thompson reported that no salmon ever

returned to the sea. He had seen, in spawning season, the riverbanks covered for miles with lean and gasping fish.[34]

The native fishermen took salmon with what Franchère described as a dart—actually a sort of harpoon, a ½-inch iron point attached to two pieces of curved bone at the end of a shaft—or with nettle-fiber nets 80 to 100 fathoms in length. Individual fishermen generally used hook and line for sturgeon which, although large (the Astorians claimed to have landed one that weighed 390 pounds *after* the eggs and intestines had been removed), rarely put up a struggle. Flotillas of canoes harvested smelt, spearing these fish—most flavorful creatures, Stuart found, "and so fat as to burn like a candle"—on the tines of long wooden rakes.[35] Smelt ran in early spring but traveled only 50 or so miles upstream, so the lower tribes valued it for trade with the interior Indians. Sturgeon, too, were a springtime catch.

Another salmon species, dubbed the "dog-tooth," entered the Columbia in late summer. This fish *(Oncorhynchus keta)* had a double row of sharp teeth, each tooth about ½-inch long, and, remarked Franchère, "a hooked nose like the beak of a parrot."[36] Males used the teeth to fight for a chance to spawn. The Astorians regarded the dog-tooth as inferior owing to its insipid flavor. All the same, the Columbia tribes caught it in vast amounts, smoking and storing it for the winter.

Mystically attached to salmon, the tribes of the Columbia treated it solemnly in sacrament and fetish. They believed that after the Creator set the world in motion a second divinity, sometimes represented as an immense and protean bird, animated men, taught them to make tools and canoes, and caused the salmon to gather so they could collect as many as they needed. The Indians conceived the afterlife, for the virtuous, as a country of abundant fish. They followed a strict and recondite liturgy for the first ten days or so of the salmon run. Fishermen reverently placed sand in the mouth of the first fish caught and rubbed its skin with moss. They then cut it lengthwise and removed the heart and eyes. "Salmon are never allowed to be cut crosswise, nor boiled, but roasted," Ross observed, "nor are they allowed to be sold without the heart first being taken out, nor to be kept overnight; but all must be consumed or eaten the day they are taken out of the water." In the early days at Astoria, the Chinooks and the Clatsops brought the traders only a small number of salmon at a time, "fearing

that we would cut them crosswise and believing that if we did so," wrote Franchère, "the river would be obstructed and the fishing useless." The chiefs agreed to supply the Astorians with salmon in quantity only after the Astorians swore to cut it lengthwise, bake it, and not eat any before sunset.[37]

With the autumn dispersal of the tribes, the Astorians were left to shift for themselves. Robert Stuart sailed in *Dolly* to gather rations and trade with the dozen or so Clackamas villages upstream. He returned with little to show for his efforts. Although game seemed plentiful, heavy rains and the denseness of the forest made hunting difficult. Rations remained scanty. In early December, Stuart, a guide, and several voyageurs embarked on a reconnaissance of the Willamette Valley. They regained Astoria in time for a celebration of the new year. The rains ceased, the clouds dissolved, and the sun shone brightly on January 1, 1812, the Astorians marking the holiday and the mild, bright weather with an extra allowance of rum, a three-gun cannon salute at sunrise, another salute at sunset, and an evening of dancing.

TWO CANOES FILLED WITH WHITES approached the post near sunset on January 18—the advance guard, it turned out, of Wilson Price Hunt's long-overdue cross-country expedition. Donald Mackenzie and half a dozen others had split from Hunt's main body at Cauldron Linn on the Snake River in present south-central Idaho. From there the voyage had been a terrible ordeal. For days at a stretch Mackenzie and his men lived on roasted beaver skin and shoe leather. Mackenzie, wasted with hunger, skin hanging in folds, the fat that once quivered along his outsized frame all melted away, brought no word of the fate of the rest of the party. As it happened, Hunt's experiences were even more harrowing than Mackenzie's, if only because he endured them for several weeks longer.

Hunt's itinerary led him from Lachine in Quebec to the fur trading center of Mackinac in the straits connecting the Great Lakes Huron and Michigan, where he paused in the late summer of 1810 to add recruits from the transient community of trappers and woodsmen there. The quality and reliability of the labor pool proved disappointing. Most of the trappers had migrated to the island to recuperate after the rigors of a wilderness winter and were in a playful mood. "In the morning they were found drinking, at noon drunk, and in the night

seldom sober," Alexander Ross wrote.[38] Along with the feckless woodsmen, the British-born printer's apprentice turned naturalist Thomas Nuttall, twenty-four years old, joined Hunt at Mackinac. The Philadelphia botanist Benjamin Smith Barton, cataloger of specimens from the Lewis and Clark expedition, sent the energetic but inexperienced Nuttall west to augment the collection with new species from the Great Lakes region and the northern Plains. Nuttall planned to travel with the Astorians into Sioux country, collecting, describing, and categorizing as far as the Great Bend of the Missouri.

Hunt pushed on to St. Louis in August via Green Bay and the Fox, Wisconsin, and Mississippi Rivers. After discharging a number of the French Canadians and replacing them with Americans, he struck north from St. Louis on October 21 in a sundry flotilla of three river craft, one of them a retired Mohawk River transport known as a Schenectady barge. The expedition settled into winter quarters a month later at the mouth of the Nodaway River, some 450 miles up the Missouri.

Nuttall and another British naturalist, John Bradbury, joined Hunt on the Nodaway when the journey resumed in April 1811. An eminent scientist, forty-four years old in 1811, Bradbury was a protégé of the venerable Sir Joseph Banks, for forty years president of the Royal Society and a veteran of Captain Cook's voyage to Tahiti to observe the transit of Venus in 1769. On Thomas Jefferson's recommendation, Bradbury had chosen St. Louis for his operational base. He met Hunt there in the autumn of 1810 and at once accepted the Astorian's offer of a place in the expedition.

Nuttall and Bradbury would be among the first trained scientists to systematically investigate the natural history of the West. Nuttall amused Hunt's Canadians with his antics as a specimen-hunter. He uprooted samples with his gun barrel, and he developed a habit of wandering far afield in his botanizing, trusting to luck and bemused Indians for his safety. "He went groping and stumbling along among a wilderness of sweets, forgetful of everything but his immediate pursuit," Washington Irving wrote of Nuttall. "The Canadian voyageurs used to make merry among themselves at his expense, regarding him as some whimsical kind of madman."[39] They designated him, inevitably, *le fou*, and he rarely disappointed them.

Like the naturalists, the twenty-eight-year-old Hunt had no experience of wilderness travel, although—as Irving noted—he could draw

on a secondhand knowledge of the trade and of the Plains Indians from his years as a merchant in St. Louis. And his second-in-command, Mackenzie, a veteran North Wester, was an expert woodsman, even if he did engage in titanic struggles to heave his 300-pound body in and out of the boats. The early stages of the journey passed uneventfully. The party, now in four boats, one mounted with a swivel gun Lewis and Clark style, negotiated a safe passage of Sioux territory and reached the Arikara Villages on June 12.[40] Here Hunt broke the journey for more than a month to negotiate for horses for the overland march to the Wind River country.

