

Benjamin Simpson



YAQUINA BAY LIGHTHOUSE CONSTRUCTION MANAGER - 1871

The history leading up to Benjamin Simpson's accomplishments in Oregon was 158 years in the making. Ben's earliest documented ancestors were Richard Simpson and his second wife, Anne Gilbert who in 1688 settled on a site called "Simpson's Choice" in Old Baltimore County, Maryland, near Aberdeen

Proving Grounds. The settlement of the area was part of the tobacco trade funded by English businessmen, who recruited investors and indentured servants to the New World with visions of affluence. However, the reality was much less exciting as the land was soon exhausted and the succeeding generations were

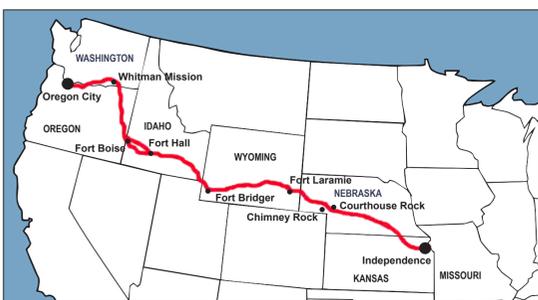
forced to relocate to North Carolina, then to Tennessee, and later to two different locations in Missouri. They arrived there in 1820, never achieving more than a subsistence existence.

Here is a timeline of Benjamin Simpson's life in the bountiful Oregon territory.

 Pictures with this symbol indicate that the image is a close approximation of the actual item.

1818: Benjamin Simpson born March 29, 1818 in Warren County, Tennessee

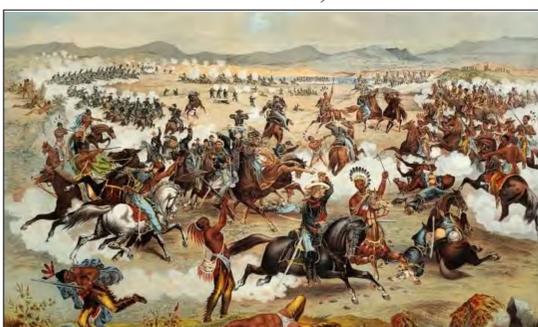
1846: At the age of 28, he was the captain of a 50-wagon train going from Missouri to Oregon on the recently opened Oregon Trail.



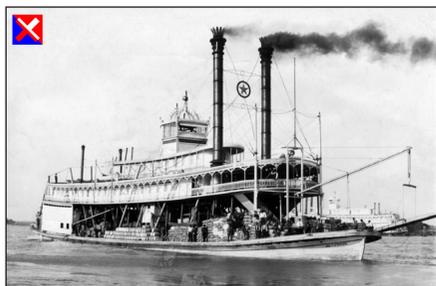
The Oregon Territory was shared with Great Britain until June 15, 1846. Their wagon train was about a third of the way on the Oregon Trail when this occurred.

1847: Ben built a sawmill in Oregon City, the first of four that he had built: Oregon City (1847), Grande Ronde (1856), Santiam River (1851) and Oneatta (1871).

1848: Ben joined the Oregon Mounted Volunteers to pursue and punish the Cayuse Indians responsible for the Whitman Massacre for the Whitman Mission near Walla Walla, WA.



1849: He built a paddlewheel steamboat for use in the Willamette River.



He shipped lumber and knockdown cabins from his sawmill to California as the gold rush created a massive demand. He had concluded it was smarter to sell to the miners than to seek gold. Also, he and a partner opened a store in Oregon to sell goods acquired in California on returning voyages

1850: Simpson was first elected to the Territorial Legislature – the first of his seven terms in the Oregon Territorial and State Legislatures.

1851: He built a 120-foot steamboat to transport passengers and farm products on the Willamette River between The Falls and Corvallis. He also purchased a store at Parkersburg, a warehouse at Fairfield Landing and another sawmill on the Santiam River.

1856: Ben was a sutler at Fort Yamhill, Polk County, where he formed a close friendship with Second Lieutenant Philip H. Sheridan. Sheridan went on to be a Major General and one of Ulysses S. Grant's most trusted commanders during the Civil War.

