

European and Euro-American History



Home of the Gods to National Treasure...

Many generations of humans have explored the landscape now in Olympic National Park. Stone tools, a 2,900-year old basket fragment and other archeological evidence trace human use over millennia. Local tribes used the Olympic Mountains for hunting, gathering, travel and spiritual quests. Europeans and Euro-Americans have a much shorter history—with exploration beginning in 1592 and settlement starting 200 years ago. Like their predecessors, these later inhabitants were drawn to the beautiful and resource-rich lands. Eventually, recognition of these magnificent and threatened resources led to establishment of Olympic National Park.

In Search of a Northwest Passage

Possibly the first European to sight the Olympic Peninsula was Juan de Fuca, a Greek pilot sailing for Spain. In 1592 he claimed discovery of the strait that now bears his name. The late 18th century saw the first well-documented voyages. Spanish explorer Juan Perez Hernandez sailed the coast in 1774. Four years later, English navigator Captain James Cook unsuccessfully searched for Juan de Fuca's elusive strait. His countryman Captain William Barkley sailed into the strait in 1787, and named it after its discoverer. The next year another English explorer, Captain John Meares, named Mount Olympus—it seemed to him a veritable home of the gods. In 1792 the region's waters were thoroughly explored by Captain George Vancouver, who named many features including Puget Sound and Mount Rainier.

The Mysterious Interior

Though local tribes had long traveled the mountains, Lt. Joseph P. O'Neil's 1885 reconnaissance of the northern Olympic Mountains was the first well documented exploration. From Port Angeles, the party worked south through the foothills reaching Hurricane Ridge a month later, a trip that takes under an hour today. From there part of the group explored the Elwha Valley while O'Neil traveled southeast to near Mount Anderson until he was called back to his fort.

The fame of being the first to cross the Olympics went to the 1889-90 Press Party. Financed by the *Seattle Press*, the well-publicized expedition crossed via the Elwha and Quinault Valleys, a six-month ordeal during one of the worst winters in history. A month after the Press Party emerged from the mountains, Lt. O'Neil began his second expedition. He and his men explored the eastern and southern Olympics between Hood Canal and the Pacific. The area inspired him to advocate establishment of a national park.



Lt. Joseph P. O'Neil

In closing I would state that while the country on the outer slope of these mountains is valuable, the interior is useless for all practicable purposes. It would, however, serve admirably for a national park.

Lt. Joseph P. O'Neil, 1890 Report

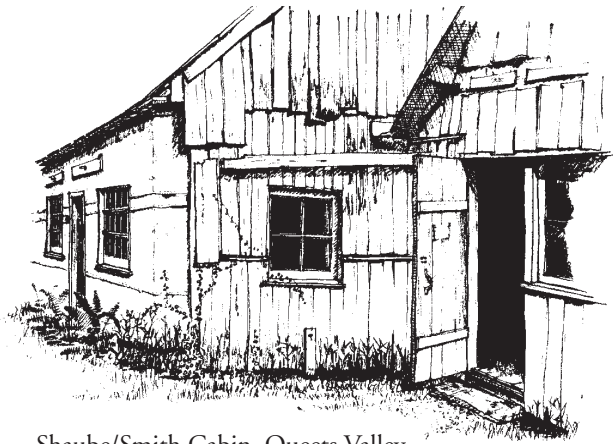


Carving a Home

The westward homestead wave reached the Olympic Peninsula in the mid-19th century. The earliest settlers clustered along the coast, near Hood Canal and present-day Port Townsend, Sequim, Port Angeles, and Neah Bay. In 1891 the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reported on Charles and Samuel Gilman's journey through the western Olympic Peninsula. They praised the potentially fertile soil, excellent pasturage, and abundant rainfall. However, their prediction that many people would come to settle never came true.

Homestead life on the remote Olympic Peninsula was tedious and hard. It began with building a cabin. Unless they used clearings maintained by local tribes, settlers expended enormous effort to clear the imposing forests for gardens,

orchards and pastures. Homesteaders often kept farm animals including chickens, milk cows, horses, pigs, sheep and cattle. In the long, rainy winters, hunting and fishing helped feed the family. The challenges proved too much for many. But those that remained often wrote of the beauty and vast resources in correspondence to family back East. Slowly, the peninsula began to draw attention.



Shaube/Smith Cabin, Queets Valley

Hoping for Gold

A short hike up the Elwha Valley there's a small cabin—the remains of Humes Ranch. Will and Martin Humes arrived in 1897 with their cousin Ward Sanders. The three hoped for gold but were not disappointed when none was found. In a letter Will wrote, "we think we could do well hunting, even if no gold is found."

Mention of elk, deer, bear, fish and "cat" in the letters were enough to bring their brother Grant to the valley. Grant remained, packing and guiding and relishing "the cool, green woods and the peace and quiet and beauty to be enjoyed there."

"To Preserve for the Benefit, Use and Enjoyment..."

Even at the turn of the century there was concern over the region's disappearing forests. In response, President Cleveland designated most of the Olympic Peninsula's forested land as the Olympic Forest Reserve in 1897. Though the preserve helped to better manage forests, elk were not protected. By 1900, their population had plummeted to less than 2000 animals, mostly from hunting for hides and the valuable incisor teeth which were used to decorate watch fobs. In 1909 President Theodore Roosevelt designated part of the reserve as Mount Olympus National Monument to protect the elk. But setting aside so much productive forest was controversial, and monument acreage was cut in half within a decade, leaving much of the lowland forest available for harvest.

To help preserve the awesome forests, a national conservation organization campaigned to establish a national park. After a visit to the area, President Franklin Roosevelt added his support, and signed the 1938 act establishing Olympic National Park. An extensive strip of wild coast was added in 1953.

The park's rich resources are internationally recognized. In 1976 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated Olympic part of an international system of Biosphere Reserves. These sites are recognized for their scientific and scenic value, and as places that can serve as baselines to measure human impact. The park was also honored by UNESCO in 1981 when it was designated a World Heritage Site because it and other sites like Mesa Verde, the great barrier reef, and the Egyptian pyramids in ancient Thebes are "older than the nation where they happen to be located. They belong in a way to the entire world."