The naturalists collected furiously during this interval. Bradbury, a skilled marksman, fired at prairie dogs; like the Columbia River seals, they recognized the flash "and darted with surprising quickness into their holes before the shot could reach them." He and Nuttall carefully observed Arikara manners and customs. Like most whites, Bradbury found native attitudes toward sexual matters jarring. When Mackenzie turned up in a green frock coat, Arikara women offered him sex in exchange for pieces of it. "This occasioned much mirth betwixt us, and on my part a pretended alarm that his coat should become a *spencer*," that is, a woman's garment, Bradbury remarked. Sexual transactions served two purposes, he concluded: they were a mark of hospitality as well as a means by which the Arikaras obtained goods they valued.[41]

In mid-July, Nuttall and Bradbury packed away their skins and specimens—Bradbury alone planned to travel with several thousand living plants—and prepared to turn back for St. Louis. Hunt resumed the westward trek on July 18, 1811, with sixty-one men; Marie l'Ayvoise, the pregnant Iowa Indian wife of his interpreter, Pierre Dorion; and the Dorions' two children. The peaks of the Big Horn Mountains (in present north-central Wyoming) came into view in mid-August. A three-week march brought the Astorians to the Wind River. Crossing the Rockies via Union Pass north of Gannett Peak in the Wind River Range on September 16, they arrived at the landmark of Henry's Fort, a ruined trapper post on a tributary of the Snake River, on October 9.[42]

Here Hunt calculated his next move. Against the advice of the local Indians, he elected to abandon the horses and try a descent of the turbulent Snake in canoes. Some of his own men were skeptical, too: the minor partner Joseph Miller, who had been in a state of

barely suppressed rebellion for weeks, now announced his intention to desert Hunt and join a trapper detachment for the winter season. Something of a greenhorn, Miller was unlikely material for a wilderness trapper, but Hunt had no authority to prevent his going, and after a long argument agreed to outfit him with traps, provisions, and horses. Miller thus set out for the beaver streams with the veteran hunters John Hoback, Jacob Rezner, and Edward Robinson. Hunt turned to more urgent tasks, putting some of the people to work building a river fleet while directing others to prepare caches for trade goods and other impedimenta to be left behind.

Inclement weather set in, rain and sleet along the river and snow in the higher elevations. Leaving their seventy-seven horses in the care of two young Snake Indians, the Astorians pushed into the stream in fifteen canoes on October 19. Snow fell all day, the flakes dropping with a hiss into the pale green water. They made good progress: thirty miles the first day, steady going for the next couple of days, and seventy-five miles on October 23. Then the water began to foam, the first intimation of trouble ahead. Obstructions, narrows, and rapids made frequent portages necessary. The Snake entered wild and rocky country; over one two-day stretch, Hunt's band covered just eight miles. When Ramsay Crooks's canoe struck a rock and the powerful current swept a voyageur to his death, Hunt realized he would have to discard the vessels and continue on foot.[43]

The overlanders had reached the Cauldron Linn. The river here ran between two ledges of rock fewer than thirty feet apart, exploding through the cleft with terrific violence. Making camp nearby, Hunt sent a party ahead to scout the river. For forty miles or more the Snake writhed between towering ledges, all falls and rapids; except for one or two places, the scouts reported, it appeared to be impossible to descend from the ridge to the banks. Accidents to the canoes had left Hunt with only five days' rations. He now divided his command, sending detachments off in different directions in search of pack animals and provisions. Donald Mackenzie with five men pushed north and west across the plain. With the main body of thirty-one men plus Dorion's family, Hunt decided to follow the inflexions of the Snake.

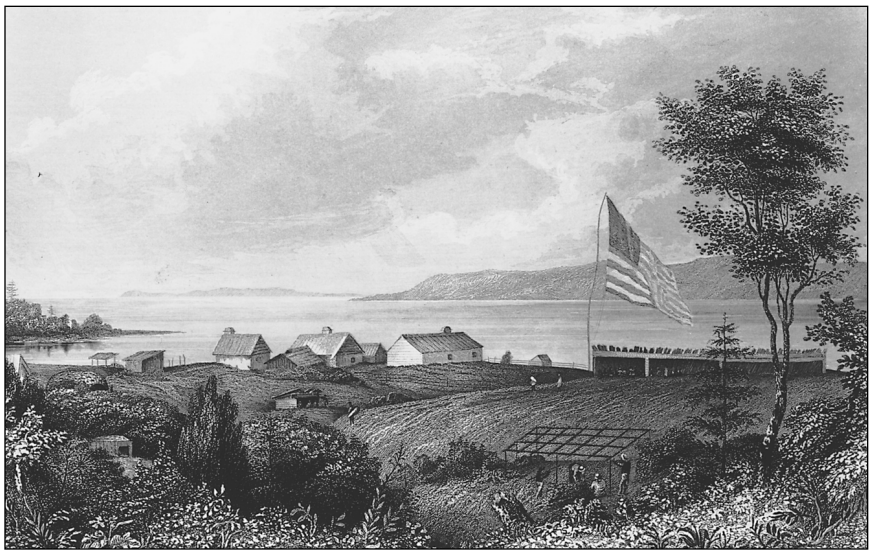
The little band advanced painfully over the bare rock of the rift. The Columbia outpost—if it even existed—lay nearly a thousand miles distant still. Winter was approaching. The men had caught and

dried a few fish at Cauldron Linn, working the river at night with spears by the light of cedar torches. The tails and bellies of beaver provided further sustenance. Hunt distributed the last of the provender on November 8: 40 pounds of Indian corn, 20 pounds of grease, 5 pounds of gluey portable soup, and 150 pounds of dried meat. Each man carried a 20-pound pack along with his own equipment. The Astorians now divided again. Hunt with half the party marched along the northern bank, following a rocky trace two hundred feet above the river. Crooks led the other half along the southern bank.

They survived only by the good will of itinerant Shoshones. Hunt's men managed to trade every few days for salmon and dog ("well-flavored and hearty," the men found dog meat); in the intervals they subsisted on handfuls of parched corn. Firewood, even sagebrush, was scarce. The men suffered torments of thirst. Rain fell finally on November 20—"timely," Hunt observed in his diary, "as several Canadians had begun to drink their urine." The river, though nearly always in sight, coursed far below in the canyon, tantalizingly out of reach. The spawning season had ended now; putrefying salmon lined both banks, and the odor of corruption tainted the atmosphere.[44]

Toward the end of November Hunt decided to leave the river and steer north over the lava flows. Encountering Shoshones, he traded for dogs and a pair of packhorses. Somehow Dorion contrived to acquire a nag to carry his wife. The route led through a defile toward the mountains. With only beaver and an occasional mule deer for food, Hunt ordered one of the horses destroyed. "I ate it reluctantly," he wrote, "because of my fondness for the poor beast." Snow lay waist deep in the uplands. Frozen blackberries and chokecherries supplemented what little meat the hunters managed to bring in.[45]

Regaining contact with Ramsay Crooks and his half-starved contingent on December 6, Hunt found Crooks so enfeebled he could barely walk. There seemed nothing to do but turn back for the Shoshone lodges. Hunt approached Pierre Dorion about slaughtering his crowbait horse. Dorion refused. "What was singular," wrote Irving, "the men, though suffering such pinching hunger, interfered in favor of the horse." Half dead with hunger, the band approached a Shoshone camp on the evening of December 10. Shouting and firing into the air, they drove off the startled Indians and seized five of their horses.



This engraving from an A. T. Agate drawing shows Fort Astoria with the U.S. color waving in the middle ground, the Columbia and the uplands on the far shore in the background. The British North West Company and later the Hudson's Bay Company occupied the post, known to Britons as Fort George, after the War of 1812. (Library of Congress)

Hunt refused to give up the attempt on the mountains. He had little choice, for to stay in place was to perish of hunger or exposure. With insults, flattery, and bribes, he browbeat three Shoshones into accompanying the party as guides, and in readiness for the march ordered two horses killed and their skins sewn together to make a raft for a last crossing of the detestable Snake. Leaving Crooks behind, the tattered band quit the river on December 23 and slouched northwestward toward the Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon. Marie Dorion went into labor on December 30 and delivered safely within a few hours. She rested a day, then caught up to the band. "One would have said, from her air, that nothing had happened to her," Hunt remarked.[46] The babe, however, lived only a few days.

