

Russel Farnham (1785-1832)

By James Kelly

Russel Farnham, an American adventurer, explorer, and fur trader, was sent by John Jacob Astor in 1811 to establish Fort Astoria, the first United States settlement on the Pacific Coast. He would later influence legislation that created the Oregon Territory and the State of Oregon. Although he spent just over three years in the Oregon Country, it made a deep and lasting impression on him.

While most accounts of Farnham list his birth as 1784, town birth records for West Springfield, Massachusetts, show that he was born on November 14, 1785. He was the only son of John and Sarissa Farnham, and he had three sisters—Lovisa, Sarissa, and Pamela.

Farnham joined Astor's Pacific Fur Company as a clerk in 1810 and arrived at the mouth of the Columbia River on the *Tonquin*. He helped build the fort in the spring of 1811 and was later sent to trade with the Salish (Flathead) tribe near present-day Thompson Falls, Montana. When control of the fort passed to the British, Farnham and several other stranded Americans left on the brig *Pedler* with Wilson P. Hunt, who had been in charge of the fort. Farnham served as third officer under Captain Northrop.

At the Russian settlement in present-day Sitka, Alaska, Farnham joined the crew of the *Forester* under Captain William Pigot and traveled to Kamchatka, Russia. The captain sent him overland to St. Petersburg with the proceeds of the sale of the ship's cargo of furs. He then traveled back to New York through Copenhagen.

After returning to the United States, Farnham made the acquaintance of Senator Thomas Hart Benton and Representative John Floyd. During the winter of 1820 and 1821, Farnham and Ramsay Crooks, a fellow Pacific Fur Company trader, worked on behalf of Astor's American Fur Company to lobby Congress for revision of government regulations that circumscribed trading with Natives. Farnham and Crooks stayed at Brown's Hotel in Washington, D.C., where Benton and Floyd also lodged. They sang the praises of Oregon Country. As Benton later reported, "their conversation, rich in information upon a new and interesting country, was eagerly devoured by the ardent spirit of Floyd. He resolved to bring forward the question of occupation, and did so."

In 1821, Floyd presented the first report and bill to Congress in support of the United States occupation of the Columbia River, an effort he pursued until 1829. Floyd credited Farnham and Crooks as the source of much of his information.

On October 27, 1829, Farnham married Susan Bosseron in St. Louis. A year later, they had their only son, Charles. While in the fur trade on the Mississippi River, Farnham had been married to Agathe Wood, of the Menominee tribe in Wisconsin; they had a daughter named Mary Ann. Agathe later returned to her home in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, where she was known as the widow of Russel Farnham. Their daughter would continue to use the Farnham name until her death in 1886.

Russel Farnham died suddenly in St. Louis on October 23, 1832, an early victim of the first cholera epidemic to hit the United States. His body was buried unceremoniously at night. Due to his sudden death, his estate and landholdings would be caught up in legal battles for years.

Sources

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