Atkinson: Pioneer Oregon Educator

Donald J. Sevetson

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George Atkinson arrived in Oregon at the right time. A turbulent, energetic period of scattered settlement and political uncertainty was about to end. An officially sanctioned government was about to be formed. He came expecting to stay, and to make a difference. His wide-ranging skills and irrepressible optimism made valuable contributions during the formative stages of the region and state.

He arrived in 1848 with the expectation of spreading Congregational churches across the Pacific Northwest. That was slow to occur. He saw little growth in numbers of members or of churches until the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1884. Those long years were a disappointment to his sponsoring mission society, but he used the time effectively to advance the cause of education. The staid newcomer who had hoped to plant the institutions of the East soon came to adapt appreciatively to his new setting. Whether it was settlers staking mile-square claims, neighbors rushing off to newly opened mines, extemporaneous 'stump speakers', climbing a mountain, planting his garden or building his house, he accepted life in Oregon on its own terms. He rarely passed up an opportunity to take part in it, sing its praises and trumpet its potential.

-Excerpt from Chapter 17

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ATKINSON
PIONEER OREGON EDUCATOR

DONALD J. SEVETSON
DEDICATED TO
OUR GRANDCHILDREN
JESSICA, IAN, AND CLARA
Autumn, 2011
“EDUCATION IS IMPORTANT”
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Patricia Nelson Limerick’s book, *Legacy of Conquest*,1 turned many things upside down in the field of the history of the American West. Among her contributions to our understanding was the revelation that many traditional Western ‘folk heroes’ were very flawed individuals. Her more recent work, *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West*, is a stimulating, provocative series of essays. One of them, “Believing in the West”, continues the theme of the first work while exploring the place of religion throughout western history. In that essay Limerick proposes a ‘different kind of Western hero’. She puts it this way:

“It is time for . . . (a) sustainable hero who can replace the old, exhausted and depleted Western heroes. Sustainability in a hero means, very concretely, providing inspiration that sustains the spirit and the soul. While inconsistency can disqualify a conventional hero, a degree of inconsistency is one of the essential qualifications of a sustainable hero. Models of sustainable heroism are drawn from the record of people doing the right thing *some of the time* (italics in the original). Sustainable heroism comes only in moments and glimpses, but they are moments and glimpses in which the universe lights up.”2

Since her essay is about religion in the West, Limerick gives examples of Western clergy who were sustainable heroes. Among them is Episcopal
Bishop Daniel Tuttle, assigned in 1867 to oversee his church’s work in Idaho, Montana, and Utah.

This work portrays another minister who belongs on the list of sustainable Western heroes, George Henry Atkinson. He, we will contend, also “did the right thing some of the time.” How much, and how wrong he was at other times, is what this work is all about. Atkinson was a man of his time, and some of his principles and prejudices present themselves to us in uncomfortable, even offensive ways. Nevertheless, the range of his vision, the scope of his achievements and his unrelenting dedication to his values will call forth admiration and even amazement, if not always agreement.

And, lest it be assumed that he was fully different than the generation of Western heroes whose stories were once in dime novels and still fill our bookshelves, cinemas and television screens, we will even find him confronted by a drunken, pistol-wielding sheriff on a saloon-lined street in a frontier town. Armed only with ‘weapons of the spirit’, he maintained his dignity in the encounter, and prevailed.

Born in Massachusetts in 1819, Atkinson’s values and goals were shaped in New England culture. At the age of twenty-eight, in 1847, he and the former Nancy Bates, his bride of one year, left those familiar surroundings for Oregon. Life in Oregon changed George Atkinson’s outlook and behavior. He soon moved beyond strong attachments to New England ways to become an enthusiastic participant in and advocate for life on the Pacific slope. He played an important role in shaping the life and culture of the Pacific Northwest, even as that life and culture reshaped him.

Home missions had begun as a way of starting churches among easterners as they moved west. Before sending the Atkinsons to Oregon the American Home Missionary Society (AHMS) had already placed agents in northern New England, the Great Lakes states, and Iowa. Their strategies for planting churches, placing missionaries, and creating educational institutions had been tested in those places. Oregon was much farther away than any place where they were at work.

George Atkinson, as he prepared for mission work, was full of hopes, expectations and excitement. As a young Christian influenced by the Second Great Awakening he believed fervently that no one, anywhere, should be beyond the hearing of the Gospel and the reading of the Word of God in the Bible. Raised in Massachusetts and Vermont and educated in those two states and in New Hampshire, he shared “a sense of the responsibility
of religiously strong New England to the whole nation." He saw universal education as the key to accomplishing that goal.

Things in Oregon did not turn out as George Atkinson, or the AHMS, anticipated. Problems were numerous. Mining mania often drew the attention of the newcomers who were in the Willamette Valley. They had made the difficult six month journey on the Oregon Trail, lured by stories of fabulous opportunity. Whenever or wherever brighter prospects beckoned many were ready to move again. That high level of instability left many communities uncertain about the future.

Atkinson quickly learned that a commission from the AHMS did not carry much weight with new neighbors in Oregon. Most people there were from the Midwest or mid-south, inclined toward the frontier religion of Baptists, Methodists, and Cumberland Presbyterians. Although a few Congregational and Presbyterian ministers and wives greeted the Atkinsons upon their arrival, none had been commissioned, as Atkinson was, by the AHMS. Several had come to the area, early in the 1840s, as independent Congregational and Presbyterian missionaries. In the spring of 1848 the missionaries that had been sent to Indians by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) also arrived in the Willamette Valley. The U.S. Army had compelled them to leave their mission fields because of Indian wars. Thus Atkinson was but one missionary among several, and there was little unity among them about strategies or goals.