A hard slog through deep snows under leaden skies brought Hunt and his men to the summit of the last ridge of the Blues on January 6, 1812. The sun appeared for the first time in weeks, and they could see the plain of the Columbia stretching before them, with distant views of Mount Hood to the west. After a long descent, they paused for a few days' rest in a Cayuse/Tushepaw encampment along the

Umatilla River, then pushed on to the Columbia itself, arriving on the southern bank on January 21, nine months and a precisely calculated 1,751 miles after leaving the Arikara villages on the Missouri. The river here flowed 1,320 yards wide between treeless banks. The January air struck mild, like autumn in the middle states of the Atlantic coast.

Fish and fat dogs were plentiful now. Local Indians reported a party of whites had passed some weeks before: Mackenzie's band, surely. They told him, too, of a large house enclosed in palisades the whites had built near the river's mouth—Astoria? Hunt had completed the voyage, to that extent vindicating Astor's decision to entrust the command to him. He could congratulate himself on surviving at least, and on having been the first white man to lead a party through Union Pass of the Rockies. At The Dalles he learned of the *Tonquin* disaster in Nootka Sound and of David Stuart's founding of the post at Okanogan. In tough negotiations with the relentless Wascos, Hunt bought several canoes and embarked on the last stage of the journey on February 5. The flotilla reached Astoria ten days and a series of rain- and windstorms later. A trim little shallop lay at anchor in the bay below the guns of the fort.

A SENTRY HIGH in the Astoria bastion reported a sail in the offing: J. J. Astor's ship *Beaver*; so it turned out to be, carrying provisions, trade goods, and thirty-six clerks and laborers to reinforce the Columbia depot. *Beaver*'s master, Cornelius Sowle, laid the ship in toward the bar early in May 1812 after a seven-month voyage from New York. With baffling winds, Sowle stood off the mouth of the great river till the ninth, when he launched the cutter to sound the passage. *Beaver* ground over the shoals in midafternoon, striking twice without damage, and came to anchor in Baker Bay.

Sowle brought formal confirmation, too, of the loss of *Tonquin* off the wild northern shore of Vancouver Island. True to type to the last, Jonathan Thorn had mortally offended one of the Nootka chiefs, slapping him across the face with an otter skin for some trifling offense and ordering him off the ship. Indian traders returned the next day with skins; against the advice of Donald McKay and others, Thorn permitted a crowd of them aboard. Belatedly recognizing the danger, he bawled out orders to clear the ship and come to sail. The Indians struck as though on cue, attacking with war clubs and knives. The

captain, McKay, and sixteen crewmen were killed or mortally wounded in the first wave of the assault. Five survivors barricaded themselves in a cabin and held out until dark. Four of them jumped ship during the night and were caught later and put to death. The fifth, a seaman named Lewis, invited the Nootkas aboard in the morning and, in an act of self-immolation, touched a light to the powder magazine. The explosion destroyed Lewis, *Tonquin*, and, by report, upward of a hundred Indians.

The new arrivals off *Beaver* found the Astorians discouraged about prospects for the trading enterprise. Five partners, 9 clerks, and 90 artisans and voyageurs were in residence; the *Beaver* party swelled the muster roll to 140, a substantial population for an uncultivated country to support. All the same, for newcomer Ross Cox, a twenty-nine-year-old Dublin-born ex-North Wester, Astoria was a picture of luxury after thirty weeks at sea. He savored the feel of the hard, unyielding earth underfoot. The buildings—barracks, refectory, warehouses, a forge, and a carpenter's workshop—were sturdy, warm, and dry. Bateaux and canoes could unload their cargoes on the workmanlike landing stage even at low water. The kitchen garden flourished in Astoria's second spring. Cox played amateur ethnologist, touring native villages; making midnight excursions to burial places in search of specimen skulls; and venturing out to the ruins of Lewis and Clark's Fort Clatsop, overgrown now with parasite creepers. Like earlier arrivals, though, Cox found the claustral woods unnerving. "Their deep and impervious gloom resembles the silence of solitude and death," he thought. Sometimes even the birds refused to sing.[47]

Veteran Astorians were too full of business to brood. Robert Stuart had set out upriver in late March at the head of a relief party for the Okanogan post, traveling part of the way with the clerk John Reed, bound overland for New York and carrying a polished tin case with dispatches for John Jacob Astor. A party of Wasco Indians armed with bows and arrows and battle-axes ambushed Reed along the portage at the Long Narrows above The Dalles and were poised to dismember him when Stuart, hearing the war whoop, doubled back with seven or eight men and drove them off. Reed survived a thump on the head, but the Indians bolted with his rifle, pistols, and the gleaming dispatch box. Stuart detached a couple of men to escort the addled Reed back to Astoria and pushed on without further incident to the Okanogan.

Stuart found Alexander Ross recovering from a melancholy winter alone at the Okanogan station. The start had been auspicious, with the blaze of the Great Comet of 1811 across the sky. Ross observed it a handsbreadth above the horizon at twilight of evening on August 31, "a very brilliant comet with a tail about 10 degrees long." The Sinkaiekt natives of the region explained that the Good Spirit sent it to announce Ross's arrival and foretell comfort and prosperity. The omen proved faulty, or anyway untimely. In October, David Stuart with three men marched northward on a fur reconnaissance into present British Columbia, leaving Ross at Okanogan with only "a little Spanish pet dog from Monterey, called Weasel" for company for the entire winter—188 days, by his count.[48]

"Every day seemed a week, every night a month," he wrote. "I pined, I languished, my head turned gray, and in a brief space ten years were added to my age. Yet man is born to endure, and my only consolation was in my Bible."[49]

The Sinkaiekts, "the people of the water that does not freeze," were a horse tribe, subsistence hunters, fishers, and gatherers. They struck Ross as friendly at first, at peace with each other and their neighbors, and managing comfortably in their temperate surroundings. Ross improved the time working out a Sinkaiekt vocabulary and establishing a trading routine with native trappers. After a while he began to notice a change in the Indians' attitude. They loitered about the post, as though waiting for something to happen. The men neglected their hunting. The evenings were interminable and, as the winter advanced, ghost-ridden, too. Shrill whoops and enigmatic chants sounded suddenly out of the depths of the night.

Ross wondered whether the racket accompanied some ritual, or perhaps signaled the prelude to an assault. Alone, barricaded in his ramshackle hut, guns freshly primed at bedtime each night, Ross experienced a kind of slow-motion loss of nerve. He gradually worked himself up to a full pitch of terror. Yet the Indians never harmed him. In fact, once they settled into a winter routine, the Sinkaiekt trappers delivered furs regularly. At the time of David Stuart's return, on March 22, 1812, Ross had procured 1,550 beaver pelts and otter skins worth 2,250 pounds sterling in Canton, at a cost to J. J. Astor of only 5½ pence each.

He had grown accustomed to isolation, if not reconciled to it, by the time David Stuart returned from the north and Robert Stuart

arrived from Astoria. Ross saw them both off with their cargo of peltries after a few days' rest. The Stuarts witnessed a minor miracle on the homebound journey when, just below the junction of the Snake and the Columbia, the wraithlike forms of Ramsay Crooks and John Day materialized out of the wilds. Stragglers from Hunt's voyage, they had managed, with Indian help, to survive the winter. The combined party reached the haven of Astoria on May 11, two days after *Beaver*'s arrival. Along with Crooks and Day, long since given up for dead, the Stuarts safely delivered some two thousand skins from the Okanogan station.

