White American Violence on Tribal Peoples on the Oregon Coast

OREGON VOICES

by David G. Lewis and Thomas J. Connolly

Traditional narratives of nineteenth-century western movement of White people across North America often present the West as an empty space waiting to be filled with an energetic, advancing vanguard of civilization. Arriving migrants were not filling an unoccupied demographic void; they were displacing and replacing complex, settled societies that had resided there for thousands of years. The newcomers self-defined their culture and institutions as superior to those practiced by the Indigenous populations, asserting that this presumed superiority granted them a supreme right to govern and control this now-contested space. The resident populations were unconvinced and vigorously opposed Whites' claims to supremacy. Ultimately, the coercive power of violence was the decisive factor in the ascendancy of Whites in the West.

DURING THE PAST five centuries, Native peoples of the North American continent have lost nearly all of their landholdings to peoples of European descent. The acts required for taking those lands rested on the denial that tribal people were humans, deserving of human rights, and that violent actions were wrong when perpetrated on “savage” Indians. The relevant body of law, commonly referred to as the Doctrine of Discovery, is rooted in the Papal bull of 1493, which directed “barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith.” The U.S. Supreme court upheld fundamental elements of this doctrine in 1823.

Long before Europeans and Americans brought new laws and customs to what would become Oregon, Native peoples of the valley and coastal regions controlled access to their natural resources on their lands through property rights and access rules. Specific families often owned assets such as fishing sites or managed gathering places, while hunting grounds might be shared with the broader community. Such rules contributed to their effectiveness as prolific traders who were savvy about commerce. The Tualatin people of the northern Willamette Valley (relatives of Santiam author David Lewis), for example, traded with the Clackamas Chinook for salmon at Willamette Falls, but were not permitted to fish with dip nets. One guilty of trespass or theft from a neighbor might face fatal retribution.

Settlers who began to arrive in the late 1830s and into the decades that followed routinely ignored tribal laws and policies. Over time, fur traders, settlers, miners, entrepreneurs, and military agents engaged in repeated and often shocking acts of violence against Native people. Those acts of physical injury, murder, and trauma provide insight into how White supremacy was institutionalized in Oregon. Bearing witness to this violence is crucial to understanding how those foundations of Oregon White supremacy looked and felt to Native people.

During the fur trade era, the Oregon Country was primarily under the influence of the British Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC). The company’s large trapping parties effectively bypassed engaging with their Native hosts, from whose lands they harvested furs and game “without permission or apology.” Trappers disregarded traditional ownership protocols and, when challenged, countered with a strategy of “massive retaliation” or “generalized vengeance homicide.” The lesson that harming HBC employees could mean the death of multiple innocents firmly established...
subsequent relationships between Indians and Whites. From the Whites’ view, those relationships enforced economic and political superiority, but from the Natives’ perspective, the relationships established an enduring mistrust.

One example, analyzed by scholar R. Scott Byram, illustrates this reality. In 1832, Alsea hunters killed two HBC trappers who were in Alsea territory and trapping for furs without Alsea consent. The Chief Factor of the local HBC outpost at Fort Vancouver, John McLoughlin, instructed his employee, Michel Laframboise, to lead a retaliatory expedition. Laframboise was to deliver the threat that, if the Indians would not identify and kill the perpetrators, the HBC “would come back and Kill every one of the tribe that came in our way and would not stop till we had killed every one of them.”

The retaliatory party attacked an innocent Yaqwina village, and, according to a narrative by Coquelle Thompson, “They shot down man, woman, and child as they ran naked from the houses. Not one escaped. That is why only Yaqwina [Yaquina] John and few others of the Yaquina people survived. [The fur trappers] killed many people in revenge for two of a different tribe.” According to HBC records, the party killed six Indians; an account of the incident reported by Corporal Royal Bensell, however, claimed the “Sixes” (possibly Yaquina) “lost some 400 warriors.” Certainly, both accounts exaggerate the real circumstances to serve their own interests, but as Byram emphasized, in the oral history of the Yaquina, this incident — “in initial, wide-scale breakdown of principles of justice regarding international relations” — was effectively the end of the Yaquina people as a nation.

