Homeward Bound
The Battleship Oregon Pennant and Imperialism in Oregon

by Silvie Andrews

ON TUESDAY, JULY 16, 1901, the people of Salem, Oregon, hung out their American flags. Dressed in their finest, they took to the sidewalks that afternoon to watch a company of Oregon National Guard soldiers, the Salem Military Band, a band and cadet brigade from the Chemawa Indian School, a color guard of Civil War veterans, and assorted carriages, cyclists, and pedestrians parade through the streets to the Oregon State Capitol. Five thousand people from Oregon and beyond thronged the capitol grounds as cannons thundered and church bells rang throughout the city.

The occasion was not a late Independence Day celebration, as it might have appeared to the uninformed observer, but the gifting of three flags—a Union Jack, a naval ensign, and a "homeward bound" pennant—from the crew of the battleship USS Oregon (BB-3), also known as the battleship Oregon, to the State of Oregon. The last of these flags, a 215-foot-long streamer of red, white, and blue silk, is now held in Oregon Historical Society's (OHS) museum collection. The sociopolitical forces surrounding this pennant's creation, dedication, display, and descent into obscurity are the subject of this essay.

The excitement with which Oregonians greeted this event in 1901 may be difficult to understand today, with USS Oregon long faded from public memory, but it cannot be overstated. The battleship Oregon, which left the West Coast in 1898 to fight the Spanish Navy at Cuba, had finally returned to its homeport at Bremerton, Washington. During its time away, it figured prominently in the Battle of Santiago Bay, one of the pivotal battles of the Spanish-American War, and brought fame and glory not only to its own crew, but also to the faraway state for which it had been named. One local newspaper regarded the ceremony as "one of the most important events that has ever occurred in Oregon," adding that "every loyal citizen of Oregon should be proud to honor the occasion." At a time when the ideological rift between imperialists and anti-imperialists ran deep, "loyal citizen" was a charged term, particularly in a state where the press tended to vilify anti-imperialists as unpatriotic, unmanly, and even seditionous. This was because far across the Pacific Ocean, up and down an archipelago that few Americans could have found on a map just three years earlier, the United States was still at war.

The presentation of the flags was a symbolic transaction that honored both the ship and the state, and their respective roles in the Spanish-American War. While those aboard the ship battled in Cuba, Oregon also sent soldiers to fight in the Philippines, each contributing to Spain's defeat in 1898. The ceremony symbolically placed Oregon at the crux of the two theaters of the war. Beyond that, it was a nod to those who had remained in Oregon and contributed their support on the home front. Oregonians—and particularly their newspapers—had eschewed the many voices opposing the Spanish-American War and the overseas imperialism that had driven it. Even now, their enthusiastic welcome of USS Oregon's crew belied the ongoing ideological battle being fought throughout the country over the Philippines, then a new and controversially acquired U.S. territory.

Inside the State Capitol, the Hall of Representatives was packed to bursting. The crowd that flooded in from the street was so dense that the visiting delegates from Oregon's crew could barely push through to the speaker's podium. Oregon Gov. Theodore Thurston Geer began the proceedings by formally greeting the delegation, after which Oregon's chief yeoman, Joseph H. Weir, addressed the multitudes: "The colors we have the honor to pres-
ent . . . are the longest ever flown from the finest battleship that ever floated;" he claimed, adding that the pennant was the first to feature one star for every state in the Union — an impressive forty-five. (A “homeward bound” pennant, flown from a ship’s mast as it returned to its home port, traditionally featured a star for each of the thirteen original colonies.) Weir gave a brief account of the ship’s history, with an emphasis on its celebrated role in the Spanish-American War. To conclude his remarks, he expressed hope that the people of Oregon "will ever remember how proud we are of these colors, and that you will be as proud of them as we are, and we will never regret having left them in your charge." Each statement was met with earsplitting cheers. Veterans carried the three flags to the dais in a white trunk, where Geer accepted them on behalf of the people of Oregon. Geer promised that the state would treasure and honor USS Oregon’s colors, and would pass them on through the generations "to the care and administration of those who are to follow us in the active duties of life.""