The partners met in conclave a few weeks later to fix assignments for the new trapping and trading year. The Astorians resolved to move aggressively into the interior to intensify competitive pressure on the North Westers. David Stuart would return to the Thompson's River region for the winter of 1812–1813, leaving Ross to suffer Okanogan's wind-scoured days and haunted nights in solitude for another season. Donald Mackenzie planned to penetrate the country of the Blackfeet, a brave, bellicose, and incorruptible tribe that would show scant interest in Astor's trumpery goods, still less in following trap lines along the icy streams of the Idaho high country. With Reed's journey aborted, the partners directed Robert Stuart to strike overland for St. Louis with dispatches for Astor, who remained in a state of anxious ignorance about affairs at the Columbia outpost. Stuart would carry word of the successful establishment of Astoria and the interior posts; the destruction of *Tonquin;* the belated appearance of Hunt's cross-country party; and the arrival of *Beaver*.

A brisk salute from the four-pounder cannon at Fort Astoria sent the expeditions on their way on the morning of June 29, 1812. The flotilla consisted of two barges and ten canoes, with Mackenzie and David Stuart and their clerks, voyageurs, and Sandwich Islanders occupying all but one of the vessels. Robert Stuart embarked in the tenth canoe with his small band: Ramsay Crooks, the disaffected ex-partner Robert McLellan, hunters Benjamin Jones and John Day, and the voyageurs André Vallée and François Leclerc. It became apparent at once that Day had not regained his equilibrium after the ordeal of the previous winter. He seemed morose and churlish, Robert Stuart thought, and gibbered at odd moments.

With a following wind, the canoes hurried past the mouth of the Cowlitz River on the forenoon of July 2 and reached Deer Island,

opposite the Willamette, at sunset. Here Day became unstrung entirely. He prowled about the camp muttering threats of self-murder, then settled into a thundery silence. The others ostentatiously ignored him. Rising toward daybreak, he seized a brace of loaded pistols, waved one of them in the direction of his temple, and fired. Two or three of the people shucked their blankets, tackled the dazed but only lightly wounded Day, and pinned him to the ground before he could do further damage. Stuart sent him back to Astoria under an Indian escort later in the day.

The favorable breeze swept the flotilla smartly eastward toward the Columbia River gorge until the sixth, when the weather abruptly turned contrary. Heavy rains delayed the attempt on the Cascades, and the Astorians, now 153 miles from the fort, according to the penciled marginal notes in Stuart's manuscript journal, advanced just three miles in three days. The glacial pace allowed them plenty of time to admire the long, vaporous flumes of the group of cataracts east of the mouth of the Sandy River, among them a two-tiered falls (today's Bridal Veil) and another with an elegant dissolving cascade of more than two hundred yards (present Multnomah). The crags and projecting rock faces that flanked the cataracts suggested to Stuart the antique towers and fortifications of his native Scotland.

But the current raced like a mill sluice there, and the several hundred Indians camped in the neighborhood for the salmon fishing were the antithesis of picturesque. Ross Cox found them hideous, with bad teeth and sore eyes. Muskets were broken out as a precaution, and the men donned arrowproof elkskin jerkins. "They are saucy independent rascals, will steal when they can, and pillage whenever a weak party falls into their clutches," Stuart complained. As ever, the river's bounty, its surpassingly generous gifts, astounded the whites. Plying a scoop net from a doubtful-looking scaffold that extended into the stream, Indian fishermen harvested salmon in prodigious numbers. Stuart judged that an experienced hand could catch at least five hundred a day.[50]

The journey here became something of an ordeal. The ascent from the first rapid to the Long Narrows, a distance of about eighty miles, consumed fifteen days. After yet another in an interminable series of portages, the Astorians late on July 16 camped for the night on a sand beach a couple miles below the mouth of the Deschutes

River. The natives seemed friendlier here, less rapacious, and only a few carried weapons. Robert Stuart doled out tobacco and other presents to the principal chiefs. They finally cleared Celillo Falls (now vanished beneath a placid sheet of reservoir) on the eighteenth and passed into a sparser and drier country, with fewer pines and more scrub oak.

From Celillo Falls onward, the pace quickened. The expedition on July 21 made eighteen miles despite the necessity for two short portages, then covered forty-five miles with a strong wind abaft on the twenty-second. The landscape assumed a forsaken aspect, "without a stick of wood," Stuart remarked, "and the soil is an entire desert of sand, even on the top of the bluffs." Rattlesnakes appeared in quantity. On the theory that the odor of tobacco repelled them, the men slashed open a bale and strewed loose leaves around the campsites. The sun beat down relentlessly out of an immense sky, and there was a jagged edge to the torrid air. Stuart began to scout for horses for the overland journey. He fell in with a party of Indians near the junction of the Walla Walla River and the Columbia; they were cordial and inclined to trade, although they struck him as materially less well off than the fish Indians downstream. All the same, he pushed on to their village. The Wallawalla tribe, about two hundred strong, built an enormous bonfire and staged an elaborate dance that night to welcome the travelers. The next day Stuart obtained four good horses for merchandise to the value of $179.82.[51]

There, 384 miles upriver from Astoria, the parties divided, the Mackenzie and David Stuart contingents striking north for the mouth of the Snake River. Robert Stuart negotiated for another dozen or so horses, while the people prepared packsaddles and packages for the march. His band started early on July 31 for the hills southeast of the Columbia. The sun heaved up and scorched the desert landscape. A light breeze blew with just enough velocity to raise suffocating clouds of dust. To all appearances no rain had descended on these barrens since Noah's time.

A succession of dry ravines, tedious to negotiate, lay athwart the route. Early in the afternoon Leclerc, suffering terribly from thirst, paused to drink his own urine—a portent of hardships to come. Stuart drove the men on in search of water: thirty miles for the day, forty, and still nothing in view but round, gray hills and a purpling sky to

the east. They raised the Umatilla River near present Pendleton, Oregon, with the last of the light. Men and horses splashed into the cool, clear stream and lapped gratefully.[52]

With the succession of weary days, the Astorians came to acknowledge the insignificance of their presence in a hostile and indifferent land. For all his Scots fortitude and high Presbyterian sense of duty, Stuart would cease to care at times whether he delivered Astor's mail, or indeed whether he lived or died. Twenty-seven years old in 1812, the acquisitive, principled, and physically indestructible son of a Scots crofter, he had no way of knowing that his ordeal would be the chief legacy of the Astor enterprise. As far as he could tell, he left no tracks in this pitiless landscape. Although the credit (or blame, depending on one's point of view) would go elsewhere, Stuart and his men would be the first known whites to follow a trace from the Pacific through South Pass of the Rocky Mountains and down the Platte River—a route that would prove practical for wagons and, eventually, for streams of ordinary travelers.

The expedition advanced through dense stands of yellow pine into the Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon. Leaving the shadows of the woods for a region of grassy hills and meadows, Stuart followed a faint track that led to the delectable Grande Ronde, a perfect green disk of rich grass, clover, and wild flax dropped among the mountain peaks. Dubbing this place, a shared grazing land for the Cayuse, Nez Perce, and Umatilla tribes, the "big flat," he chose a campsite along the right bank of the Grande Ronde River and dispatched the hunters, who presently returned with two salmon and a beaver. The men remained in camp for two days, mending saddles and recruiting their strength for the approach to the stone and sage deserts of the Snake River country.