It was a new experience for the AHMS to have missionaries deployed so far from their New York office. Atkinson did not receive a reply to his first letter to the Society’s secretaries until nineteen months after reaching Oregon. Facing a situation quite unlike what he and his sponsors had anticipated, he made many important decisions on his own. He branched out beyond his church responsibilities. He designed a system of public education while also starting private academies to train teachers. By mid-career he had become respected leader in the broader community, voicing his views from coast to coast on matters as diverse as railroads, agriculture and Indian policy.

Not all apostles of New England’s ‘Christian civilization’ were clergy. Frederick Billings was a Vermont native. His biographer states that upon arriving in San Francisco in 1849, Billings quickly saw that
“People should be putting down roots more quickly than they were, especially where social services were concerned. His interest in schools, churches, hospitals, orphan asylums, and the like stemmed from a conviction that only through family life would San Francisco prosper.”

The same writer adds that “these were, perhaps, somewhat conventional views, at least for a young man of his background, but they were not widely held (in San Francisco). As one examines the history of San Francisco from 1849 to about 1856 . . . one encounters perhaps two hundred individuals who worked for the common good as Billings defined it.”

Atkinson, like Billings, found his neighbors in the West very different from those he had known in his earlier years, yet he knew that Oregon was going to be his home. This book is about his life in, struggles with, and contributions to that new home.

1. Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*.
4. See Appendix for a description of the AHMS and other Congregational mission societies.
6. Among the independent home missionaries were Harvey and Emeline Clark, William and Elizabeth Geiger, John Smith Griffin and Desire Griffin, and P.B. and Adelaide Littlejohn. For details on their journey to Oregon see Buan, *A Changing Mission*, 1-35.
7. ABCFM missionaries forced to leave reservations were Henry and Eliza Spalding, Elkanah and Mary Walker, and Cushing and Myra Eells.
On the morning of June 20, 1848 a small wheat boat left Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River, heading downstream toward the Willamette, a tributary of the Columbia. Peter Skene Ogden, chief factor for the Hudson’s Bay Company at Fort Vancouver, had arranged the transportation for George and Nancy Atkinson, missionaries of the American Home Missionary Society who had recently arrived from the Sandwich Islands. The wheat boat, powered by oars wielded by six Indians, also carried three other passengers. One of them was John Gulick,¹ fifteen year old son of Peter and Fanny Gulick. The Gulicks, missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, had been in the Sandwich Islands since 1828. They asked the Atkinsons to take their son with them to Oregon, in hopes that a change of climate would benefit his health.

The party left the Columbia, traveling upstream on the Willamette to the tiny settlement of Portland, where they stayed the night.² The next morning, Wednesday, June 21, they arrived at their destination at eleven o’clock. Oregon City was the western terminus of the Oregon Trail and the seat of Oregon’s provisional government.

Oregon City had been the Atkinsons’ goal since leaving Boston for the Sandwich Islands on Oct. 25, 1847 on the barque Samoset. Sailing around Cape Horn, they had arrived in Honolulu in 125 days. It took them three
months to arrange passage to Astoria and Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River. The trip to Oregon City was the final leg on their journey.

The Atkinsons had chosen to travel to Oregon by sea because only in that way “Mr. Atkinson could take books and other helps for his work, his own private library and family supplies, and other necessaries.” An overland route would have permitted but minimal travel necessities. The cost of shipping their twenty-five boxes by sea came to $1,420.78. Atkinson’s priority for educational work is indicated by the fact that he brought $207 worth of school textbooks – the first to be offered for sale in quantity in Oregon - and $475 worth of religious literature. He later wrote of both the initial selection of textbooks and further activity along the same line:

“The commission given Rev. G.H. Atkinson by the American Home Missionary Society in 1847 to labor in Oregon, instructed him to aid in the work of education. This led him to spend several weeks before coming, in carefully examining various series of school books, which resulted in the choice of Sanders’ Series of Readers and Speller, Thompson’s Arithmetic, Davies’ Algebra, Smith’s Geography, Wilson’s History, Wells’ Grammars, and the Spencerian System of Penmanship. An invoice of $200 worth were brought by him on the publishers’ commission in 1848, and sold in 1848 and 1849, and an invoice of $1700 worth were soon ordered, which were in 1850 or 1851 sold in bulk to Hon. L.D.C. LaTourette, of Oregon City, whose store was the first to have a school book department, and finally re-sold to Hon. S.J. McCormick, the veteran book seller of Portland.”

They arrived at a time of dramatic change in Oregon. Its status as United States land had finally been clarified in 1846, when an international treaty with Great Britain fixed the western boundary between the United States and Canada. The treaty ended a confused and tense time of joint occupancy and administration of the region by the two nations. The Anglo-American Convention of 1818, which established joint occupancy, was negotiated by President James Monroe’s Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, as one of several international agreements made during Monroe’s administration. That act allowed the two nations “joint occupancy” of Oregon for a period of ten years. The same nations, in the Convention of 1827, agreed to extend
joint occupancy indefinitely, subject to abrogation by either party with one year's notice. The 1846 treaty brought the arrangement to a conclusion.

The 1846 treaty led the mission-minded Congregational churches of New England to change Oregon from a foreign field to a domestic one. Responsibility moved from one mission society, The American Board for Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), to another, the American Home Missionary Society (AHMS). The ABCFM had sent five missionary couples to Oregon in 1836 and 1838. The Atkinsons were the first sent by the AHMS.

Unpopularity of joint occupancy of Oregon had grown so strong by 1845 that in his inaugural address President James K. Polk declared that “Our title to the country of Oregon is clear and unquestionable.”

Two years earlier, in 1843, restless Willamette Valley settlers had taken matters into their own hands, meeting at Champoeg, some fifteen miles above Oregon City on the Willamette River, and organizing a “provisional government” for Oregon. They elected a governor and other public officials and selected Oregon City as the seat of government. Those actions were of doubtful legality, ignoring both the 1818 Treaty and the 1827 Convention, but expressed the desire of a growing community for protection by and affiliation with the United States.