Following the proceedings inside the state capitol, the crowd and delegations moved outdoors, where the next phase of the painstakingly choreographed ceremony took place. A band played the national anthem as the three flags were raised: the Union Jack at the south end of the capitol, the ensign at the north end, and the pennant on the central copper-clad dome. Newspapers described the pennant as hundreds of feet long and made of thin, lightweight silk; to induce it to catch the wind, one of the visiting sailors took hold of the end and led it across the capitol lawn like the string of a kite. Physical descriptions of the “homeward bound” pennant are easy to find but difficult to corroborate. The Salem Statesman of July 17, 1901, gave the pennant’s length as 420 feet, whereas the Oregonian of the same day recorded it as 378. In 1915, when the “monster pennant” once again flew above the State Capitol for Independence Day, the Statesman amended its earlier report that “originally the emblem was 420 feet long.” The newspaper then described a hitherto untold incident from the pennant’s brief time on the ship: “When the battleship stopped in Nagasaki harbor on her return [in 1901] the end of the pennant dragged in the water and a harbor tub which happened to be passing churned up 215 feet with its propeller, shortening it by more than half.” It added the description: “Half the length of the pennant is of blue silk upon which are worked forty-five white stars . . . the remaining half is composed of a red and white strip. The pennant is two feet wide at the base, tapering to a point.”

Discrepancy aside, this account is the most specific and is also the closest to describing the 215-foot pennant in OHS’s museum collection, which additionally bears significant water damage that is consistent with being submerged in the ocean. That the damage was not accounted for in 1901, when Oregon received the pennant, may indicate hesitancy on the part of the press or the visiting crew to diminish the eminence of the spectacle. Ensuing discrepancies in recorded length could well be due to the difficulty of measuring such a long object.

Certain Oregonians, many of whom were likely in the audience that day, had particular cause to remember the events of the Spanish-American War. Geer invoked them in his speech: “… [the colors] will also bring to the recollection of every member of the gallant Second Oregon the burning plains and miasmal swamps of Luzon.” He referred to the 2nd Oregon National Guard Infantry, a volunteer regiment that had been deployed to the Philippines in 1898 and returned the following year, first to assist in the capture of Manila from Spain, and thereafter to secure the islands against the freedom fighters of the Philippine Revolutionary Army (PRA). It was the latter of these actions that had given rise to specters of “burning plains and miasmal swamps.” Manila changed hands on August 13, 1898, in a relatively bloodless exchange that was arranged in advance between Spanish officials and American generals, largely as a means to prevent Filipino rebels from entering the walled central district of the city. In defiance of the PRA — its former ally that had been embroiled in a bloody fight for Philippine independence from Spain.
Andrews, Homeward Bound

Members of Company A, 2nd Oregon Volunteer Infantry, pose with their rifles in 1898 or 1899. The men comprising the 2nd Oregon came from a variety of vocations; very few were career soldiers.

since 1896 — the United States annexed the Philippines as a territory. Tension built steadily between the PRA and the American forces occupying Manila until hostilities opened in February 1899. Oregon soldiers dispatched to the countryside surrounding Manila carried out punitive actions against civilian populations as often as they engaged enemy forces. While the Spanish-American War was over in a matter of months, the Philippine-American War was to continue well into the twentieth century.

The wars in the Philippines were significant turning points for U.S.—international relations and were met with a corresponding measure of controversy at home. American colonialism in North America was nothing new — westward expansion and the subjugation of indigenous peoples had been the government’s constant work for over a century — but now the United States stretched from coast to coast in North America, and further expansion required a new mandate. Imperialists found such a cause in English poet Rudyard Kipling’s writings. His poem “The White Man’s Burden” framed colonial expansion not as the right of Euro-Americans but as their responsibility, a sacred inheritance passed from Britain to its erstwhile child the United States. Within this vision, Filipino resistance to U.S. rule was framed as ignorance to the enlightenment and civilization that Americans could bring to the islands — an ignorance based in racial inferiority. In Oregon, where the Indian Wars were a recent experience, white newcomers to the region were receptive to the idea of conquest as the Euro-American “racial destiny.” Oregonians devoured Kipling’s poem.

