



RECENT HISTORY OF OLYMPIC NATIONAL PARK

Since the early 16th century, European explorers sought a Northwest Passage across the American continent to the Pacific. A Greek navigator who sailed for Spain and was known by the name of Juan de Fuca claimed to have found such a passage at 47°N latitude in 1592, but his claim was doubted by subsequent explorers. Captain James Cook, in March 1778, paused off the northwestern tip of the Olympic Peninsula, which he named Cape Flattery because an opening along the coast “flattered” the Captain and crew with the hope of finding a harbor. Cook noted in the logbook: “In this very latitude geographers have placed the pretended Strait of Juan de Fuca. But nothing of that kind presented itself to our view, nor is it probable that any such thing ever existed.” In 1787 the English Captain Charles William Barkley recognized the passage between the Olympic Peninsula and Vancouver Island and entered it onto his charts as the Strait of Juan de Fuca. On July 4, 1788, British Captain John Meares named Mount Olympus (which had been called El Cerro de la Santa Rosalia by Spanish explorers). He was the first explorer to record contact with the Makah Tribe. He also sent a small party to explore the Strait. In 1792 the Strait and Puget Sound were thoroughly investigated by Captain George Vancouver, who named many of the geographical features in this region, including Dungeness, Discovery Bay, the Olympic Mountains, Hood Canal and Mount Rainier. At about the same time, Spanish navigators also began exploring the Strait, named the harbor sheltered by Ediz Hook “Puerto de Nuestra Senora de los Angeles,” now Port Angeles.

Settlers came to the north Olympic Peninsula in the mid-1800’s, but Euro-Americans didn’t explore the mountainous interior. Although there are unconfirmed accounts of an ascent of Mount Olympus by two white men and two Native Americans from Cape Flattery in 1854; the crossing of the peninsula by a shipwrecked crew and passengers in 1855; and an expedition led by Melbourne Watkinson in 1878, the first well-documented exploration of the Olympics occurred in the summer of 1885. Army Lieutenant Joseph P. O’Neil led a small party of enlisted men from Vancouver Barracks and civilian engineers on a reconnaissance of the Olympic Mountains. O’Neil chose Port Angeles—at the time a town of about 40 inhabitants, a hotel, a sawmill and two stores—as his starting point because of its nearness to the mountains. On July 17 the party headed south into the foothills, following a route similar to the present-day Hurricane Ridge Road, making slow progress cutting a trail through dense forest and windfalls. It took them about a month to climb to Hurricane Ridge. From there part of the group began to explore the Elwha Valley while O’Neil and the others headed southeast. O’Neil explored almost as far south as Mount Anderson before a messenger reached him with orders to report to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and the expedition was cut short.

A second assault on the Olympic interior was made in the winter of 1889-1890. During the fall of 1889, the year Washington became a state, the Seattle Press newspaper called for “hardy citizens . . . to acquire fame by unveiling the mystery which wraps the land encircled by the snow capped Olympic range.” This call was answered by James Christie, who volunteered to organize an expedition if the Press would finance it. The Press Party consisted of six men (one of them left the expedition early; five completed the trip), whom the Press described as having “an abundance of grit and manly vim,” four dogs, two mules and 1500 pounds of supplies. This group entered the Olympics in December 1889, one of the harshest and snowiest winters in the Peninsula’s history.

Christie had planned to follow the Elwha River into the heart of the mountains, transporting supplies on a large flat-bottomed boat, Gertie, which the men built. The boat leaked and had to be hauled over log jams and towed through rapids by the men, wading through deep snow along the banks or in icy water sometimes up to their chins. After 12 frigid, exhausting days, Gertie was abandoned. The party spent January - April 1890 exploring the Elwha Valley. In mid-March the explorers discovered and named Geyser Valley, where they heard sounds they thought were bubbling geysers although there are none in the valley. (James Christie predicted Geyser Valley would make “a young paradise for some venturesome squatter,” and ten years later Will and Grant Humes homesteaded in the valley. The Humes cabin can still be visited today, about 2.5 miles from the Whiskey Bend trailhead.) In early May, the Press Party, their clothes in tatters and running dangerously low on supplies, crossed Low Divide and headed down the Quinault Valley. They were transported in an Indian canoe across Lake Quinault and down the river to reach the coast on May 20, 1890 after nearly six months in the mountains. As a result of the Press Expedition, many peaks bear the names of prominent newspaper publishers and editors of the late 19th century, including Mt. Meany, Mt. Dana, Mt. Lawson, Mt. Noyes, Mt. Scott and the Bailey Range. Press Party blazes can still be found along the Elwha River trail in the park.

In 1897 most of the forested land of the peninsula was included in the Olympic Forest Reserve (Olympic National Forest). Following O’Neil’s recommendation, Washington state Congressmen introduced unsuccessful bills in the early 1900’s to establish a national park or an elk reserve. In 1909, just before leaving office, President Theodore Roosevelt issued a proclamation creating Mount Olympus National Monument within the national forest to protect the summer range and breeding grounds of the Olympic elk. Mount Olympus, along with all other national monuments, was transferred to National Park Service administration as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s governmental reorganization in 1933, and with the support of national conservation organizations, Washington Congressman Monrad C. Wallgren in 1935 sponsored a bill for the establishment of a national park. After a visit to the Olympic Peninsula in the fall of 1937, President Roosevelt added his enthusiastic support to the movement for a national park and the act establishing Olympic National Park was signed on June 29, 1938. The coastal strip was added to the park in 1953.



HISTORY OF OLYMPIC NATIONAL FOREST

The Olympic National Forest began as a Forest Reserve in February 1897, when President Cleveland signed the proclamation which withdrew 1,500,00 acres of public land on the Olympic Peninsula. In 1905, the name Olympic Forest Reserve was changed to Olympic National Forest. The center of the Olympic National Forest was proclaimed Mount Olympus National Monument by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1909. The transfer of the monument from the Forest Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture’s jurisdiction to the Park Service, U.S. Department of Interior occurred in 1933, and it became the Olympic National Park in 1938.

In 1964 Congress passed the Wilderness Act. Its was created to set aside and preserve designated areas of land to be retained in a primitive and natural state for current and future generations to enjoy. Five Olympic National Forest Wildernesses, totaling 88,265 acres, were designated in the Washington Wilderness Act of 1984. These include Colonel Bob, Buckhorn, Wonder Mountain, Mt. Skokomish, and The Brothers.