The Atkinsons arrived while representatives of the Provisional Government of Oregon, Joseph Meek and J. Quinn Thornton, were in Washington, D.C. The two were there to advocate territorial status for Oregon, and it was enacted by Congress in August, 1848. Territorial status did not become fully effective, though, until March 3, 1849, when the new Territorial Governor arrived and issued an official proclamation.

The quest for territorial status was but one of several important changes. While the Atkinsons journeyed from Boston to Oregon City three important events had occurred.

On November 29, 1847 some Cayuse Indians attacked the Waiilatpu Mission near present Walla Walla, Washington. Sixteen people were killed, including ABCFM missionaries Marcus and Narcissa Whitman. Forty-seven others were taken hostage. That event led to a lengthy period of conflict between the U.S. Army and the settlers, on one hand, and Indians.

In late January, 1848 gold was discovered near Sutter's Mill on the American River in California. News of the strike finally reached Oregon in August. It was proclaimed to the nation and world in a message from
President Polk to Congress in December. George Atkinson wrote to the AHMS in September, 1848, telling of the impact of the gold strike: “Our mechanics have left their shops in many cases. Our three physicians decided to leave their patients or all. Some of our merchants hastened to dispose of their merchandise or to close business and leave.”

On March 10, 1848 Congress voted to ratify the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, concluding the Mexican-American War. That treaty ceded to the United States a vast area including Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah, opening California to settlement. Oregon was no longer America’s sole window on the Pacific Ocean.

Many issues confronted the new settlements: rapid population growth, uncertainty of property rights, competing denominational missionary efforts, rival political ideologies, and contests between population centers.

Atkinson had first heard a description of the pace of white population growth from William Gray, while in Astoria en route to Fort Vancouver. Gray had come to Oregon in 1836, accompanying ABCFM missionaries Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and Henry and Eliza Spalding. He left the mission in 1842. Atkinson’s diary noted:

> “Mr. G. is well acquainted with the history of Oregon Territory for the last twelve years. He says its population has doubled every year since then, five families in 1836, ten in 1837, making at the end of 1848 20,000.”

Gray’s figures were far from accurate, but the trend he described was real. Increasing numbers had come yearly, the major stimulus the opening of the Oregon Trail in 1843. It linked Independence, Missouri with Oregon’s Willamette Valley.

Territorial status itself did not resolve any of the issues facing the region, but it made it possible to establish governmental instruments for dealing with them. Atkinson saw that a system of public schools could not be created until a recognized government could establish property titles and approve a method of taxation:

> “The mile-square claims separate neighbors too much . . . . we have no free schools, no districts, no appropriation for education, no plan for it, no effort to commence one. We shall be able
to do nothing until the government at home throws its protection over us & establishes its legal authority in our communities. Settlers will make no permanent improvement of farms or dwellings until they know what amount of land will be granted them. And this uncertainty prevents any school organization.”13

George Atkinson had arrived in Oregon at a strategic moment. He brought with him significant resources for educational and religious work. Well-equipped and ready to lead, he was one of those who would shape the life of the region.


2. “Extracts from a contemporary diary give this picture of Portland in January and February, 1848: ‘Portland has two white houses and one brick and three wood colored frame houses and a few cabins.’” Carey, History of Oregon, 655.


5. Herring, From Colony To Superpower, 148-52.


8. They were: Eliza and Henry Spalding and Marcus and Narcissa Whitman (1836) and Cushing and Myra Eells, Elkanah and Mary Walker, and Asa B. and Sarah Smith (1838).

9. "Article 3 of the Organic Code adopted by the provisional government of 1843 allowed individual land claims of up to one 640 acres (one square mile unless of another alignment), but there was uncertainty as to whether future governments would recognize this. Samuel L. Thurston, elected in 1849 first delegate to the U.S. Congress of the Oregon Territory, succeeded in persuading Congress to pass the Oregon Donation Land Law in September 1850, which validated titles legally claimed under the Provisional Government, thus ending uncertainty about the earlier claims. Under this law the right to claim up to 640 acres continued for five more years, expiring in 1855. Robbins, Oregon: Landscapes of Promise 82-3.

10. For details see website of Whitman Mission National Historic Site: www.nps.gov/whmi/historyculture/mission-at-wailatpu.htm


The Atkinsons lived in Oregon City from 1848 until 1863. During that time George established a reputation as a competent, confident, aggressive leader of educational systems and institutions.

Just five days after his arrival in Oregon City he was already opening boxes of the school text books he had brought, valued at $207.79. He marked prices on some of them and provided them to Mrs. Nancy Thornton, the schoolteacher, ‘for sale to the scholars’. Book sales proved so successful that he soon ordered an additional $1,700 worth, all of which were sold during the next two years.¹ Later in the same week, at the camp meeting at Tualatin Plains, he and Harvey Clark discussed the ‘orphan school’ that Tabitha Brown had started in Tualatin Plains the previous spring.² They hoped to put the school on a permanent basis. On the same day he visited the school, taught by Lewis Thompson:

“He had about twenty small and large scholars. The class was reading in the Testament. He then questioned them as to the meaning of the words. It was a good exercise. The school has a good location.”³

Atkinson was soon involved in more education projects. His diary entry for March 5, 1849 begins with a reference to Tualatin Academy, but goes on to other educational causes:
“During the first of the week I was at the Tualatin Plains with Bro. Eells and after much consultation with Bro. Harvey Clark & other Christian friends there, we resolved for the sake of the children, to go on with the Academy, Bro. E. to be the Teacher. We are now raising the means to build him a log house.

“[Territorial] Governor Lane arrived Friday eve. He was received by the citizens by the firing of cannon. A committee waited upon him, and escorted him to the City Hotel. Citizens called upon him. Brethren Walker, Eells, and myself spent a half hour in the evening. He is an affable man.”

