

The Treaty Trail: U. S. - Indian Treaty Councils in the Northwest

STUDENT READING: CAUSE AND EFFECT

INDIAN LIFE BEFORE RESERVATIONS

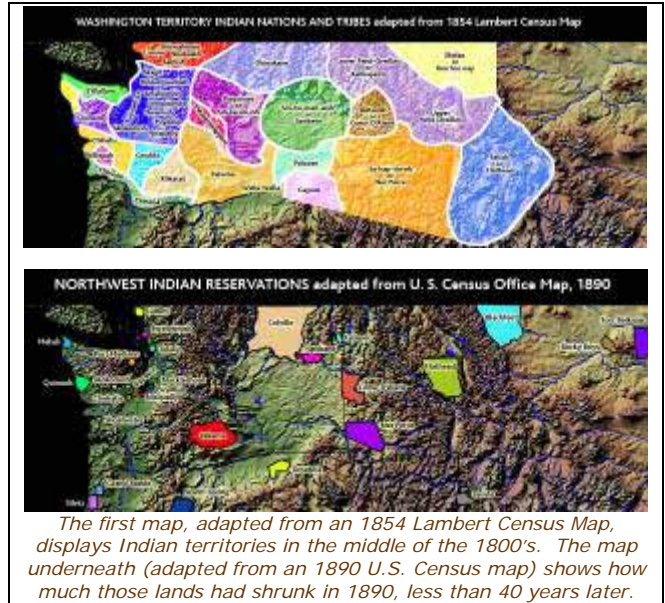
Before European/American arrival in the Northwest, there were no empty lands. The original homelands of native groups covered the entire expanse of lands now known as Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana. These lands were places where Indians lived, traveled, hunted, fished, and gathered food. Sacred places where ancestors were buried and religious rites and ceremonies performed also were a part of these lands.

However, the U.S.-Indian treaties of 1854 through 1856 left Indian tribes with only a small part of their former homelands. Tribes gave up millions of acres in Washington Territory alone, in exchange for a guarantee or promise that their rights would be protected, that some lands would be reserved, and that many goods and services would be provided for them by the U.S. Government.



This picture of the Dalles, taken by Asahel Curtis in 1916, shows the Dalles as it was before the Dalles Dam. It was once a series of waterfalls twelve miles long, with its head, Celilo Falls having a 20 foot drop. Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

Some of the richest natural resources of the region were shared among different tribes and brought different people together.



The first map, adapted from an 1854 Lambert Census Map, displays Indian territories in the middle of the 1800's. The map underneath (adapted from an 1890 U.S. Census map) shows how much those lands had shrunk in 1890, less than 40 years later.

For example, the fisheries around The Dalles and Celilo Falls provided an important food source for many native groups from different tribes. The gatherings at these important places were times for different tribes to trade, share information, and develop relationships with each other. Because many native people spoke multiple languages, they could communicate with other groups.

Native people used plants, animals, and other resources carefully so that their children and grandchildren would be able to use them as well. Caring for these resources was a way of respecting the land and treating what it had to offer as gifts. Each Indian community had responsibilities and obligations to care for the natural resources. These responsibilities and relationships with the land were different from the European idea of private property and ownership of land.

EARLY SETTLERS

In the 1820s, Congressmen and others urged Americans to consider the Oregon Country as a new place to live. Beginning in the 1830s and increasing dramatically in the 1840s, a large number of Americans came into the Oregon Country. The Willamette Valley was one of the first places settled.

As the United States continued to explore the western half of the country, the creation of new laws made it easier for settlers to cross the country. Accurate maps, enthusiastic reports, and trail guides helped attract people to the western territory.

Unfavorable living conditions in the rest of the United States also encouraged many people to choose to immigrate to Oregon Territory. In the Mississippi Valley, for example, nearly ten years of hard times began in 1837. Bad weather and widespread sickness worsened living conditions already made difficult by economic depression.



Detail from "Nez Percés" by John Mix Stanley. This picture, created in October of 1853, displays a meeting between Isaac Stevens' railroad survey team and a hunting band of Nez Percé Indians. Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

THE COMING OF THE RAILROAD

In 1853 Isaac Stevens successfully applied to President Pierce for the governorship of the new Washington Territory, a post that also carried the title of Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Not content with just two jobs, Stevens asked for and was given a job with the proposed transcontinental railroad survey. Washington Territory Governor Isaac

Stevens was placed in command of documenting the northern route by recording information about plants, animals, Indian tribes, and topography of the land. The railroad would bring large numbers of people and economic development to the region.

THE TREATY TRAIL

From 1854 - 1855, Governor Isaac Stevens traveled hundreds of miles across the modern states of Washington and parts of Montana, Oregon and Idaho negotiating ten treaties that would open the territory for future, ongoing white settlement of the region. The American drive for occupation of Western land led to the creation of a reservation system established through the treaty councils.

The treaties attempted to isolate Indian society and remove Native Americans from their traditional land and culture. One of the goals of the Reservation system was to concentrate the Indians upon a few reservations, and encourage them to abandon Indian culture and adopt European types of farming, schooling, and prayer.

This period of United States History was greatly influenced by the vision of "Manifest Destiny", the belief that the United States had a mission to expand freedom and democracy. The term became used to describe expansion of the United States westward from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean.

The Treaty Trail in the Northwest changed how both Native American peoples and non-native peoples have experienced life in the United States since 1854. As a result some of our family histories involve triumphant journeys westward to start a new life; other family histories tell of displacement, survival, and innovation amid discrimination. By opening up the region to the commercial development of natural resources, even the landscape around us is evidence of the Treaty Trail.