Stuart forced the pace when the march resumed: twenty miles on August 7, twenty-three miles on the eighth, twenty-six miles on the ninth. He counted no fewer than nineteen antelope slanting along the hills above Alder Creek—so rare a sight that he did not at first trust his eyes. The creatures were bashful, the hunters' fieldcraft deficient. Nobody managed to creep close enough to squeeze off a shot. The next day brought them to the Burnt River and a rough track weaving southeasterly through rocky hills that tumbled down to the stream's edge. Stuart noted professionally that the river, here thirty yards wide and lined with willow, supported plenty of beaver.

The Astorians struck the Snake below present Farewell Bend State Park, Oregon, on August 12. Beyond the high, sandy far bank lay the country of the Nez Perces and their neighbors the misnamed Flatheads, who emphatically denied that their ancestors had ever distorted the skulls of their young. The Nez Perces seemed peaceable if haughty and imperious; they tended, too, to demand high prices for their horses. The route followed the southern bank of the Snake through broad saltwood bottomlands. Daytime temperatures soared into the nineties, sapping the people's energies. Mosquitoes swarmed at night. Stuart agreed to a steep price for an Indian guide to lead the party over the mountains: a pistol, a blue blanket, an ax, a knife, an awl, a fathom's length of blue beads, a looking glass, and a quantity of powder and ball. The guide presently disappeared, taking Stuart's horse with him.

Settling into a punishing routine, the Astorians followed a stony trace that faintly suggested the eastward route. A hot, dry wind breathed heavily over the sun-blasted Snake River Plain. The region seemed reaved of life, although in fact it carried a steady traffic of compulsively mobile Shoshones, so the sound of human voices on the sultry afternoon of August 20, voices speaking *English,* startled and unnerved Stuart and his band. It was as though the rocks had been given tongue. A moment later Joseph Miller materialized like an apparition from a narrow band of willows along the riverbank. Close behind followed Hoback, Rezner, and Robinson, who with Miller had deserted Wilson Price Hunt's expedition the year before.

The castaways emerged from the woods naked as worms, sunshriveled, and skeletal. An outlaw band of Arapaho had stolen their packaged peltries, most of their clothing, and their horses the previous winter. They had been wandering on foot ever since, living almost exclusively upon fish.[53] For all their misadventures, though, Miller and his shag-bearded companions had taken careful note of beaver stocks as they tramped along the western verges of the Rockies: they were abundant, Miller told Stuart, and prime in both size and quality. All the same, the trappers in the full flush of a joyous reunion decided to accompany the Astorians to St. Louis. Stuart thus began to negotiate for remounts. The inhabitants of these sterile hills were poor, though—even now, during the fishing season—and averse to trading away their equine capital. But they had little else to offer in exchange for the whites' alluring stocks of awls and beads. Stuart

finally argued a Shoshone band into swapping two fresh animals for two of his jaded beasts and other considerations.

A two-day march over rough ground brought Stuart to "the Salmon Falls," a series of cascades (now diminished by damming downstream) in south-central Idaho east of the junction of the Big Wood River with the Snake. Here a hundred lodges of Shoshones were industriously killing and drying fish. Fishermen waded into the center of the falls at sunrise and slew the leaping frantic salmon with elkhorn spears attached to long willow poles. Miller, who had rested here briefly with Hunt in 1811, told Stuart he had seen the Indians destroy thousands of salmon in a few hours.

The trace veered cross-country away from the tortuous Snake through sand barrens and withered stands of wormwood. Stuart struck the river again on August 29 at Cauldron Linn, 1,011 miles from Astoria. He studied the frenzied channel from the high bluffs. The violence of the river's surge through the constricting rock generated a spray that Stuart likened to the ocean heaving itself upon a lee shore. The wreck of one of Hunt's canoes lay wedged among the boulders. Stuart suppressed the urge to descend, concluding that "nothing that walks on the earth" could pass between the base of the bluffs and the torrent. He pushed on for another dozen miles and pitched camp in a broad patch of good grass. With McLellan and Crooks he soon found the first six of Hunt's caches; they had been plundered, by wolves at first and later by Indians. Only a few weather-damaged books were strewn about. Nearby were three of Hunt's abandoned canoes, shattered and irreparable.[54]

The next day Stuart located the last three of the caches, these undisturbed and with a sufficient quantity of traps, dry goods, and ammunition to equip a small brigade for the winter hunt. Hoback, Rezner, and Robinson had reconsidered: they would try their chances in fur country again after all. Figuring he had seen enough of the wilderness and of Arapaho thieves to last a lifetime, Miller opted to continue on to St. Louis with Stuart. The men spent the last day of August in camp, making and mending for the onward journey. Stuart packed the greater part of the remaining trade goods he had carried from Astoria into the undamaged caches and saw the trappers off early on September 1. The country here leveled out, and the Astorians reeled off a steady fifteen and sometimes twenty miles a day. Stuart bought a dog, some dried salmon, and "an excellent sort of cake

made of pulverized roots and berries" from a Shoshone band. The men had long ago discarded any lingering inhibitions about eating dog flesh. It made a hearty meal, Stuart thought, and its fat proved useful in frying the lean, flavorless trout that now had become a staple food.[55]

Reaching the fifty-foot cascade of American Falls (inundated with the building of a dam in 1925), Stuart found grass for the animals and wild cherries in abundance. Again quitting the Snake, the Astorians followed the line of the Portneuf River southeasterly along an Indian track that led through the hills to a broad sand and gravel flat. A further trek of eighteen miles bought them to the Bear River. Here, after an arduous day's march of forty-two miles, were fresh signs of buffalo (properly, the American bison) and rich, grassy bottoms where they could halt to bait the horses. They sighted antelope, but the herds, shy as ever, scampered out of range. The men continued to subsist mainly on trout, a diet insufficient in fat and calories to fuel the daily marches, even over tableland.

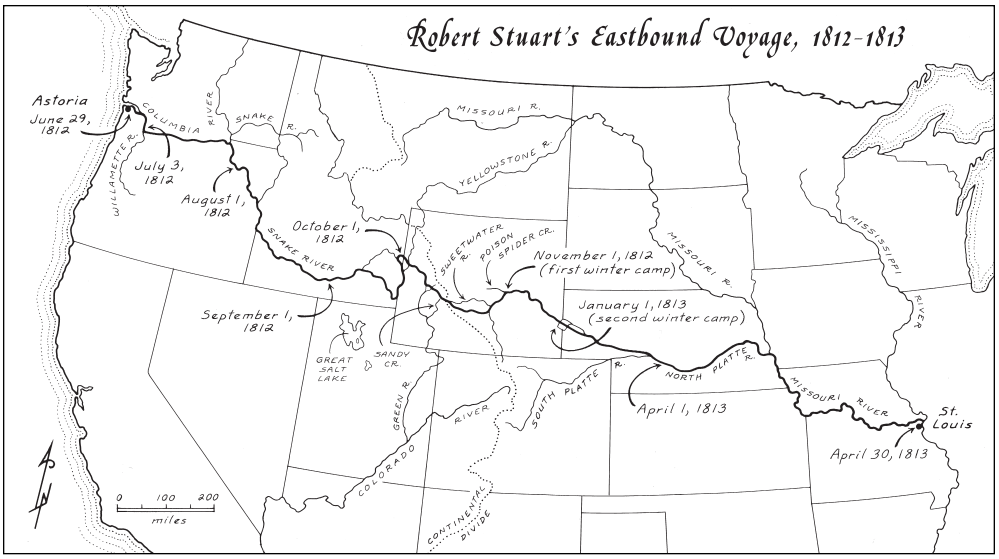
A party of Crow Indians paid a late-afternoon call on the camp, offering buffalo meat prefatory to serious bargaining for gunpowder. More Indians arrived as the evening advanced. There were adequate numbers now, twenty or more men, to overwhelm the whites. Even so, Stuart refused to trade powder for horses and doubled the camp watch, visibly annoying the Crows. "Their behavior was insolent in the extreme," he complained, "and indicated an evident intention to steal, if not rob—we kept close possession of our Arms, but notwithstanding our vigilance, they stole a Bag containing the greater part of our kitchen furniture." As a gesture of diplomacy, Stuart offered the Indians a present of a token twenty loads of powder before breaking camp in the morning.[56]