Oregon Territorial Proclamation, 1849.
In his 1876 history of the Oregon City church Atkinson described colorfully how he built public support for a territorial school plan:

“Early in 1849, a short time after General Joseph Lane arrived with a commission as Governor to establish the United States Territorial Government, the pastor of the church (Atkinson refers to himself here) consulted with several citizens, among them Hon. George L. Curry, upon forming a school district and taking measures to establish a system of free schools. A public meeting was called in our room hired for worship. The subject was discussed, one prominent citizen, the town proprietor, arguing the right and duty of every man to educate his own children, as was done in Canada, his country, and the wrong of imposing taxes on one man to educate the children of another. Instantly Mr. Smith, of Chehalem Valley, happening to be present, who had the vulgar sobriquet of ‘Blubber-mouth,’ blurted out: ‘That’s not the way we do in our country, doctor. In America, schools are free; we educate every child. That’s the way we preserve our liberties.’ One question was, ‘Shall we organize a system of free schools?’ After a lengthy discussion, a vote was taken which resulted as follows: thirty-seven for and six against free schools.”

“The dissenters to this resolution were gentlemen whose early abode or training in other countries led them to the opinion that every man ought to educate his own children and wards, and not tax others to do it.”

The governor asked Atkinson to prepare that portion of Gov. Lane’s first message to the new legislature that covered education. The document reads, in part:

“The law of congress provides that when the lands of the territory shall be surveyed...sections numbered 16 and 36 shall be reserved for the purpose of being applied to the schools . . . . With a system of education, sustained by such resources, there is no reason to doubt that in the course of a few years the rising generation of Oregon will proudly vie, in respect to useful
knowledge and moral culture, with that of the older settled portions of our common country.”

Atkinson also began two other activities promoting education: (1) starting a girls school in Oregon City, and (2) recruiting teachers from New England. His diary notes:

“I proposed to some of our citizens during the week to commence establishing a good protestant city school. They are ready to do it. Some have children whom they wish to educate. They are deeply interested. These are strong motives to action. Thus we have hold of some irreligious men. The Catholics are getting our day scholars.”

In late July he was both lobbying legislators and trying to recruit teachers from the East:

“I conversed with members of the Legislature respecting schools & urged the grant of corporations for Academies, & Seminaries by a general law. I wrote letters to societies at the east to send us teachers.”

Aware of organizations in New England that were recruiting and training teachers for the frontier, Atkinson wrote William Slade, a former congressman and governor of Vermont. Slade was general agent and corresponding secretary for the Board of National Popular Education, an organization that he and Catherine Beecher had co-founded in 1847. Atkinson persuaded Governor Lane to write to Slade as well. Slade replied to the governor, describing his Board’s teacher training program:

“The Board with which I am connected gathers its teachers in classes, in Hartford Con., semi-annually and carries them through a six weeks course of preparation before sending them out. We have just sent out a class of twenty, who have been distributed to various states, from Texas to Wisconsin. . . . I shall
esteem it a great privilege to be permitted to aid you in this good work.”

Drawing on a family contact, Atkinson also wrote to Mary Hale, the wife of a cousin. She was active in the Boston Society for Promoting Popular Education At The West, another society devoted to teacher training and placement:

“If you could send out two of the South Hadley pupils or Bradford or Pittsfield pupils or some of such ladies who are willing to teach the ignorant, to bend to circumstances, who also have the intelligence to instruct in modern languages, in music, but especially in the branches of solid learning, who have a spirit of self-denial and sacrifice, we would cooperate with them. . . . They need such clothing as is needed in New England. Better have a good supply made up. They need very thick shoes or boots for the muddy winter. Send us some of missionary spirit. A very ordinary teacher is now receiving $400 for her services. Also her board. . . .”

Although his anti-catholic bias was expressed regularly, George became increasingly concerned about what he saw as self-serving behavior of all denominational schools, both Protestant and Catholic. He valued the work of churches in starting schools where none existed, but conceived of those institutions as temporary, stopgap measures. Once public schools got into operation he believed that other institutions should yield the stage. Many denominational school leaders – both Catholic and Protestant - disagreed, opposing school legislation and then, after it became law, trying to impede or delay its implementation at the local level. Historian George Himes, explaining Portland’s delay in beginning a public school, commented:

“Notwithstanding the school law, the idea of ‘free schools’ was bitterly opposed in many quarters, particularly by bachelors, those who had no children, and others especially interested in building up private and denominational schools.”
The Oregon Territorial Legislature passed the school law on Sept. 5, 1849. That law contained a section providing that “no preference shall be given or discrimination shown on account of religious opinion, whether with the pupils or teacher, nor shall any laws be enacted by any district that will or may in any way interfere with the rights of conscience in the free exercise of religious worship.”

The school legislation,

“reflecting New England educational systems . . . included these principles: (1) education should be free; (2) control should be decentralized and local; (3) a permanent school fund should be established; (4) professional standards should be adopted to provide for the certification of teachers; (5) schools should be tax supported; and (6) all educational institutions should practice religious freedom.”

The protestant-sponsored school that Atkinson proposed for Oregon City soon began to take shape, given a charter by the legislature as the Clackamas County Female Seminary. Trustees listed were George Abernethy, G.H. Atkinson, Hezekiah Johnson, Wilson Blain, A.L. Lovejoy, Hiram Clark, and James Taylor. Officially undenominational, its major support came from Methodists and Congregationalists.

Atkinson, chosen secretary of the board of trustees, assumed responsibility for soliciting financial support. The first thousand dollars came from former provisional governor George Abernethy. Dr. John McLoughlin donated a block of land, at Twelfth and Jefferson Streets. A two story building was designed and erected, measuring thirty by sixty feet, including boarding school facilities. Its cost was $11,000.