In 1851, an American schooner arrived at a remote natural coastal port in the territory of the Kwatami tunne, the Sixes River band of the Tututni peoples, which would come to be known as Port Orford. American businessman Capt. William Tichenor had the goal of beginning a new American port town to service the gold fields of southern Oregon, and he secured a donation land claim in the Kwatami lands without having first discussed his desires with the Tribe. Such claims were technically illegal under U.S. land law, as the Tribes had neither negotiated treaties nor sold their land to the United States.

Tichenor had hired men from Portland and took on firearms at Astoria, and on arrival at his land claim, they mounted a ship’s cannon on top of a large shore rock, called by the local Athapaskan speakers Ma-no-xe oe and later renamed Battle Rock. They encountered stiff opposition from the Kwatami people who occupied the area, supplemented by a canoe arriving from the direction of Rogue River and bringing the number of Indians to “at least one hundred.” Tichenor’s men responded to the Kwatami’s first attack with small arms fire and cannon shots, killing twelve or thirteen Natives with the cannon’s first firing. Following the battle, “We counted seventeen dead Indians,” according to an account by party leader J.M. Kirkpatrick, who later learned “from an Indian at the mouth of the Umpqua that there were twenty killed and fifteen wounded.” After fourteen days of this standoff, Tichenor’s men escaped north.

When Tichenor returned from San Francisco, he found his men gone and signs of a great battle. He again went south to San Francisco and returned on July 14 with some sixty-five men, who he employed to establish a firmly fortified beachhead and to claim Port Orford for his town. The men who escaped battle eventually reached settlements in the north, and on hearing their story, the command at Fort Vancouver sent a military detachment to punish the Tribes and to build a fort, Port Orford, to ensure the safety of the Americans in the region. More deaths followed, including many due to punishments handed out by the military detachment on neighboring Tribes. Tichenor, supported by the U.S. military, created the first southern coastal port on the Oregon coast, on unceded Kwatami lands, on September 14, 1851. It served as the center of colonization and Indian administration for the southern Oregon coast for many years thereafter.

Editorials in regional newspapers debated the treatment of Native people, with some regularly calling for the extermination of the Tribes, who they referred to as if they were a scourge on the region needing to be eliminated. An editorial in the Salem-based Oregon Statesman, on July 8, 1851, for example, stated, “Permission has been asked, we learn, of the Governor [of Oregon], to march into their [Rogue River] country and slay the savages wherever they can be found.” The Oregon City Oregon Spectator editorialized on September 2, 1853, that:

*The Indians are revengeful, though they seem bent upon plunder more than the shedding of blood; but the whites are highly exasperated, and are determined, they say, to exterminate the race. . . . A general disposition appears to pervade the minds of the whites to kill all the Indians they come across. The extinction of the entire race in that region is the most unanimous sentiment.*

These sentiments promoted the genocide of Native peoples. The rhetoric was reinforced by the depredations
laws and policies of California and Oregon, which allowed for the reimbursement of expenses from such attacks, and by federal Indian Bureau of Indian Affairs policy, which provided Americans, but not Indians, reimbursements for war losses.16

Beginning in the fall of 1853, entrepreneur Augustus F. Miller made money by building a port town at the mouth of the Chetco River to serve southwest Oregon miners with a store, hotel, and his own ferry service. He planned to establish that town in the midst of two Chetco villages at the estuary. At the Chetco River village called Chit, the Tolowa-speaking Athapascons were already offering ferry services to American miners and travelers.17 Miller ordered the Chetco people to stop offering White people ferry rides across the river, but they did not comply — despite his numerous threats. In February 1854, Miller hired experienced Indian fighters from California to destroy the two Native towns. Early one morning, Miller’s mercenaries fired into the plank houses, killing an estimated twenty-three natives.18

In May 1854, Joel Palmer, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Oregon, traveled to southwestern Oregon, to Crescent City, California, and then north to the Chetco River to investigate the Chetco massacre, which he documented in his September 11, 1854, report:

Three men remained in the lodges and returned the fire with bows and arrows. Being unable to get a sight of these Indians, they ordered two squaws, pets in the family of Miller, to set fire to their lodges.

