

PACIFIC NORTHWEST BOUNDARIES, 1848-1868

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In twenty years of boundary making, the years from 1848 to 1868, the United States Congress produced six different political maps of the Pacific Northwest, and the Idaho region was affected by each of the changes. Two years after Great Britain and the United States reached a Pacific Northwest boundary agreement in 1846, Congress established the United States' portion of the region as the territory of Oregon. (Before that time, the Oregon country had been unorganized politically.) Thus in 1848, all the land which later was known as Idaho became part of Oregon territory. Then in 1853, settlement north of the Columbia and west of the Cascades was sufficient to justify creation of a new territory of Washington. Most of Idaho, however, remained in Oregon until admission of Oregon as a state in 1859 led to the decision that the final eastern state boundary would be the present Idaho-Oregon line. Since Idaho then remained unsettled, the area was tacked onto Washington--temporarily at least. At that time scarcely anyone was expected to live in Idaho until sometime in the twentieth century, and Congress anticipated no need for further boundary revision for another fifty years. But in 1860, the founding of Pierce and Franklin altered the situation entirely.

Gold discoveries in the Nez Perce country in 1860 changed the pattern of settlement in Washington territory abruptly. By 1862, the Idaho mines had surpassed the older, western part of the territory in population. And unless the mines were put into a new territory, political control of Washington was about to move from Puget Sound to the new Idaho mining region. Furthermore, an 1862 offshoot of the Idaho gold excitement brought the beginning of mining to the upper Missouri in an area just east of the continental divide in what then was the western extremity of Dakota. Here also, no one could doubt that the gold rush would shift the balance of population from the eastern to the western edge of the territory. Creation of a new, enormous territory of Idaho, March 4, 1863, provided the answer: this action gave the miners a government of their own, and saved control of Washington and of Dakota for those who lived in the older sections of those territories. The only trouble was that the original territory of Idaho--with an area decidedly larger than that of Texas--had three active mining regions, each separated from the others by formidable mountain barriers. Communication within such a territory--especially when the legislature met during the winter--proved to be almost impossible. So the eastern Idaho mines were made into Montana in 1864. And finally, with the building of the Union Pacific railway across the continent, Wyoming was created in 1868. That action incidentally provided Idaho with territorial boundaries that turned out to be permanent.

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