Fund-raising fell short of its goal, and Abernethy loaned $6,000 to the trustees of the Seminary on June 12, 1850, due for repayment by June 12, 1856. The loan’s terms provided that if not repaid on schedule Abernethy could assume control of the property and building.
Atkinson’s assuming responsibility for raising funds, paired with the decision of the Trustees to spend $11,000 for construction of the seminary building, shows a readiness to envision and pursue ambitious plans. His great energy, well-informed mind, and high ideals, though, easily led him beyond the realm of the realistic and practical. No one could argue against the need for and desirability of a girls seminary in Oregon City, yet the volatile, transient nature of life in the town, which Atkinson was already noticing and reporting in his letters to the AHMS, might have served to warn him about launching anything quite so ambitious as a building costing $11,000, secured by a $6,000 loan that included the terms won by Abernethy.

Still another opportunity for educational efforts beckoned when George was named School Commissioner of Clackamas County, the first occupant of that office. Following statehood in 1859 the official title for such positions would become Superintendent. No record has been found of the exact dates when Atkinson began, or ended, his service as school commissioner. However a diary entry from the summer of 1850 shows him already at work: “During the last two weeks I have been over most of the county as commissioner of schools to district it. Have conversed with many new families & formed many acquaintances.”

In another article Atkinson says that he:

“divided the whole county as the law required in 1850, from the Marion County line on the south to the Columbia on the north, and from the Willamette river on the west to the summit of the Cascade mountains on the east, drawing an outline map for deposit and reference in the County Clerk’s office. The law called for the districts, though some of them had not one inhabitant. The later modified law calls for districts ‘where the people need them’.”

Tualatin Academy soon developed problems. An Atkinson diary note in early 1851 is candid:

“Two days were employed with the Trustees of Tualatin Academy... We have many apparently great difficulties to encounter. At one time it is in respect to funds. Again respecting the means of boarding. Again the teaching. Bro. E. [Cushing Eells] has left us unpleasantly situated. He wishes us to prohibit the attendance of all scholars who use tobacco. We prohibited its use in and around the school house. He leaves the school somewhat disaffected with us, we have reason to suppose. Others who ought to be friends of the Institution, members of the church there, speak evilly of it and do not assist it. Another good teacher has come to the school just at this juncture and it is going on.”

While working diligently for universal education Atkinson gave equal effort to Sabbath Schools, now called Sunday Schools. Led by laity, they required specific resources and training. In addition to the above noted $207.79 worth of school textbooks he had brought in 1848, Atkinson had come with $473.20 worth of religious literature. In a letter to the AHMS secretaries he gave primary place to Sabbath Schools as strategy in frontier communities:

“Were I to go to one of those places, I would first have regular appointments for preaching, then once in two, three or four weeks and at other places in the neighboring settlements on all
the other Sabbaths. My next effort would be to establish Sabbath Schools and Bible classes in as many places as possible, securing the union of all sects in the study of the Bible, and Teachers and Superintendents from among themselves. They will usually secure the services of the most competent persons in the neighborhood. I have great confidence in Sabbath Schools as a means of imparting religious truth.”

Clackamas County Female Academy opened May 19, 1851. Two of the teachers, Elizabeth Lincoln of Maine and Sarah Smith of New York, were from a group of five that had arrived in Oregon under the auspices of Gov. Slade’s society. Their arrival and placement were handled by Atkinson: “I have visited a little but have been much occupied in locating five teachers who arrived April 30th.”

By July of 1851 his outlook was optimistic:

“Our schools are prosperous. Tualatin Academy which is more especially under the care of our denomination is gaining in importance and in the confidence of the people. There are now sixty-three pupils in it – thirty in the male department under the care of Rev. D.R. Williams and thirty-three in the female department under the care of Miss E. Miller, one of the teachers sent out by the Education Society of which Gov. Slade is agent. Clackamas Co. Female Seminary, an institution under trustees of several denominations, is now nearly closed. Thirty-three pupils are in the school. Miss Lincoln and Miss Smith from the above Society have charge of it. The other two ladies have interesting and important schools in the neighboring settlements.”

In 1853 he was cheered by the arrival and leadership of Sydney Harper Marsh, whom he had recruited at Union Seminary in New York, at Tualatin Academy. Marsh, named president of the school, acted swiftly to add a college division, calling it Pacific University. Atkinson wrote to his uncle: “Prof. Marsh is highly esteemed. He is devoted & earnest & withal a prime scholar. He is a prize.” Marsh was brilliant and decisive, with a strong family background in higher education. He had the intellectual and
executive strength to form and lead Pacific University. Atkinson would have his clashes with Marsh over the direction of the school. The relationship of the two strong leaders would range from cooperative to chilly over the next twenty-five years.

Atkinson wrote to uncle, and benefactor, Josiah Little about colleges, affirming the importance of open and free inquiry:

“I have just been rereading your letter of Dec. 23, 1853 with pleasure & profit. Your suggestions, uncle, with regard to an unsectarian spirit, and a liberal ennobling character in our Institutions, accord entirely with a growing conviction in my own mind. We began what is now legally styled “Tualatin Academy & Pacific University” with that purpose. Our whole spirit now is free thought, free inquiry in all directions; the discovery and development of all possible knowledge, under the guidance of faith in the Bible, as God’s changeless word, & under the influence of prayer, the Sabbath, & the preaching of the Gospel. Moving on thus we have commanded respect of all, gained the confidence of most & the love of many.

We have more to do in our institutions to purify & exalt character than to surround truth with the defenses, as they are supposed, of Sect. When we keep near to Christ in heart, we shall be found near each other, & the warmth of His love will create a genial atmosphere in which we shall all delight to abide.”

The girls’ seminary at Oregon City soon began to have difficulty. On the surface things seemed positive. The teachers were capable and there were good numbers of students. Fundraising, though, fell far short of what was required to repay the $6,000 loan. Uncertainties about the future of Oregon City meant that support for the school was slow to develop. The capital had been moved from Oregon City to Salem, and periodic floods had caused disruptions in local businesses.