Partly to shake off the Crows, Stuart here decided to ignore Indian counsel about the best route to the southerly pass through the mountains and follow Miller's imprecise directions instead. He led the party away from the course of the Bear River—and what would become the Oregon Trail—not much more than a hundred miles in an air line from South Pass, the long, gentle upsweep that pierced the main chain of the Rockies. The detour would add four hundred miles and all but unendurable misery to the journey. Stuart struck mostly north along today's Idaho–Wyoming border, the Salt River Range on his right hand. Food stocks were nearly depleted and the weather had

turned cold. After a day or so Stuart began to question Miller's competence as a guide. Stuart concluded finally that the safest plan would be to abandon the search for a southward gap and strike north to Teton Pass, where he could pick up Hunt's track of the previous year. The band slogged north for eleven miles on September 17, then east for a stage, then due west. The next day, Stuart pushed fifteen miles to the northwest, hard going, too, much of it through scenes of beaver devastation in the upper Snake River bottomlands: quagmires and gloomy stands of dead trees.

Stuart rose after an uneasy night at first light on September 19 and made his way down to the river to drink. As he dropped to his knees on the muddy bank, a troop of mounted men swooped down upon the camp, scattering the pastured horses—even the hobbled ones. The attackers were Crows, Stuart guessed, probably the same band they had encountered on the Bear River. Whatever their identity, the raiders were adept at rustling horses. The leader had posted one warrior in position on a knoll commanding the route of the intended stampede, while the main band, on signal, gave the war whoop and charged. The initial ruckus spooked the horses. When the lookout on the knob put spurs to his mount, causing it to bolt as though in fright, the Astorians' skittish horses followed in hot pursuit. Simultaneously, a second contingent threatened the camp from the rear. Reluctantly allowing the horses to go, Stuart ordered the men to fall back to defend the baggage. From the knoll, the raider chieftain pointed emphatically to his backside in a taunt that required no translation. Jones, a marksman, begged Stuart for permission to bring him down. Stuart forbade Jones to fire, knowing he would never escape the Crows once blood had been drawn. The loss of the horses would take some laughing off. Even so, Stuart could not help admiring the Indians' tactical competence. In minutes they had driven away all his livestock at no cost to themselves.

The people consumed the last of the meat that evening. Jones trapped a beaver in the morning, and after making a meager breakfast of it, they packed for the onward journey. Not much of value remained, but Stuart nevertheless ordered everything they could not carry burned or dumped into the river. The route ran northwest, along the upper Snake. Jones caught another beaver, and over the next two evenings the men took eighty-five trout with rod and line. "They are poor and indifferent food," Stuart lamented, "and were it not for the



Robert Stuart's route eastbound from Fort Astoria to St. Louis, July 1812–April 1813. (© 2003 by Jackie Aher)

little meat we occasionally fall in with, I really think they would not even support life." He now changed plans again, determining to backtrack to the Snake River plain below Henry's Fort in hopes of trading for Shoshone horses. Pausing briefly to knock together handmade rafts, the Astorians pushed out into the river, reeling off twenty miles the first day. It seemed effortless, and nobody wanted to dwell on the fact that they were moving *away* from St. Louis and that winter was coming on fast. On the twenty-third, afloat on the swift and twisting stream, they made ten miles northwest, two miles northeast, another six miles northwest, a mile north, and another mile northeast. André Vallée shot a fat beaver, but it sank to the bottom before he could haul it aboard.[57]

By the last week of September, Stuart's erratic course brought the Astorians as far north and west as the verges of today's Yellowstone National Park. One of the hunters wounded an elk; the creature took to the river and drifted a mile downstream before they could finish it off and tow it to the bank. Skinning the carcass, they extracted a rifle ball and an arrow point, both fresh, thought Stuart, indicating the presence in the neighborhood of Blackfeet—a tribe to be avoided at all hazards. The meat was good, though, and Stuart called for a day's

halt to jerk and package it. Rain and hail clattered down through the afternoon, turning to snow with nightfall.

They lay in camp all day on September 28 to make ready for the resumption of the foot march. Stuart decided they had gone as far as they could go on the rafts, some ninety miles; the next day's trek carried them fifteen miles north over rough ground, still on course for Henry's Fort. By now the band had begun to show signs of disintegration. Stuart banned the use of firearms for fear of alerting the Blackfeet, so there was no fresh meat. With Ramsay Crooks feverish, Stuart's decision to abandon the Blackfeet walks and strike directly over the mountain they had been skirting meant that the others would be obliged to take up Crooks's burdens, perhaps even carry him, too. Complaining of bruised feet, the fractious McLellan mutinied, flatly refusing to haul the beaver trap any longer or its equivalent in dried meat. He abruptly announced that he would proceed on his own. As they labored uphill, the men caught glimpses of McLellan in his solitary progress across the plain below. They reached the snowclad summit in early afternoon. Willows lined a silvery river that coursed through a broad valley below. After a painful descent, they made an early camp along the stream.

Crooks's fever ran dangerously high despite regular dosings of castor oil; soon he would be too weak to walk. McLellan's defection seemed to embolden the others. Gathering in a circle around Stuart, they ticked off the perils of western travel: the inhospitability of the country, the murderous Blackfeet, lack of food, the harshness of the climate. Then they proposed going on without Crooks. As nothing else had done, the petition to abandon one of the party forced Stuart to confront not only the perils of the moment but larger questions of courage, duty, and endurance—as well as humankind's chronic inability to rise to the occasion.

"The phantoms which haunt a desert are want, misery and danger," he reflected, "the evils of dereliction rush upon the mind; man is made unwillingly acquainted with his own weakness, and meditation shows him only how little he can sustain and how little he can perform."[58]

Ben Jones killed five elk on October 2. With Crooks unfit to march, Stuart made a virtue of necessity and pitched camp near the carcasses. Having used up the last drops of castor oil, he subjected the invalid to an "Indian sweat," hoping to broil the fever out of him.

It seemed to help. When the march resumed on the fifth, Crooks managed to stay on his feet. The course lay south-southeast, for now Stuart had given up on Henry's Fort and meant to try Teton Pass before the snows blocked it. One of the hunters shot a grizzly bear with 3½ inches of fat on the rump—a life-sustaining supplement to the lean, tough elk.

The Astorians trudged southeast by east, camping near present Jackson, Wyoming, on October 7. They finished off the last of the elk on the eighth and made a paltry breakfast the next morning of a few trout and a small duck. Two days later they came upon Robert McLellan's camp and traces of his dinner of the night before—a bony wolf. Stuart and his men could not even manage that much, and they rolled themselves up in their blankets, hungry. An exhausting climb on the morning of the eleventh brought them to a ridge overlooking the Green River, a wide, shallow stream with a thin line of willows shivering along the banks. They had hoped for buffalo here, but there were no signs—and no supper on October 12 nor yet breakfast in the morning, for Jones found nothing but a beaver's forepaw in his trap. At daybreak Stuart espied a thin column of smoke on the horizon and sent Leclerc to investigate, praying it rose from an Indian camp. It turned out to be McLellan's halt; it had caught fire while he was off fishing. Like the main band, McLellan had eaten little or nothing for five days.

