

DISCOVERER OF THE OREGON TRAIL: ROBERT STUART (1785-1848)

by
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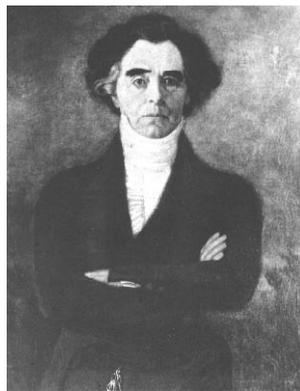
The Oregon Trail played a huge role in the settlement of the West. With 65 miles of the Oregon Trail in Baker County, it is also an important part of our local heritage.

Ever wonder who discovered the route? And when? Surprisingly a Scotsman named Robert Stuart pioneered the route three decades before the first wagons rolled through Powder River Valley. He did so traveling from west to east beginning two-hundred years ago this summer.



Sketch of Robert Stuart.

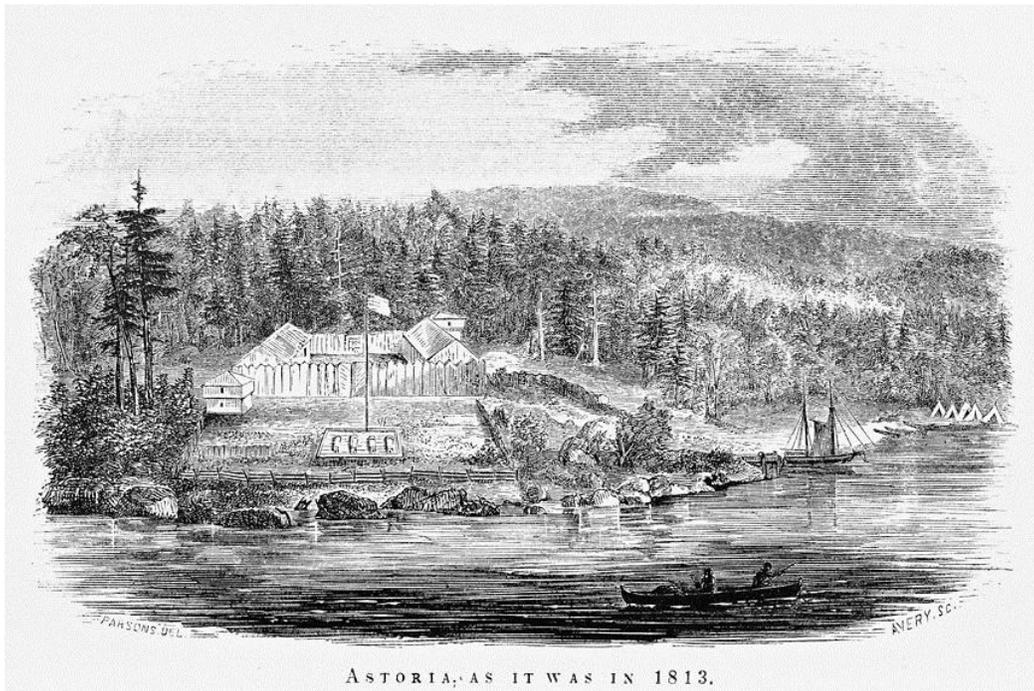
Starting in June 1812 from newly established Fort Astoria at the mouth of the Columbia River, twenty-seven-year-old Stuart and a small band of men trekked by canoe, horse, and on foot 3,700 miles from Fort Astoria to St. Louis, Missouri, via Wyoming's South Pass and the Platte and Missouri rivers, a route that would become the Oregon Trail.



Portrait of Robert Stuart.

The first two U.S. transcontinental expeditions, those of Lewis and Clark (1804-1805) and Wilson Price Hunt (1810-1812), both hoping to travel most of the way via water, had followed longer, more northern routes too mountainous for wagons.

Stuart was born February 19, 1785, in Scotland. In 1807 he joined his uncle David Stuart (1765-1853) in Canada, to work as a clerk for the North West Company of the Canadian fur trade.



In 1810, John Jacob Astor of New York City, considered the wealthiest man in the country at the time, formed the Pacific Fur Company with St. Louis businessman Wilson Price Hunt as managing partner. At Montreal, Hunt recruited David and Robert Stuart and others to be partners in the newly formed company, which became the chief rival of the Hudson's Bay Company based in Canada. Both companies had as their goal to monopolize fur trade in the Pacific Northwest.

Astor devised a two-pronged business plan to guide his newly formed enterprise. Hunt would lead an overland expedition to find the best route to the Columbia River, whereas the Stuarts would sail on the ship *Tonquin* around Cape Horn to the mouth of Columbia River (1810-1811), where the company would set up a fur trading post named Fort Astoria, the first white settlement in the Pacific Northwest.

On the ocean voyage from New York, Robert Stuart distinguished himself during a stop at Falkland Islands. The ship's captain, Jonathan Thorn, despised by both crew and passengers alike, weighed anchor early leaving David Stuart and others on shore. Plucky Robert Stuart drew a pistol on Thorn and forced him to turn the ship around and pick up his uncle and others left behind.