Resistance to imperialism was little remarked on in the state’s press, except to denigrate anti-imperialists. An Oregonian editorial in December 1898 summed up the prevailing attitude towards anti-imperialists as “a certain type of New England men, who . . . have always been distrustful of the patriotism and jealous of the prospective prosperity and power of the West.” Expansionism, a foundational tenet of Oregon’s government and society, was thus inextricably linked to the war with Spain and the annexation of the Philippines. When the Oregon Statesman called “every loyal citizen” to attend the presentation of the USS Oregon colors, invoking the young veterans who had “gladly shed their blood on the plains and in the marshes of far away Luzon,” the flags and the wars they represented became part of a narrative of western exceptionalism that extended far into the past.

USS Oregon’s victory, in contrast to the drawn-out fighting in the Philippines, was over quickly and with significantly more fanfare. Where the Philippines had been a strategic target, intended to prevent Spain’s Pacific Squadron from joining its Atlantic Squadron and doubling its power, Cuba was at the heart of a sixty-eight-day odyssey from San Francisco, California, to Jupiter Inlet, Florida. Because the Panama Canal’s opening was still years in the future, the ship had to circumnavigate South America, a voyage of 13,675 nautical miles. The American public followed its progress through frequent and dramatic updates in the press, speculating on its whereabouts during the periods of silence between stops. Even more dramatic was Oregon’s role in the Battle of Santiago Bay on July 3, 1898. Although Spanish vessels were in bad repair and made a poor showing in general against the comparatively modern U.S. fleet, USS Oregon stood out for its performance in a sixty-mile pursuit of the Spanish cruiser Cristóbal Colón that ended with the enemy ship run aground. A lieutenant of Oregon, while recuperating from a burst ear-drum courtesy of the ship’s eight-inch guns, bragged that “the [Oregon] . . .
THE BATTLESHIP OREGON MARINE PARK was dedicated in 1939 following a successful fundraiser to purchase a more visible berth for the battleship. Oregon’s foremost later marked the spot, a cavity hewn from the western Willamette River bank between Southwest Clay and Jefferson streets, from 1943 to 1956, when it was moved to make room for road construction.

the bulldog of the American navy. The nickname “Bulldog of the Navy” entered common use and remained attached to Oregon long after other battleships had outstripped it in size and speed.

The battleship Oregon may have started life on the cutting edge of world naval development, but it did not remain there for long. The U.S. Navy decommissioned USS Oregon in 1906, and it remained so until 1911, when it was recommissioned as a training vessel. With the end of World War I came the end of Oregon’s useful life. While many vessels from the Spanish-American War were scrapped or sunk at sea for target practice, the battleship Oregon became a floating museum and war memorial in Portland, thanks to advocates in Oregon and the rest of the nation. On June 15, 1925, the battleship was towed up the Willamette River carrying its homeward bound pennant, which had been returned after a quarter century in the State Capitol. Airplanes flew overhead to drop roses onto the ship’s deck, factories lining the banks sounded their whistles, and boats on the Willamette dipped their flags to salute Oregon as it passed. The Oregonian of the following day estimated that 20,000 people had throned the bridges and riverbanks to witness the battleship Oregon’s final voyage.

The press billed the museum on board Oregon as a “patriotic shrine,” which was appropriate to the quasi-religious significance attached to the ship and its material legacy. Even objects several times removed from the U.S. victory at Santiago were treated with reverence. Through the efforts of Cora A. Thompson, secretary of the state commission that governed the ship and its onboard museum, Oregon became the official national repository for Spanish-American War history, thereby expanding its mission to encompass people and events unrelated to the battleship itself except through mutual involvement in America’s “splendid little war.”

In the Battleship Oregon Museum, the “homeward bound” pennant mingled with infantry uniforms, Krag–Jørgensen rifles, and other militaria. It also shared space with war trophies: captured flags; kampilans, bolo knives, and other traditional Filipino weaponry; furnishings from the Spanish castle in Manila; exotic textiles; and more gruesome mementos, such as a tanned piece of human skin. The museum elevated each object and photograph in spiritual and historical significance by virtue of its display in such a monumental setting. At the same time, the quantity of material on display in the ship suppressed granular interpretation and condensed many nuanced narratives into an anonymous slurry of conquest.