Two were consumed in the configuration, and the third, while raising his head through the flame and smoke for breath, was shot dead.19 Josiah Parrish, the Indian sub-Agent of the Port Orford District, had reported on the massacre to Palmer on July 20, 1854:

On my arrival at Chetco on the fifth of June last I was creditably informed that the massacre of six Indians, three of which men shot and three burned to death in their houses, and the burning of forty-two Indian houses (which composed these villages), that one Augustus F. Miller was the chief instigator in the bloody tragedy. [Miller] sent to Crescent City and raised a party of desperate Indian killers. . . . and then one morning about daylight when they were all quiet, asleep in their houses, they were attacked by this party, who shot three of their men killing, them dead on the spot, then set their houses on fire over their heads and burned three of them alive, and wounded others.20

The surviving Chetco people escaped, hiding in the Coast Range and on a river island to protect themselves from further attacks. Palmer sent a Native boy to persuade them to return to their villages, and sent presents, but he had no success in getting them to return or speak with him.21

The legal system newly imposed on the region offered no justice in the face of this violence. Acting on Palmer’s orders, Parrish arrested Miller and had him placed “into the hands of the military at Port Orford.” The Justice of the Peace, however, soon released Miller, which led Parrish to conclude: “here allow me to express an opinion that Miller nor no other man can be convicted of any crime against the Indians however murderous and criminal.”22 Palmer described the events:

Miller was subsequently arrested and placed in the custody of the military at Port Orford; but on his examination before a justice of the peace was set at large on the ground of justification and want of sufficient testimony to commit.

The details of a similar occurrence at Coquille have been laid before you in a copy of the report of Special Agent F.M. Smith, of the circumstantial truthfulness of which I am fully satisfied.

These narratives will give you some idea of the state of affairs in the mining districts on this coast. Arrears are evidently useless, as no act of a white man against an Indian, however atrocious, can be followed by a conviction.23

Palmer’s frustration reflected the overall lack of justice for Native peoples in the Oregon court system. White people could commit crimes, murders, rapes, and genocide on Native peoples and would not be held accountable. Many Native people, for decades afterward, continued to hide in the coastal forests to protect themselves from White Americans.24

The attack on the two Chetko villages followed another that had taken place recently, just twenty-two miles to the south, on the Tolowa peoples of the Smith River, in California. Tolowa people, including “Pyuwa of Enchwo [a Tolowa village], who lived to be a very old man; one of very few adult male survivors,” provided a first-person account:

People were gathered for Needash, after the fall harvest, at the center of the world at Yontocket. Indians from all over gathered to celebrate creation and give thanks to the creator. On the third night of the ten night dance, whites came into the village in the early morning hours. They torched the redwood plank houses, and as the Indians attempted to escape through the round holes in the houses, the militia killed them. This village existed as the largest native settlement consisting of over thirty houses. The whites would cut off the heads of the Indians and through them into the fire. They lined their horses on the slough and as the Indians sought refuge, they were gunned down. . . . The center of the world, Yontocket, burned for days and that’s how the place received the name “Burnt Ranch.” Roughly five hundred Indians died in this massacre.25

The Yontocket, or Burnt Ranch, massacre was just one in a series of such attacks that occurred nearly every year along the northern California coast, from 1853 into the 1860s. Thousands of coastal Native people were killed or removed to reservations, making room for White settlers and freeing up the land for new American coastal port settlements, such as Crescent City, Brookings, and Port Orford. The pattern of first attacking and pacifying tribal villages, followed by forcing the removal of the survivors, was true to both the northern California and southern Oregon coasts.26

In 1857, Oregon Indian Superintendent James Nesmith ordered John F. Miller, Indian Agent at the Grand Ronde Agency, to begin hiring Special Indian Agents, to hunt down encampments of Natives hiding in the Coast Range to force their removal north to the reservation.27 White settlers sent letters to
Indian agents, demanding the removal of remaining coastal bands. One petition, sent to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Oregon City, was from seventeen “residents at and near the Mouth of Rogue River” who requested the removal of the Chetcos, declaring:

the route from this point to Crescent City cannot be passed in safety in consequence of numbers of Indians being suffered to remain in the vicinity of Whaleshead and Chetco. . . .

We do not come before you as supplicants but demand as a right to ask you to adopt and execute such measures as will ensure peace and security to us for the future and throw around us the shield our Country Cheerfully guarantees to all “American Citizens.”

These “Citizens” saw themselves as the righteous occupants of the land, and those who had occupied the land for untold generations, and whose lands were sanctified by the remains of countless ancestors, as outlaws and threats to the manifest destiny of “Americans.”