After Captain Thorn's passengers had debarked at the mouth of the Columbia, the *Tonquin* sailed north to Vancouver Island, where he and all his crew were slaughtered by Indians angered by Thorn's rough treatment of them in negotiating purchase of

pelts. Many Indians also died in the massacre, when a surviving crew member ignited the powder room blowing up himself, the Indians still on board, and the ship.

With trading posts established at Astoria and at Fort Okanogan on the upper Columbia River, the partners picked Robert Stuart to lead a small crew to carry dispatches about the progress of the enterprise back to financier Astor in New York City.



New York City Financier John Jacob Astor.

On June 29, 1812, Stuart and his crew, composed of Ben Jones, André Vallé, François LeClerc, Robert McClellan, Ramsey Crooks--Joseph Miller joined them in Idaho--left Fort Astoria and canoed up the Columbia to the mouth of Walla Walla River. After procuring from Indians about twenty horses for mounts and pack animals, they followed Hunt's overland route southeast. On July 31 the party reached Umatilla River near present-day Pendleton, then crossed the Blue Mountains to Grand Ronde and Powder valleys, and descended Burnt River to Snake River arriving August 12 at the great northern bend of Snake River (Farewell Bend).

They followed up Snake River arriving August 29 at Hunt's supply caches in south central Idaho, where in November 1811 Hunt's party abandoned its canoes due to dangerous rapids that had resulted in the drowning of one crew member. Here Stuart had hoped to resupply his men, but most of the caches had been pilfered by Indians.

Near today's Pocatello, Stuart made a fortuitous departure from Hunt's more northern route by leaving Snake River in favor of following Bear River to the southeastern corner of Idaho. But instead of continuing east up Bear River through the mountains and into Wyoming, on September 13 Stuart headed due north up the wrong branch. His detour from the future Oregon Trail route took the men one hundred miles north along the Idaho-Wyoming border in their attempt to find a way over the Salt River Range.

The detour cost the men three weeks of travel and much more. At dawn on September 19, Indians raided their camp driving away all their horses. Carrying on their backs what they could, they set out on foot in moccasins subsisting on what they could kill.

By October the men's health was failing from constant exertion and lack of food. Robert McClellan, who suffered from sore feet, refused to climb a mountain and left the group. Ramsey Crooks was suffering from fever. The men advised Stuart to leave him else they all perish. Instead, Stuart relieved Crooks of his pack, which allowed Crooks to keep up the march. On October 13 they found McClellan near death from starvation. And the others were starving as well. With no prospect of finding game soon, one of the men suggested that a man be sacrificed, so the others might survive. Horrified, Stuart leveled his rifle at the man and threatened to shoot him. The next day they were saved by chancing upon a solitary old buffalo.

On October 17 the party crossed the mountains at Teton Pass (south of Jackson Hole, Wyoming) in nine inches of snow. Forced southeast by the Wind River Mountains, they camped on October 20 in the vicinity of South Pass, later used by wagon trains as the most practical route over the Continental Divide. On October 29 they camped near a landmark later known as Independence Rock. The next day they began following the North Fork of Platte River, which would lead them to the main branch of the Platte and all the way to the Missouri River.



Washington Irving, author of the historical novel Astoria.

In early November, facing snow and cold, but with buffalo to sustain them and plenty of wood, they built a cabin to wait out the winter (near Caspar, Wyoming), where they felt hidden from Indians.

But on December 10 a party of Indians passed through. With their camp discovered, they abandoned their cabin and continued their march east into Nebraska. Finding wood and buffalo dwindling to nothing, they retreated thirty-five miles reaching on December 31 the area near the Wyoming/Nebraska border, where they had last seen sufficient supplies of wood and food. They celebrated New Year's Day 1813 by cutting up and smoking McClellan's tobacco pouch.

On March 8 they embarked in two newly-constructed dugout canoes. Soon finding the extremely wide Platte River too shallow, they abandoned their canoes and proceeded on foot. Five weeks later they reached an Indian village just sixty miles west of the Missouri River. Here they learned that America was at war with Great Britain. Finally in canoes again, on April 16 Stuart's party reached the Missouri River in two days. Paddling up to 68 miles per day down the Missouri, they reached St. Louis on April 30.

Within a few days, Stuart headed east arriving in New York City on June 23, where he delivered dispatches to Astor.

Stuart did not return to the Pacific Northwest but instead continued in the employ of Astor as an agent for the American Fur Co. In 1813 he married Emma Sullivan (1792-1866). They had nine children. The family lived in Mackinac, Michigan, from 1817 until his retirement in 1834. The town's courthouse is built on land the Stuarts donated and their house is now a museum devoted to history of the fur trade. After moving to Detroit, Stuart, among other activities, served a year as Michigan State Treasurer (1840-1841). He died suddenly October 29, 1848, on a business trip to Chicago. The discoverer of the Oregon Trail is buried in Elmwood Cemetery in Detroit, Michigan. Robert Stuart Junior High School in Twin Falls, Idaho, is named for him.

(Note: Robert Stuart's adventures were popularized in the historical novel *Astoria*, published in 1836 by Washington Irving, best known for his story "Rip Van Winkle." John Jacob Astor commissioned his friend Irving to write *Astoria*. Astor put at Irving's disposal Stuart's *Travelling Memoranda*, and other written sources, which Irving followed faithfully in rendering a historically accurate account of Astor's attempt to corner the fur market in the Northwest.)

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