The museum’s promotional materials called for all “patriotic citizens” to...
visit and support the museum, echoing the nationalism of the Gilded Age that had heralded the crew’s visit in 1901.44 This was not the only way in which the battleship stirred memories of the Spanish-American War era. While the Battleship Oregon Museum enjoyed immediate popularity among locals and tourists, it also courted controversy; during the Great Depression, some argued that the practical needs of Oregonians outweighed the ship’s expensive upkeep.45 Giving voice to the anti-imperialist sentiment that had been markedly absent from Oregon’s press in the earlier era, progressive politician Monroe M. Sweetland claimed: “Not only does [the ship’s] presence glorify war in general, but it particularly glorifies the entirely uncalled-for war against Spain, which Americans should be eager to forget.” Sweetland referred to Oregon as a “propaganda battleship” and “a symbol of our stupidity and cupidity.”46 He was part of a vocal minority that considered the battleship Oregon’s historical significance to be a source of shame rather than pride. The voices calling for the ship’s removal would never outshout those calling for its preservation, but they challenged the story it purported to tell, one of a nation united in support of colonial expansion.

If Oregon could lay claim to the national spoils of the Spanish-American War, it could not, in the end, maintain its grasp on the ship that held them. The battleship Oregon had not been gifted to the state but only loaned by the U.S. Navy. While the arrangement was intended to be permanent, the production demands of World War II caused the federal government to reclaim the ship for slightly less auspicious uses than it had carried out in prior wars. In 1943, a scrapyard in Kalama denuded Oregon of its superstructure, and the hulk became a munitions barge. Manufacturers, such as Commercial Iron Works in Portland, turned scrap iron from the ship into items such as engine bases used in Liberty Ships. The salvage was not well publicized, however, leading many to conclude that the battleship’s removal had been “needless” — even, to one commentator, “the most unnecessary, wasteful incident of the war.”47 The battleship’s forecast remained in Portland as a testament to Oregon’s years on the waterfront. Marshall N. Dana, editor of the Oregon Journal and chair of the Battleship Oregon Commission, dedicated the mast to the City of Portland on July 4, 1944, using the occasion to decry the “humiliating” loss of the battleship and to eulogize it as a “martyred hero.” Dana claimed: “This foremast is for memory. We who dedicate it here today and present it to the city are but a few of the many thousands who cherish the memory of [Oregon].”48 The mast initially stood at the foot of Southwest Oak Street in the site of the battleship’s former berth, but it was moved to its current location at the foot of Southwest Clay Street in 1956 to accommodate the widening of Naito Parkway (then Harbor Drive).49 The same year, a Japanese scrapyard purchased and demolished the hulk of USS Oregon.50

The Battleship Oregon Commission retained possession of the museum collection, shuffling it from the ship to a series of temporary venues until 1957, when the state legislature dissolved the commission and transferred its assets to the Oregon Department of Finance and Administration. By this time, two world wars had eclipsed the Spanish-American War in public memory, and concern over the fate of the collection was limited. Tom McCall, journalist and future Oregon governor, editorialized the museum’s assets as “of doubtful value, even when measured by the yardstick of nostalgia and history.”51 In 1959, the Department of Finance transferred the collection to OHS, where staff at the time appear to have shared McCall’s assessment: a great many objects were sold at auction; a great many more — including the pennant — were simply never recorded, and over the years, became separated from their history.52 In the 1970s, OHS curatorial staff recataloged many of the U.S. military uniforms, insignia, and accoutrements formerly of the Battleship Oregon Museum collection, mostly dating to the Spanish-American War era. Reflecting interpretive priorities of the time, they accorded certain items, such as an ornate silver punch bowl from Oregon’s officers’ quarters, a higher level of value by showing them regularly in exhibitions.53 War booty collected in the Philippines by American soldiers accounted for a significant portion of the Battleship Oregon Museum collection, but very little of it entered the OHS catalog. Instead, OHS staff stored away souvenirs and looted objects and never put them into exhibit cases. The place that the battleship Oregon pen-
To the battleship Oregon’s crew, the pennant represented homecoming. As a gift to Oregonians, it represented pride in the name and values of a state that had embraced the zealous, often performative nationalism of the Gilded Age, sometimes in ways that were harmful to non-white Oregonians. Later, as a museum object, the pennant carried that nationalism forward into the twentieth century, capturing the imaginations of children born long after the guns of Santiago and Manila had fallen silent. But as much as the pennant has played a part in collective memory, it is also implicated in the collective forgetting of the Spanish-American War, “one of the most important and well-forgotten events in American history.” The battleship Oregon, for better or worse, was a tangible and visible tie to the Spanish-American War. Its loss coincided with and likely contributed to the collective amnesia regarding the wars of 1898 and 1899. As illustrated by the years of obscurity the battleship Oregon pennant has spent in OHS’s collections, preservation of the ship’s legacy — and by extension the wars’ legacy — has been fraught. The pennant’s rediscovery does not conclude this narrative but provides an opportunity to explore it in all its complexities, laying the road to future interpretation of the past.

