

# Celebrating the 33rd star

## If you have never toured your state capitol building, you have missed out.

You may see murals, or perhaps a history of how your state joined the union. In Oregon, you can even climb the 121 spiral steps to the top of the capitol dome, and take photos with the 22-foot-tall, gold-leafed Oregon Pioneer statue, aka the Gold Man.

Seeing all this history is a privilege many take for granted. They may not know our original capitol building burned to the ground in 1935 in the middle of the Great Depression.

The fact is, Oregon has been through a lot. Here's the story of how the territory was first established, then came into the union as the 33rd state. It is a tale of independence, cougar depredation and the true essence of the western frontier.

## Fur trade and the Corps of Discovery

It is fitting that that the 8.5-ton statue atop the Oregon State Capitol depicts a pioneer looking to the west. He's holding a splitting axe in his right hand and a tarp to build a shelter in his left.

The Gold Man embodies the rugged nature of pioneers who came via the Oregon Trail in the mid-1800s. But even more rugged were the Spanish and French explorers who preceded them in the 17th and 18th centuries.

These explorers created fur trade routes that were dominated for many years by the British Hudson's Bay Company. This led to some trappers settling down in the area and farming.

Due to the bustling fur trade, both the United States and Great Britain laid claim to the Pacific Northwest. Rights to the lands were eventually settled by the signing of the 1846 Oregon Treaty. The U.S. Congress created the Oregon Territory in 1848, which originally encompassed all of the present-day states of Idaho, Oregon and Washington, as well as parts of Montana and Wyoming.

By this time, the fame of the 1803 Lewis and Clark-led Corps of Discovery

had spurred creation of a 2,200-mile route west. The Oregon Trail connected the Missouri River to the fertile Willamette Valley in Oregon. At first only suitable for foot and horse travel, the route was gradually made passable for wagons. Before the transcontinental railroad rendered it largely obsolete, the trail brought more than 400,000 settlers, ranchers and farmers to the Oregon territory.

The growing territory needed a federal administrator. A notable lawyer in the State of Illinois — a man named Abraham Lincoln — was offered the job of secretary of the Oregon Territory. He turned that down. Then he was offered the job of governor of the Oregon Territory in 1849. The future 16th President of the United States turned that down as well. I think that worked out OK for the nation.

## Debate over slavery

Even though Oregon held a Constitutional Convention in 1857, some historians point out that Oregon was perfectly content to remain a territory. While titans of the state like Joseph Lane were advocates for statehood, many settlers were more concerned with conflicts over estate law and how heirs obtain land, as well as what to do about a growing cougar problem.

The U.S. Senate took up the Oregon statehood topic in 1858, amid a public split within the Democratic Party over slavery and the ongoing controversy over admitting Kansas to the union. Jefferson Davis — afraid of upsetting the balance between free and slave states — opposed the admission of any additional northern states.

Oregon had voted by a three-to-one margin against slavery. It also voted overwhelmingly to prohibit free blacks from entry into the state, and included other discriminatory language in the state constitution to boot. This gave both sides ample reasons for delay.

Despite Oregon's controversial state constitution and the lack of population levels required for statehood, Lane used his growing power and influence to make a successful case for Oregon statehood.

Oregon officially became the 33rd



Jeff Stone  
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state in the union on Valentine's Day, February 14, 1859.

Oregon did not find out it was a state for 33 days. Horsemen on dispatch from Congress were delayed due to the Molalla River flooding its banks and didn't make it until St. Patrick's Day, March 17. Murals of this event depict the popular indifference to this historic news in the muddy streets of Salem. There wasn't exactly a mass celebration in the capital city.

## She flies with her own wings

While the origin of Oregon's name is far from certain, historians point to either a 1715 French map, which refers to the Wisconsin River as "Ouaricon-sint," or an English army officer's proposal for a trip out west in which he refers to a Native American river called "Ouragon."

Oregon's flag is currently the only U.S. state to have a two-sided flag (the flag of Massachusetts was changed in 1971 to be single-sided). One side has the state shield, with 33 stars around it — each star representing one of the first 33 states including Oregon. The other side depicts a beaver, the official state animal, as a nod to the fur trading history of the state's origins.

The state motto, "She flies with her own wings," was first adopted in 1854 to honor the independent spirit shown by pioneers who formed the provisional government in the Oregon Country in 1843.

To this day, Oregon still represents the western frontier: independent, abundant in natural resources, and dedicated to innovation by its population. The western way of life is in our DNA.

Happy birthday, Oregon. ☺