"He was lying on a parcel of straw," Stuart wrote, "emaciated and worn to a perfect skeleton, hardly able to raise his head or speak."[59]

Stuart distributed McLellan's things among the others, and they dragged him along a level, sandy track. With the people nearing the end of their strength, he signaled an early halt on the Green River north of the site of Daniel, Wyoming. There was no game, no prospect of a meal. Some of the men had been talking among themselves, and after a while one of the Canadians approached Stuart. Rifle in hand, he suggested they cast lots—Stuart, as leader, would be exempt—to determine which of the men would die to provide flesh so the others might live.

The notion froze Stuart's blood. When he found speech, he emphasized the man-eating taboo: crime upon mortal sin, premeditated murder, and cannibalism. Besides, the killing might well be purposeless: When the time came, would anyone actually be able to force human flesh down? The Canadian—Leclerc it was, although Stuart

did not name him—seemed to carry the others along with him. They were, after all, lost, stupid with fatigue, and raddled with hunger—and perhaps they had heard that a man ate like pork. The lifeless plain stretched away forever, and all of them would starve before they could clear it and enter abundant country. Stuart's words, his natural air of command, had failed to persuade. He reached for his rifle and leveled it at Leclerc's chest.

This broke the spell. The Canadian realized all of a sudden that if he persisted he might just as well draw the short end, so far as his own well-being was concerned. "He fell instantly on his knees and asked the whole party's pardon," wrote Stuart, "solemnly swearing he should never again suggest such a thought." All the same, Stuart relieved Leclerc of his rifle and placed him under guard. The incident deeply disturbed Stuart. Wrapped in his blanket, he mused resentfully upon the heedlessness of the comfortable and affluent. "Let him visit these regions of want and misery; his riches will prove an eye sore, and he will be taught the pleasure and advantage of prayer," he wrote later. Banal reflections, perhaps, yet Stuart was hungry, too, wasted, his stomach shrunken and in knots.[60]

In the event, his prayers proved effectual. The route of October 14 led east over a range of low hills, a spur of the Wind River Mountains. Buffalo bones piled up near old Indian encampments mocked the Astorians' hunger. Then, in the early afternoon, they stumbled upon deliverance in the form of an ancient buffalo bull. They killed and flayed it and hurled themselves on it in a frenzy, tearing at the flesh and consuming it raw. With the most violent pangs satisfied, they butchered the creature and carried the cuts to a proper camp along a stream. Stuart ordered a thin soup to be prepared and consumed before he would allow the people to attack the barbecued flesh.

The Wind River peaks nicked the eastern horizon, the main ridge vaulting up high, rugged, and treeless, masses of dark rock covered in places with snow. Famine still threatened. "Our living is of the meanest kind," Stuart wrote, "being poor Bull meat and Buck antelope, both too bad to be eat, except in cases of starvation." Yet again an encounter with Indians postponed disaster. The Astorians fell in with a band of Shoshones on October 18 and followed them to their encampment on a creek northeast of present Big Sandy, Wyoming. Although they themselves were short of animals—Crow raiders had

come calling—the Indians agreed to exchange a horse for a pistol, a breechcloth, an ax, a knife, a tin cup, two awls, and a few beads. Stuart also arranged to trade for a five-day supply of buffalo meat and much-needed leather moccasins.[61]

Stuart led a hard march of eighteen miles the next day in cruel weather, a bitter northeast wind blowing a snowstorm in his teeth. Vallée and Leclerc killed a young bull in the twilight. Snow fell steadily overnight, covering its clean-picked bones. Pushing southeast in the morning, Stuart realized he had reached the neighborhood of the Continental Divide. He made camp the night of October 22 at the western end of South Pass, 20 miles wide, a series of gently rising hills 7,550 feet above sea level at the summit. The men found enough dry aspen for a good fire against the numbing cold, but no water. At daybreak on the twenty-third Stuart ascended for 3 miles, then called a halt for breakfast at a spring of sweet water. A further climb of 5 miles brought him to an eminence he dubbed "big horn." The snow had drawn off. Below him stretched a broad, level plain, its reds, browns, and ochers glowing dully in the wintry morning light. Before long thousands of emigrant wagons would come crawling along these flats in a final approach to the South Pass gateway to the farther West.

ROBERT STUART'S BAND went into winter camp in early November near the junction of Poison Spider Creek and the North Platte River in central Wyoming. Wood, water, and game were plentiful there: hunting parties killed thirty-two buffalo on November 5 and another fifteen on the eighth. Then heavy snow fell and severe cold clamped down. The men hunkered down in their rough-built hut, six feet high, eight feet wide, and eighteen feet long, with "the fire in the middle, after the Indian fashion" and thick buffalo hides covering the roof and sides.[62]

The appearance of a party of Arapaho raiders in mid-December took Stuart unaware. They had other prey in mind, as it turned out: a band of Crows who had stolen their horses and abducted a number of their women. The Astorians fed them and sent them off with a quantity of jerked meat, although once again Stuart firmly rejected requests to trade weapons and ammunition. With two bands of potentially hostile Indians in the neighborhood, he reluctantly decided on a shift of base. Abandoning the improvised shelter that Stuart dubbed "our

chateau of indolence," the Astorians set out two hours before sunrise on December 13 and slogged across North Platte barrens lying under fifteen inches of powdery snow: twenty-two miles that first day; twenty-seven miles on the fourteenth, with only cottonwood bark as fodder for the horses; and twenty-six blister-raising miles on the fifteenth. Two weeks of arduous travel brought them to today's Wyoming–Nebraska border near the site of Torrington, Wyoming. When Leclerc, returning from a reconnaissance, reported he had found three trees large enough for canoes, Stuart resolved to pass the winter there. The men at once threw up scaffolds for drying meat—no need to fire-cure it; the sun and the pure, dry air of the high plains would jerk it for them—and commenced to build a hut. Stuart proclaimed a feast day for January 1, 1813, to mark the occasion.

"We destroyed an immoderate quantity of Buffalo Tongues, Puddings, and the choicest of the meat," he wrote in his journal. "Our stock of Virginia weed being totally exhausted, Mr. McLellan's tobacco pouch was cut up and smoked as a substitute, in commemoration of the New Year."[63]

As Stuart and his men were settling into quarters along the Platte, Astor partner Donald Mackenzie encountered a North West Company wintering party deep in the Oregon interior. The North Westers cheerfully passed along the news that the United States and Britain had been at war since the previous June, and that British warships were heading for the Columbia with orders to seize Astoria. Mackenzie at once turned back for the coast, reaching Astoria in mid-January 1813. He and Duncan McDougall went into emergency conference. Stocks of trade goods and rations were low, and with American ports presumably blocked up there would be faint hope of resupply. The partners decided to discontinue trade with the natives except in provisions—in any case, they already had more furs in the warehouses than they could carry away. Anyhow, McDougall had been skeptical for some time about Astoria's prospects. Mackenzie's report spurred him to act. They agreed between them to abandon the depot in the face of the British threat and shut down Pacific Fur Company operations by early summer. Mackenzie retraced his steps north and east to the outposts to inform David Stuart and John Clarke of the decision to fold the enterprise.