While in Fort Yamhill, Ben was appointed postmaster and secured a government contract to build a dam and sawmill on the Grande Ronde Indian Reservation.

1862: On several occasions Ben was asked to help settle conflicts between settlers and Indians and in 1862 was appointed as temporary Indian Agent at the Grande Ronde Reservation until 1863 when he was appointed by President Lincoln to be the Indian Agent for Siletz Agency of the Coastal Reservation at Yaquina Bay, a post he held until 1871.

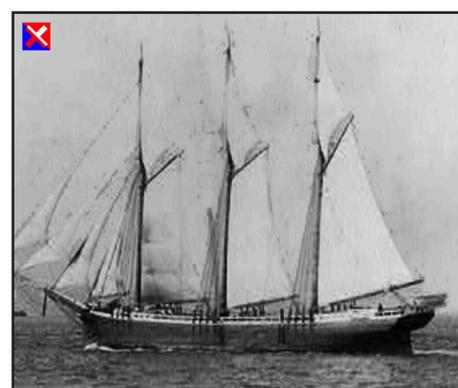
While at this post he also invested in the Ellendale Woolen Mills Company in The Dalles and contracted to build a road for the Oregon Central Military Road Company from Yaquina Bay to Silver City, Idaho, using Indian labor at equitable rates.

1865: Ben acquired the newspaper, *The Oregon Statesman*, and installed his two sons, Sylvester and Samuel, to boost his chances in another run for state legislative office.



1868: One of Ben's 11 offspring, his son, Samuel Leonidas Simpson had his poem, "Beautiful Willamette" published on April 18, 1868. It was highly regarded and he was designated Oregon's poet laureate.

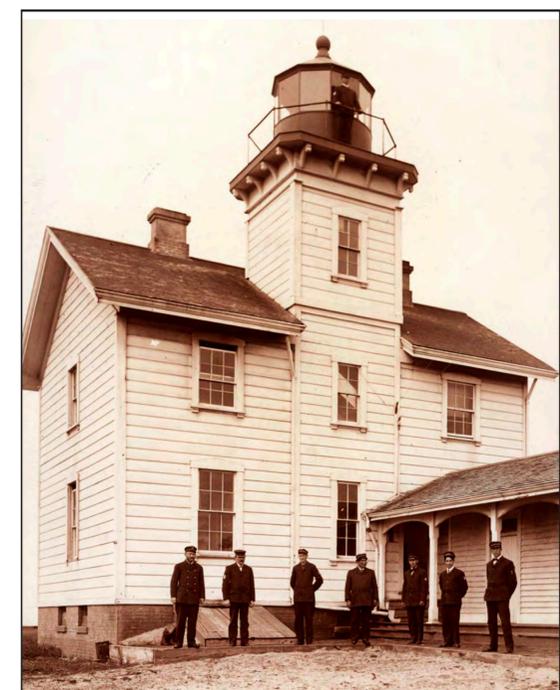
1869: Ben had the schooner, *The Louisa Simpson* built.



1870: He had the 200-ton, three-masted schooner, *Elinora* built.

Ben's schooners hauled lumber between Yaquina Bay and San Francisco returning with supplies and merchandise for his store.

1871: Ben was awarded the contract to be the construction manager for the Yaquina Bay Lighthouse. The lighthouse was completed in six months. When the light and lens arrived for the lighthouse, no one was available to install it so Ben did it himself.



He established a town he named Oneatta, where he built a steam-powered sawmill.

1875: President Grant appointed Ben to be Surveyor General of the Oregon Territory

1883: Ben moved to Selma, Alabama, where he received an appointment for the position of Post Office Inspector.

1911: 5/17/1911 Benjamin Simpson passed away and was buried at Lone Fir Cemetery, Portland, OR



Postscript: The Federal Lighthouse Commission determined that their original siting of the lighthouse was in error and decommissioned it in 1974. The structure housed the Yaquina Life Saving Station for the organization we now know as the U.S. Coast Guard for 27 years. More recently, the City of Newport used the building as accommodations for an Artist in Residence program.

Primary Source: *After the Campfires, The Simpson Family in Oregon 1846-1910* by Kirke Wilson.