The original project of removing the Chetcos began in the fall of 1856 and was largely completed by June 1858. Between January 3 and February 15, 1858, Lt. Lorenzo Lorain of Fort Umpqua, Capt. William Tichenor, and a small detached command of men began to escort the remaining Chetcos north. They collected about 150 Indians. Once past the Rogue River, all of the soldiers left the column, and with fewer men to escort them, a number of Natives attempted escape. Acting on a tip from some of the Native women, Tichenor laid a trap for the Native men and ordered his men to shoot if they tried to escape again, which they did. Following the incident, Major John B. Scott of Fort Umpqua reported:

the Indian men in the party — say 15 in number — tried several times to effect an escape . . . and return to their old haunts; and he was convinced from the report of some of the squaws, that at a certain place on the route, they would make another attempt; and that in consequence, he so disposed of the men in his employ, that when the point was reached, they fell upon these Indians, killing fourteen of them, and wounding the two boys — one Indian man, a squaw & some few children escaped.

Through his continued service, Tichenor appears to never have been held accountable for his actions. In fact, First Lt. George P. Ihrie, stationed at Fort Umpqua, wrote to James Nesmith, praising Tichenor, on June 19, 1858. “It affords me much gratification and pleasure to bear testimony to the efficient and ceaseless and judicious efforts of Mr. Wm. Tichenor of Port Orford, O.T., in securing and safely conducting to the Grand Round Reservation the families of several bands of Indians, the Warriors of which, two years ago, were in open hostilities to the whites, and the unpunished perpetrators of numerous murders and depredations.”

The intent in the removal of the coastal tribes was to make the Oregon Territory a place for White Americans, and that is the story of the settlement of the Oregon Territory. Tribal rights, sovereignty, and previous occupation by tribes and bands were simply not considered relevant by opportunistic settlers, gold miners, and businessmen. The deciding factor in determination of land tenure or the administration of justice was whether one was a White person — a true “American Citizen” — or not.

Some representatives of the United States were well aware of the dichotomy of rights in the territory. Correspondence of two of the Indian Superintendents of Oregon, James W. Nesmith and Joel Palmer, documents their recognition of the need for government protection of Native people from White settlers. Writing to the Commission of Indian Affairs in 1857, Nesmith pleaded:

As the lands of the [Indians] are entirely occupied by the whites, their means of obtaining a living are greatly curtailed. The wants of those “untutored wards of the Government” should be supplied, and their rights protected, unless the Government has determined that they should be doomed to extermination at the hands of the whites.
In 1856, Palmer wrote the following to Governor of the Oregon Territory George Law Curry:

You are not ignorant of the feeling... which in many districts looked to the system of extermination as the only available policy to be pursued by the Government. A history of the settlement and occupancy by whites, of Southern Oregon and Northern California would be a history of wrang against the red man; and the cunning, the violation of faith, the treachery and savage brutality said to be the characteristics of that people, have been practiced towards them to a degree almost inconceivable, by the reckless portion of whites who have cursed that land, with their presence the past six years.34

Nesmith and Palmer reflected the higher ideals present in American policy, but the betrayals of good faith were relentless. Throughout western Oregon, White Americans established land claims well before any land cessions had been practiced towards them to a degree almost inconceivable, by the recklessness of whites who have cursed that land, with their presence the past six years.34

The violence brought to bear on Indian peoples persisted in the written word. The telling of events leading to the eruption of the Rogue River War serves as an example. In October 1855, a band of “white settlers and miners from Jacksonville” (self-described “exterminators”) attacked a Takelma encampment on Little Butte Creek near Table Rock, killing dozens (estimates range from 28 to 106).36 This was a final atrocity for many Indians, who retaliated with violence, killing 15 to 27 Whites the following day. As Charles Wilkinson writes: “It is unerving the extent to which the majority society, even with the perspective of time, conceived of Indians as completely apart from the Oregon populace — apart, it seems, from even the human race... . Even Frances Fuller Victor, one of the finest nineteenth-century western historians, writing in 1894, called October 9 “altogether the bloodiest day the valley had ever seen;” completely dismissing the far greater number of Indian people murdered the previous day.37 Such historical bias compounded the effects of violence on tribal people.

