

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### THE CREATION OF THE TERRITORY OF IDAHO

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Prior to 1868 the region destined to become Idaho passed through several territorial reorganizations. For five years (from August 14, 1848 to March 2, 1853) it was included in Oregon Territory. Then it was divided between Washington Territory and Oregon Territory until February 14, 1859. Oregon then became a state, and the entire Idaho area was attached to Washington. At that time, the land that became Idaho was expected to remain unsettled for another 50 years or so. That would have been some time into the twentieth century. Then an unexpected Idaho gold rush, a year after Oregon's admission to the Union, changed the whole situation. Miners came by the thousands, and within two years the Idaho mines (as the country was known in 1862) had gained a population a lot greater than the older settlements of Washington.

When gold was discovered at Pierce, September 30, 1860, the eastern part of Washington Territory (which included all of what now is Idaho) was undeveloped politically. The Idaho portion made up part of Spokane County, which no one had yet bothered to organize. Anticipating the Clearwater gold rush, the Washington legislature established Shoshone County, which included all the country south and east of Lewiston. In the territorial election of July 8, 1861, Shoshone County cast the largest vote in Washington, and in 1862 the Salmon River gold rush made Florence by far the biggest community in the territory. Older, more stable settlements such as Olympia and Seattle just did not compare with Florence that season. Mineral discoveries in Boise Basin, August 2, 1862, set off still a bigger gold rush to a region decidedly farther from the original settlements of western Washington. Something had to be done to provide better government for the new mining regions. Four different plans were advanced. Each was designed to fit the ambitions of one of four different communities in Washington: Olympia, Vancouver, Walla Walla, and Lewiston.

Lewiston wanted a new territory that would take in Washington east of the big bend of the Columbia. If such a territory were to be established, Lewiston would have been a natural choice for capital. An editorial in Lewiston's pioneer newspaper, the Golden Age, expressed extreme dissatisfaction with Washington's government as administered from Olympia in the fall of 1862:

Of what use to us is a capitol of Washington Territory located at Olympia on the forty-ninth parallel. During four months of last year no communication could be had with the place at all. Its distance is between seven and eight hundred miles, interspersed with Hugh forests, roaring rivers, and rocky bound shores of ice, with impassable barriers of snow. One of the editors of the Washington Statesman was elected to the Legislature by the voters of Walla Walla, and before he left to perform those legislative duties to his constituents, he made his will, settled all of his worldly accounts, and bid his friends adieu until next summer, and perhaps forever.

Olympia actually was not quite as far north, or quite as far away, as the Golden Age made out. But many people in Lewiston strongly supported the plan for making a new territory, and a citizens' meeting there firmly endorsed the project, December 28, 1862.

Walla Walla dissented. Division of Washington Territory would leave Olympia capital of the western part, and make Lewiston capital of the new mining territory that would be established. Walla Walla preferred to keep Washington territory intact. As a compromise, after the Boise gold rush got underway, Walla Walla was willing to return to Washington's original boundaries which included the country later to become North Idaho and western Montana. Rapid growth of mining population was expected to lead to Washington's admission as a state in another year or two, and Walla Walla fully expected to be state capital.

Most of the Idaho miners--at least the ones that voted in the 1862 election--had favored candidates who endorsed Walla Walla's preference. The Washington legislature chosen that year opposed the plan to set up a new mining territory of Idaho, and Walla Walla expected to become capital of Washington just as soon as reapportionment of the legislature could give control of the territory to the mining counties, which clearly had the majority of the population.

West of the Cascades, Vancouver preferred an arrangement which would have kept enough of eastern Washington to advance Vancouver's claim to be territorial capital. Lack of a wagon road across the Cascades forced traffic from Puget Sound to come through Vancouver to reach eastern Washington. Thus Vancouver aspired to become territorial capital as a compromise location between the two sections. On Puget Sound, Olympia wished to retain its status as capital. In order to prevent the mining counties from gaining a legislative majority and from taking the capital to Walla Walla, Olympia decided that the mining region would have to be set aside as a separate territory. At the same time, Olympia wished to keep all the slower growing farming area of eastern Washington. That way state admission would not be

delayed too long, and Washington would be no smaller than was absolutely necessary to preserve Olympia's power.

Olympia won the fight. A new mining territory of Idaho emerged from eastern Washington, with Lewiston on its western boundary. In this boundary settlement, Olympia and Puget Sound had enough strength to hold down Vancouver and Walla Walla once the mining counties were taken out of Washington. A. G. Henry, an Olympia agent and Washington surveyor general, recommended the line which congress adopted and which continues to separate Idaho and Washington to this day.

Of the four alternate boundary and capital city arrangements, Olympia's prevailed only after a hard battle. Those who worked in Olympia's interest--to keep the eastern agricultural lands in Washington, but to put the new mines in Idaho--had plenty of strength in the United States Senate, but faced a hard time in the House of Representatives. The chairman of the House committee preferred to restore Washington's original 1853 boundaries, and to establish a new mining territory of Montana for the Boise region and for the upper Missouri mines which now are in Montana but then were in Dakota. This proposal passed the House, February 12, 1863. Yet it looked entirely too risky to the Olympia forces, and the last night of the session, they got Congress to amend the boundaries to include all the Idaho mines that Olympia wished to exclude from Washington. Olympia's agents quietly had built up enough strength in the House that they were able to gain concurrence in the Senate amendments which changed the boundary and restored the name "Idaho" to the new mining territory. The last morning of the session--March 4, 1863--President Abraham Lincoln approved the proposal, and Idaho became a territory of the United States.

Exceeding Texas substantially in size, Idaho originally included all of present Montana, along with practically all of Wyoming as well. That arrangement was a mistake. A large mountain block divided the population of the new territory of Idaho into three distinct sections. Each of them was relatively inaccessible from the others, and in 1864, Congress decided to set up a new territory of Montana, taking the northeastern part of Idaho for the purpose. That got rid of one of the three disconnected sections, but left the other two in Idaho, still separated by a difficult mountain barrier. The remainder of original eastern Idaho was returned temporarily to Dakota when Montana was established, May 26, 1864. Finally, when construction of the Union Pacific made possible the creation of Wyoming, July 25, 1868, Idaho received its present boundaries. By that time, the territory of Idaho had been in operation for a number of years, and the foundations for a new commonwealth had been laid. When Idaho became a state, July 3, 1890, the 1868 boundaries became permanent.

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