Despite the legislation that was enacted in 1849 no place in Oregon moved quickly to make public schools a reality. Portland saw public schools
opened twice (1851 and 1855), but closed. It was 1858 before they were sustained.27

During his eastern trip Atkinson had recruited Erasmus D. Shattuck and his wife to lead Clackamas County Female Seminary.28 From 1853 to 1855, after the Shattucks’ arrival, “the school prospered materially and reached a high standard. It was at that time the purpose of the trustees to ‘make the school permanent and to provide facilities for as thorough and systematic education as can be obtained in the Atlantic states.’”29

In 1855, though, the Shattucks moved to Forest Grove to become teachers at Tualatin Academy. Whether they decided to move because they saw little future for the Seminary or whether their departure was a critical blow that endangered the Seminary’s life is not clear. What is clear that the school did not survive long after their departure.

On August 8, 1855 the Seminary property was sold to the missionary society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which had purchased the note held by George Abernethy. The Methodists reopened the school in 1858, admitting boys as well as girls, but found themselves challenged by a growing taxpayer-funded public school. By 1862 the building was being rented by the city for public school use. In 1867 the city purchased the building from the Methodists.30

Tualatin Academy and Pacific University continued to make progress, albeit slowly. President Marsh noted, in a twenty-fifth anniversary historical reflection in 1878, that in the early years of his presidency he had had a continuing struggle to implement the decision to add the university to the existing academy. He reported that local residents and some faculty resisted both the new name and his authority as president of the dually focused institution. Atkinson supported Marsh on the matter, since he was the one who in 1852 had negotiated both recognition and financial support from the Society for the Propagation of Collegiate and Theological Education At The West, knowing that the Society did not aid secondary institutions. Nevertheless, the academy/college combination was never an easy one. The academy had an earlier start, more students (some years the ratio reached eight to one) and its own principal. The dual institutions continued through Marsh’s presidency as well as those of his four successors, with Tualatin Academy finally ceasing operations in 1915.
leadership when President Marsh was absent from the campus for two and one-half years on a fund-raising trip in the East. Marsh left in the fall of 1858 and returned in the spring of 1861, when he was warmly welcomed home. Marsh brought with him the former Eliza Haskell, whom he had married. He also reported fund-raising success. Marsh had made a decision to raise funds on his own rather than following the direction of Theron Baldwin, Secretary of SPCTEW:

"President Marsh gave a report of his work in collecting funds in the Eastern states for two years past. He stated that he went rather suddenly, as a free ticket had been sent him by Rev. T. Baldwin, Sec’y of the College Society. He acted under the direction of that Society for about a year, endeavoring to raise $1,200 per year for three years. Failing in that, he formed the purpose to raise $20,000 on his own responsibility. This caused some disagreement with Mr. Baldwin, but, after 1 ½ years effort
he succeeded in the purpose. $21,429.10 of valid subscriptions were made, $1200 worth of books were given, $307 premium on drafts were received. Whole amount subscribed, $22,936.10.”

Marsh’s ‘disagreement with Mr. Baldwin’ is hinted at in the minutes of the Trustees for Oct. 25, 1859, about one year after Marsh’s departure for the East, and therefore about the time of the ‘disagreement’. The minutes say that “a discussion here arose about our relations to the College Society.” This writer, attempting to read between the lines regarding the ‘disagreement’, suspects that Baldwin, in supplying a ticket to bring Marsh to the East, had arranged a speaking tour in churches along the lines of Atkinson’s journey six years earlier. Baldwin could have seen Marsh’s journey as a means of promoting the total work of the College Society and its support of nine schools. Marsh, though, was dedicated to generating substantial support for his own institution.

Atkinson, it will be recalled, had raised some $3,800 (netting $2,400 after deduction of travel expense) in 1852 for both Pacific University and Clackamas County Female Seminary in four months’ time, largely in “free-will offerings” and small gifts from some fifty churches and individuals. Marsh, the son of a college president, might well have felt such amounts to be inadequate for his school, let alone to justify the time, expense and effort of such a trip. He probably used the methods of his father and leaders of other prestigious eastern schools, calling upon individuals of means to whom he had personal access. His success in raising more than $20,000 both justified the change of strategy and solidified his leadership. It may have come at the price of a strain on relationships between the school and Baldwin’s society.

As with churches, the college in Oregon was taking much longer than those in the Midwest to develop financial stability through cultivation of local sources of support. This was not easy for national mission societies to understand or accept. Their recent successes, largely in the Great Lakes states, had not prepared them for the differences and difficulties of mission endeavors in the Far West.

1. "For selling about $3,000 worth of school books, sent me by those noble minded men Messrs. Newman & Co. I have been permitted to keep the profits say about $200, i.e. they have only charged me the invoices.” Atkinson to AHMS, June 21,
1853. AHMS Archives, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University. Newman was a bookseller in Boston. For the names of the textbooks see Chapter One, endnote one.

2. Tabitha Brown, the widow of an Episcopal minister, came to Oregon in 1846, at the age of sixty-seven. In the fall of 1847 she moved to Tualatin Plains, staying there with Harvey and Emeline Clark. In March 1848 she started an ‘orphan asylum’ to care for children whose parents had died while on the Oregon Trail. The asylum provided room and board, also functioning as a school. The orphan asylum, and her own generous donation of land, were forerunners of Tualatin Academy and, later, Pacific University.


4. Gen. Joseph Lane (1801-81) was appointed governor of the Oregon Territory by Pres. James K. Polk. He resigned in 1850. Lane served as Delegate to Congress from the Territory from 1851 until 1859, and as Senator from 1859 to 1861. He was a vice-presidential candidate in 1860, on the southern Democratic ticket headed by John Breckenridge.