Oregon’s Tribal peoples hold a significant amount of disaffection regarding their long-term mistreatment at the hands of the federal and state governments and by those Americans who took whatever they wanted to and tried to exterminate the Tribes. Tribal members, historians, and others have worked to document and share the long and complex histories of treaties, reservations, boarding schools, federal termination policy, and a variety of other methods of attempting to erase, or assimilate, Native people, and of the ways Native people have survived and thrived, despite those efforts. During the 1970s and 1980s, Congress passed a series of acts that guaranteed significant rights to Native peoples. Laws such as the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 (AIRFA) (42 U.S.C. § 1996), the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (ICWA) (Public Law 95–608, 92 Stat. 3069), and Indian Education Act of 1972, (Public Law No. 92–318, 86 Stat. 235) began to secure rights for tribal peoples. Under the U.S. national policy of self-determination (Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975, Public Law 93–638), Tribes are now able to advocate for their rights and have begun the process of recovering from over two hundred years of colonization by the United States. The recovery is still young, and an honest Oregon Native history of the past century and a half remains largely untold. The recovery of that history and the context of colonization, of which White supremacy was a large part, is important to the process of recovery and healing efforts by Native peoples.

NOTES


10. Orvil Dodge, ed., The Heroes of Battle Rock or The Miner’s Reward, 1–2. See also Bert Webber and Margie Webber, Battle Rock: The Hero’s Story: A True Account—Oregon Coast Indian Attack (Webb Research Group, 1992), 27, and G.G. Walling, History of Southern Oregon, Comprising Jackson, Josephine, Douglas, Curry and Coos Counties (Portland, Ore., 1884). This place-name spelling is transcribed from J.P. Harrington Papers, 1943, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, roll 26, frames 384–85; George Wasson, Jr., a Coquille descendant, referenced to J.P. Harrington the place Mo’na’-hay-Thet, which means, “ply canoe back and forth—rock,” when gathering mussels there. The word is probably manaxe, and Harrington’s linguistic transcription is probably mōnāxe-’i [David Lewis’s personal communication with Patricia Whereat Phillips, 2019]. The Athapaskan tribal name is Mo-no-ve-oe. The name Kwotomí has also been written as Quotomah or Quoth-to-mah See also David G. Lewis, "Ethnohistory of Battle Rock: Preparation for the National Register Nomination," Coquille Tribe in-house report, 2017.


15. Oregon Statesman, editorial, July 8, 1851. The editorial is critical of an Oregon Spectator (Oregon City) editorial that is itself critical of unsuccessful miners who were fomenting war and extermination of the Tribes as a means of gaining pay for their time. It was common for the newspapers of the time to criticize one another.

16. See federal records of Indian Depredations claims in Records of the Oregon Superintendency, National Archives Records Administration (hereafter NARA), RG 75, M2; records of the Oregon Superintendency, NARA, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, 1824–1880, RG 75, M34. The records of depredations claims extend from 1856 into the 1870s with additional claims from descendants happening into the twentieth century. There is no record that Tribes could make similar claims. For Oregon volunteer militia war claims and federal claims see Frances Fuller Victor, The Early Indian Wars of Oregon (Salem: F.C. Baker, State Printer, 1894), 274–320.


19. ibid.


22. Parrish, “Report of the Chetco Umpqua.” According to Oregon’s Organic Acts, section 700, if a person was of unsound mind, or unable to give testimony to the satisfaction of the court, they could be discounted as a witness. Because most Indians in this period could not speak English, with few translators available, at individual judge’s discretion, the court could discount the Native witnesses. Matthew P. Deadly, The Organic and Other general laws of Oregon, together with the national Constitution and other public acts and statutes of the United States, 1845–1864 (Portland: H.L. Pittock, Oregon State Printer, 1866), 324.


16. Scott to Machall, June 17, 1858, RG 75, M2 Roll 16.

17. Scott to Machall, June 17, 1858, RG 75, M2 Roll 16.


19. Scott to Machall, June 17, 1858, RG 75, M2, Roll 16.

20. Scott to Machall, June 17, 1858, RG 75, M2, Roll 16.


22. Major J.B. Scott to J.W. Nesmith, July 26, 1858, Records of the Oregon Superintendency, NARA, RG 75, M2, Roll 16.


27. Wilkinson, The People are Dancing Again, 120.