In 2020, Robert Warren, OHS’s digital services photographer, stands on a scissor lift to photograph the battleship Oregon homeward bound pennant at OHS’s off-site storage facility. The pennant’s length made it a challenge to document, measure, and photograph.

notes

1. “Pennant of the Oregon Presented to This State by the Crew of the Famous Battleship,” Oregon Statesman, July 17, 1901, p. 4.
2. During a 2016–2020 project to catalog, photograph, and rehouse OHS museum collections, the pennant was rediscovered and recorded. For more information on the process of researching and photographing the pennant, see Silvie Andrews, “A Banner Year: The Saga of the U.S.S. Oregon Homeward Bound Pennant,” Dear Oregon, https://ohs.org/blog/a-banner-year.cfm (accessed March 25, 2022). Museum staff concluded that this is the homeward bound pennant presented to the state, due to specific physical descriptions in newspaper coverage and an inscription on the hoist (vertical part of a flag nearest the staff) identifying the battleship Oregon and its quartermaster, H.F.W. Brauer, one of the members of the presenting party. The other two flags, the Union Jack and naval ensign, received less publicity and could not be matched with any certainty to objects in OHS’s museum collection. While OHS holds at least one Union Jack from the battleship Oregon (OHS Museum, 1959-68.165), the ship likely had many such jacks that were replaced as they became worn.
12. The Oregon State Capitol that stood in 1901 was a neoclassical structure built in 1876 that burned down in 1935. It was replaced in 1938 by the state capitol that stands today. For more information, see Elizabeth Walton Potter, “Oregon State Capitol Building of 1876,” The Oregon Encyclopedia, https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/oregon_state_capitol_building_of_1876 (accessed March 25, 2022).
17. Ibid.
18. For a regimental history of the 2nd Oregon National Guard Infantry, see C.U. Gantenbein, The Official Records of the Oregon Volunteers in the Spanish War and Philippine Insurrection (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1898), 20–21.
19. Emilio Aguinaldo y Famy, commander of the PPA and president of the revolutionary government, wrote in a letter to his allies in alliance with American forces that the United States would recognize the Philippines as an independent nation following Spain’s defeat. It is unclear whether the American negotiator, Consul E. Spencer Pratt, did in fact make this promise; he later insisted that he had not. It is possible that he offered Aguinaldo “liberty and autonomy” for the Filipino people, a common euphemism for U.S. rule. Linn, The Philippine War 1899–1901 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 25.
21. For more information on expansionism in the formative years of Oregon’s government and society, see Katrine Barb, "We Were At Our Journey’s End": Settler Sovereignty Formation in Oregon, Oregon Historical Quarterly 120:2 (Winter 2019): 382–411.
35. Ibid.
42. "Pennant of the Oregon," 20. Emilio Aguinaldo y Famy, commander of the PPA and president of the revolutionary government, wrote in a letter to his allies in alliance with American forces that the United States would recognize the Philippines as an independent nation following Spain’s defeat. It is unclear whether the American negotiator, Consul E. Spencer Pratt, did in fact make this promise; he later insisted that he had not. It is possible that he offered Aguinaldo “liberty and autonomy” for the Filipino people, a common euphemism for U.S. rule. Linn, The Philippine War 1899–1901 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 25.