5. Rockwood, Atkinson Diary, 41:12.


7. Carey, History of Oregon, 2:701. Although the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 had allocated one section of each township for educational purposes, the legislation that created the Oregon Territory doubled this, setting aside two sections (16 and 36). J. Quinn Thornton, who had traveled to Washington with Joseph T. Meek in support of territorial status, is credited with securing this increase. Thornton’s wife, Nancy, as seen above, was a member of the Oregon City church, who was conducting a school for girls.

8. Rockwood, Atkinson Diary, 41:16.

9. Ibid., 41:17.

10. During his six terms in Congress (1830-42) Slade became known for his close teamwork with Joshua Giddings of Ohio and ex-president John Quincy Adams on behalf of abolitionism.

11. Atkinson folder, Manuscript Collection, Oregon Historical Society Library. For information on Slade see Dictionary of National Biography, 203-4, which states ‘indefatigable in this congenial work (the Board of National Popular Education), which he continued until a few weeks before his death, he traveled through most of the Northern states, founding local societies and recruiting teachers in the East for service along the Western frontier.’

12. Atkinson to Mary L. Hale, July 24, 1849, George H. Atkinson Collection, Huntington. The recipient of this letter is probably Mary Lane Hale, the wife of Moses Little Hale, a cousin of George Atkinson. Moses Little Hale was employed in insurance companies in Boston for more than fifty years. I acknowledge with gratitude the assistance of Ms. Marge Motes of the Historical Society of Old Newbury MA in discovering this relationship.
13. Himes, *The History of the Evolution of Education in the Oregon Country*, 10. It is likely that Himes relied for this information on Atkinson, since the two were closely allied in the work of Congregational churches in the city, state, and region.


20. Oregon Historical Society, manuscript collection. Listed in the 1847 shipping manifest are: “2 boxes Sab. Sch. Books, $82.20; 2 boxes tracts & volumes, $200; 2 boxes Bibles & testaments, $173.00.

21. Atkinson to AHMS, April 12, 1851, AHMS Archives, Amistad.


23. ‘Closed’ apparently means that enrollment was full.


25. Atkinson to Josiah Little, March 10, 1854, Huntington. Although Marsh led in establishing the college division (called Pacific University) Tualatin Academy continued to function. The official name of the institution became Tualatin Academy and Pacific University.

26. Atkinson to Josiah Little, March 26, 1855, Huntington.

27. Reynolds, “History of the Public Schools of Portland, Oregon 1845-71”.

28. Born in Bakersfield, Vermont in 1824, Erasmus Shattuck attended the University of Vermont and was admitted to the bar in New York in 1851. In Oregon he was named a United States District Attorney in 1861 and elected judge of the Fourth Judicial District in 1864. He served for a number of years as attorney for Tualatin Academy and Pacific University.


31. Trustees, Tualatin Academy and Pacific University, minutes, May 21, 1859. Pacific University Archives.


33. The kind of promotional tour Baldwin probably expected, called “missionary itiner- eration”, has long been a common practice among Protestant denominations.
George Atkinson was elected Superintendent of Schools of Multnomah County in 1864. The term was two years, running from July through June, with an annual salary of $400. There were thirty-one school districts in the county. During the next year he also took unpaid positions as a State Penitentiary Commissioner and as Oregon chairman for the United States Christian Commission, a national body providing relief and aid to Civil War soldiers and victims. He was reelected Superintendent in 1866, then stepped down for two years. His third and last term was 1870-2.

He began his work as Superintendent with enthusiasm. Portland, the largest of the thirty-one districts, would not have its own School Superintendent until 1873. Atkinson’s work as Superintendent buttressed his reputation as a capable, determined, visionary leader. He used an innovative approach to communication, writing lengthy newspaper reports in the Oregonian, to inform the public of the needs and activities of the schools. During his six years as Superintendent he published eighteen reports, several of which occupied three full columns of print.

The first of the Superintendent’s reports appeared after his first month, on August 3, 1864. Noting that he had already visited most of the districts in the county, he “found ten public schools in operation in as many districts, and two private subscription schools in other districts.” He offered encouraging, but telling, comments on the appearance and condition of
the school buildings - seven were “comfortable and very neat”, while three “have rude, temporary structures” - before turning to his main subject, the advantages of keeping children in a neighborhood public “common school”, in contrast to sending them away to academies. His challenge:

“Let every district resolve to make its school a first class school. Let every voter attend the school meeting with the sole purpose to vote and pay tax enough to put the house in good order and to hire the teacher for six or nine months [italics in the original].”


Four more reports appeared during the next six months. In one he urged people to visit their schools:

“Fellow citizens of Multnomah County, you must visit your own schools. The teachers will be glad to see you at any time. The children will be glad to see you. I have often noticed that the promising scholars are those whose parents attend most to their schools, and who often visit them.”

In another he discussed the need for proper furniture:

“The plan of the school ought to give form to the building in which it is kept. The idea of the school should lead and not follow the fixtures for it. We do indeed have some attempt at this in the two or three low benches to suit the short legs of the little ones, but even these fail to fit. They have in many cases no backs to rest the weary child. Too often his feet cannot touch the floor and they hang in pain over the edge of the seat. If he lies down he is out of order and must get up. If he slips on to the floor for rest, he is worse off, for a switch will perhaps startle him. His seat too is often inclined out, so that he slides off. In a word, the building committee do not study well the wants of the little ones [italics in the original].”

He addressed a column to teachers, urging them to awareness of the individuality of each child’s method of learning. Noting that successful
adults in the community had learned their skills in varied ways, he wrote that “two things have been true of such a man: first, he has felt an interest in knowing some things, and secondly, he has succeeded.” He then continued:

“these two things are elements in every child. The first day of school you can see interest in every child, however small. His curiosity is all awake. The boy has much to tell pa and ma when he gets home at night. This curious interest of the child is the golden thread which the teacher may take, and which he must take in his hand to guide the child’s mind from one subject to another, and from one truth to another. [italics in the original]”

Another report emphasized primary education:

“The maturest (sic) and most skillful teachers ought to be put into the primary school room. If we take good care of the primary department, the others will succeed with comparatively little difficulty. The labor of the primary departments ought to be well divided among two or three teachers, The tendency is to impose too much upon those who conduct this department. In large schools like the public school in this city, the tendency is to lay too heavy burdens upon those who teach the little ones.”