So passed the winter of 1813. Robert Stuart set out down the Platte in mid-March, on the last stage of his trek to the Mississippi. After a

few days the country began to take on a settled look. In the Indian villages, spring planting had begun—corn, beans, and pumpkins, a crop that, by the end of May, could be laid by while the tribes followed the seasonal migrations of the buffalo. They would return in August for the harvest, then move off again in pursuit of "black cattle" in the fall and winter. Crooks and Vallée visited an Otoe village on April 12 and returned with word of the nearly year-old war between the United States and Britain. Two itinerant French Canadian traders confirmed the news the next day. The pace quickened once the band reached the Missouri, the powerful spring current sweeping the boats along at the dizzying rate of sixty and more miles a day.

The Astorians arrived in St. Louis just before sunset on April 30, Astor's dispatches intact after a meandering voyage of 3,768 miles and 306 days.[64] Stuart pushed on to New York bearing optimistic reports for the chief. Astor by now had learned of the loss of *Tonquin* and of lesser disasters. The British, too, were on the prowl at sea, with blockade vessels off New York and a squadron rumored to be headed for the Pacific Northwest. Stuart delivered happier news: the safe arrival of Hunt's overland party and the establishment of a thriving trapping/trading network in the interior. With luck and resolution, Astoria might to be able to ride out the crisis.

In the event, the British—the frigate HMS *Phoebe* and the armed merchantman *Isaac Todd*—failed to turn up at the mouth of the Columbia on schedule in the early spring of 1813. Still, when the partners convened at Astoria in late June for the annual meeting, McDougall and Mackenzie once again pressed the issue of dismantling the operation. Ross Cox arrived from Spokane House in June to discover that "a total revolution had taken place in the affairs of the company." David Stuart, Clarke, and others put up a strong dissent, but in the end McDougall and Mackenzie carried the meeting. The partners voted to bring Astor's affairs on the Columbia to a close no later than June 1, 1814.[65]

The peripatetic Hunt reached Astoria from Oahu on August 20 in the chartered resupply brig *Albatross*. The partners' resolve to withdraw chagrined him, yet he may have been partly responsible for it. Hunt had judged the Snake country unsuitable for settlement and of modest value as a trapping ground. This view doubtless deepened McDougall's pessimism about long-term prospects in the Oregon country. In any case, Hunt reluctantly fell in with McDougall's scheme,

announcing he would sail away in *Albatross*, which had business elsewhere, hire another ship in the Sandwich Islands, and return to carry off the bundled furs and other property stored in the Astoria warehouses.

The collapse of the enterprise devastated Alexander Ross, Gabriel Franchère, Cox, and the other young clerks. "After having sailed the seas and having suffered all sorts of fatigue and privation, I lost in a moment all my hopes of a fortune," Franchère lamented. He decided to return to Canada with the spring express. Ross and Cox would seek positions with the North West Company. Ross blamed Astor for failing to support the operation adequately, and faulted McDougall and Mackenzie for backing down from the British without a fight. In his last assignment for the Pacific Fur Company, he padlocked the lonely post on the Okanogan. When he returned to Astoria early in 1814, Hunt gave him a $500 cash reward for his efforts. It was slight comfort; Ross hadn't joined Astor for a salary, but for the chance of a partner's profits.[66]

A flotilla of North Wester canoes rounded Tongue Point on October 7 and slid alongside the landing stage under Astoria's light cannon. The rival traders came as conquering heroes. Saying they expected the *Isaac Todd* letter of marque any day now, they hoisted a Union Jack over their camp and congratulated themselves on their forbearance in not slaughtering the garrison to a man and confiscating the goods. Some of the younger Astorians urged resistance; McDougall chose to bargain instead. By October 16 he and North Wester John McTavish had struck a deal: all Pacific Fur Company assets would go to the British firm for the sum of $58,291.02. McTavish acquired Astoria at a steep discount—he picked up 907 otter skins, for example, for 50 cents each, perhaps 10 percent of their market value. In the final tally, McDougall recouped no more than a third of Astoria's worth, by Irving's calculation; he estimated the value of the furs alone at $100,000.[67]

As McDougall and the North Westers signed off on their settlement, Astor continued to press—without success—for U.S. government protection for the Columbia trade: a naval presence and a small garrison for Astoria. After all, he expected a generous return on the millions he and several associates were raising for the U.S. Treasury to support the underfunded American war effort. "I hope yet the government will do something," Astor wrote ex-president Jefferson in mid-October. "In the meantime I am fearful that our people will be

driven off and perhaps dispersed and it may not be easy to get them together again." By then, they indeed had begun to scatter. Jefferson offered sympathy but nothing else. "It would be afflicting indeed should the English be able to break up the settlement," he wrote Astor. "They would not lose the sale of a bale of furs for the freedom of the whole world." Jefferson consoled Astor with the conceit that his name ultimately would be coupled with those of Columbus and Raleigh as the founder of a great empire.[68]

McDougall claimed that he negotiated the best deal he could, given the anticipated arrival of British forces. He never managed to persuade Astor. "Had our place and our property been fairly captured, I should have preferred it," he told Irving later. "I should not feel as if I were disgraced." The agreement, it turned out, also included a North West Company partnership for Duncan McDougall.[69]

It remained for the Astorians, the North Westers, and the long-awaited British naval forces to ring down the curtain on Pacific Fur Company affairs with a slapstick finale. A British warship swept over the Columbia bar on December 1 and dropped anchor in Baker Bay—the *Raccoon* sloop of war, twenty-six guns, Captain William Black commanding. Adverse weather confined Black to the sloop, and several days passed before he learned that the North Westers had baulked him of his prize. *Raccoon*'s barge finally put in below Astoria on December 12 and landed Black with a guard of five marines and four sailors.

"They had looked forward to finding several American ships loaded with furs and had counted in advance upon their share in the Astoria prize," Franchère remembered. "They found nothing, and their astonishment reached its peak when they discovered the establishment had been transferred to the North West Company and was under the British flag."[70]

Black had been doubly deceived, for he could see at once that even had the Americans opted to defend the fort, taking Astoria offered no prospect of glory. "Good lord," he said with disgust, "I could knock it over in two hours with a four-pounder!" All the same, Black made the most of his conquest. "Country and fort I have taken possession of and left in possession and charge North West Company," he reported to the Admiralty. "Enemies party quite broke up they have no settlement whatever on this River or Coast." Black arranged a formal ceremony to claim possession of the region for the British crown, summoning the paramount chiefs, running up the Union

Jack, and breaking a bottle of Madeira (the accounts are conflicting; it may have been port) over the flagstaff. His sailors fired a three-gun salute, the chiefs drank a toast to the king, and the captain renamed the place Fort George.[71]

So concluded Astor's venture. There was nothing farcical in the final toting up of accounts, material and moral. Some years afterward, Alexander Ross recapitulated Pacific Fur Company casualties from 1810 to 1814: eight men lost upon the Columbia bar; five lost during land expeditions; twenty-seven lost in the *Tonquin* explosion; eight lost when the supply ship *Lark* went down in a gale south of the Sandwich Islands; nine lost in various Snake Country excursions; one lost in the final departure; and so on—sixty-one dead altogether, "a tragical list."[72]

As for gain, the Astorians could boast of the plant and animal collections of Bradbury and Nuttall, the basis of a future U.S. claim to the Columbia, and Robert Stuart's discovery of South Pass. But Astor regarded Stuart's find as proprietary, although he did offer Jefferson a copy of Stuart's account of his adventures. "You may have seen by the publick papers the arrival of Mr. Stuart & others from the Columbia," he wrote. "He kept a journal of his voyage . . . which he left with the President [James Madison] should you feel a desire to read it."[73] A loyal soul, Stuart said nothing, then or later, about Astor's suppression of the journal. Another decade would pass before the mountain man Jedediah Smith broadcast word of a viable cross-mountain route to the Pacific.