

Robert Gray (1755–1806)

By William L. Lang

On May 11, 1792, Robert Gray, the first American to circumnavigate the world (1787-1790), sailed the *Columbia Rediviva* into the Columbia River, the first documented ship to anchor in the river's broad estuary. He named the river "Columbia's river" after his ship and drew a sketch map of the river mouth. With Gray's entry into the river, the United States had an arguable claim to discovery in the deliberations with Great Britain that led to the Oregon Treaty of 1846. Even though Gray's accomplishment played no material role in the consummation of the treaty, he nonetheless became among the most famous Americans to establish a national claim on Oregon Country.

Born on May 17, 1755, in Tiverton, Rhode Island, Gray apparently went to sea at a young age. His family claimed that he served in the Continental Navy, although if he did, it is undocumented. He became a successful commercial mariner during the 1780s before Boston investors chose him to captain the *Lady Washington* in a fur-trading voyage to the Northwest Coast in 1787. Gray returned to Boston as captain of the *Washington's* companion ship the *Columbia* and sailed to the Northwest in the ship on a second trading voyage in 1790.

Gray was a no-nonsense trader who forcefully pursued acquiring pelagic furs from Natives, often driving hard bargains and entertaining little equivocation. On two occasions, one in present-day Tillamook Bay (his men named it Murder's Harbor) and another in present-day Gray's Harbor, Washington, Gray fired on Native traders who would not accept his price for furs, killing several. On May 9, 1792, Fifth Mate John Boit recorded the Gray's Harbor incident in his log: "I am sorry we was oblig'd to kill the poor Divells, but it cou'd not with safety be avoided."

As a mariner, Gray displayed an impatience that led him to sail too close to dangerous coastlines, a practice that resulted in damage to the ships he captained. But it was that aggressive attitude that led to his sailing boldly into the Columbia River in May 1792. As a commercial mariner, Gray played no role as an emissary for his country, so he willingly passed on his sketch chart of the Columbia to British Capt. George Vancouver, who had told Gray that he did not believe the river existed. Realizing his error, in October Vancouver sent his tender ship, the *Chatham*, captained by Lt. William Broughton, into the Columbia and ordered a hundred-mile-long survey of the lower river. The voyage produced a detailed map, published in 1798, that gave Britain legitimate claim to the river.

After his return to Boston in 1793, Gray continued in merchant shipping and married Martha Howland Atkins in 1794; they had four daughters who survived to adulthood and one son who died by age seven. During the Quasi-War with France in 1798-1800, Gray commanded the *Lucy*, an American privateer. Most of his commercial voyages from Boston took him to Atlantic coastal ports and the Caribbean.

Although it is undocumented, he likely died in 1806 from yellow fever in South Carolina. There are no documented images of Gray, although the one often identified as his portrait may be a reasonable likeness, save that it does not reveal that Gray had only one eye and wore a patch during most of his career. His name is memorialized in Gray's Harbor and Grays River in Washington State and a middle school in Portland.

Sources

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