The first report of his second term focused on a census of student population, pointing out that many children were not enrolled in any school:

“Enrolled in the twenty schools outside the city, there are, according to a pretty careful census, about 536 pupils, and within the city, 722 pupils – giving about five-twelfths to the former and seven-twelfths to the latter. Of 2,333 children between the ages of 4 and 20 years in the county, only about 1,232, or one half are enrolled in the school Registers. Of this deficiency, 850 are in Portland. The Academies and private schools have about 350 of these; leaving 500 unprovided. Two hundred and fifty in the outside districts fail to attend school, or about one-third of the whole number. The population of boys and girls is very nearly equal.”
The same report reviewed the condition of school buildings, complimenting many but crisply noting that “the houses in (districts) 8 and 10 need better seats and desks. No. 18 ought to build a good house. They have a central and fine location. No. 21 need one or two additional rooms to meet the wants of their increasing population, especially to grade the school.”7 He concluded with an extended discussion of the need, especially in the larger schools in Portland, to build structures with a sufficient number of rooms and teaching stations to enable better separation of subjects and grades.

Another column, “Change of Teachers in Our Free Schools,” addressed a topic close to the heart, and pocketbook, of local school boards. He discussed qualifications, employment, and evaluation of teachers. He was critical of the practice of some districts that changed teachers annually in order to keep expenses down, pointing out:

“Frequent changes keep salaries low, and tend to make them lower. It is a bid for new candidates. It destroys confidence in free schools, so that the citizens will neither vote for nor pay taxes for them, as they do for that which they value. We hold that the most careful selections should be made for teachers; and then they should not only be assured of their places, but urged to keep them, and fit themselves more and more for their profession.”8

“School Books” found Atkinson listing himself as Chairman of the Teachers’ Association, as well as County Superintendent. Since he had pioneered in selecting and bringing the first textbooks for sale in Oregon, his remarks on the topic grew out of two decades of experience. It began with candor: “The failure of our last legislature to appoint a State Board of Education still leaves the choice of school books entirely to the District Committees.”

Decrying the confusion and sizeable (to parents) expense of duplication, he proposed some short term remedial steps, such as coordination of recommendations among the county superintendents. However he advocated for a statewide approach, asking the support of the press: “Those State journals, desirous to promote the welfare of our schools in this matter, are requested to call attention to these suggestions.”9

As seen above, Oregon’s 1857 vote to be a free state was followed by a vote establishing strong barriers to prevent the movement of ‘negroes
and mulattoes’ into the new state. Nevertheless, by 1867 Portland had a number of black residents. They rallied behind William Brown, who had sent his children to public school only to have them refused admission. Brown secured the assistance of a young attorney, Thomas Alexander Wood, on behalf of the “colored children” in the district. Wood consulted with the School District directors, Josiah Failing, W.S. Ladd and Erasmus D. Shattuck.

The issue of the Colored School exposed a tension between Atkinson’s two public roles, Multnomah County Superintendent of Schools and pastor of the Congregational Church. Two of the three members of the Portland school district board, Failing and Shattuck, were also members of his church. At the Annual School Meeting held April 1, 1867 the Directors recommended that “a separate school be erected or rented for the colored children of the district.” Shattuck moved that the part of the Directors’ report relating to colored children be taken from the table. Superintendent Atkinson moved: “Resolved that the Directors be and they are instructed to make provision for a separate School for the education of Colored children of the District at an expense not to exceed $800 per annum and for this end they are empowered to rent or build the necessary buildings.”

A newspaper report of the ensuing discussion shows that the Directors had not informed the Superintendent about some of the actions that had preceded the meeting. In response to a question, Director Ladd announced that a District school census had identified twenty-five colored children of school age.

The report continues: “Mr. Atkinson enquired if the colored people applied for the admission of their children to the district school.”

Director Failing replied: “the colored citizens had applied for the admission of their children at the District school and that the Directors had refused to comply with their request but told them to open a school and let the people see that they were trying to do something for themselves and that they thought the taxpayers would then vote money to help them, but they would not promise them anything certain.”

Director Ladd added that “the colored people had held three school meetings, and that they were losing interest for the reason that but very few attended the last meeting.”

Atkinson’s response was firm: ”. . . the law as it is gave them the benefit of schools and that they could not be refused a school for their children.”
Funding for the separate school was adopted. It opened in the fall of 1867, in a building at Southwest Fourth Street and Columbia, rented from the ubiquitous Shattuck. According to Helen Casey’s research, Wood had learned that the Directors did recognize the claim of the children to a public school education, but were fearful that it would spark a ‘taxpayer revolt’, ending public education altogether. The directors offered to refund the tax money paid by the black families, but Wood refused the proposal on grounds of both unfairness and inadequacy. Wood then proposed a separate school, insisting that the teacher be paid similarly to other public school teachers, with adequate funding of at least $800 per year. Calling upon the legal services of former Mayor David Logan, Wood had commenced court action against the Directors.

Not satisfied, some black parents again tried to enroll their children in the existing public schools, but were once again turned away. The attorneys filed a petition for a writ of mandamus against the School Directors. The writ was denied by Judge – and School Director - E.D. Shattuck, who appears not to have recused himself despite a blatant conflict of interest. Progress was evident by 1870 when the School Directors, who had opened the first high school a year earlier, adopted an order “that any scholars in the colored school that may be found qualified to enter the high school be admitted there on the same terms as other pupils.”

At the 1871 school meeting a motion was made and passed to continue the colored school, but the following year “J.D. Holman moved that the Colored School of Portland be abolished. His motion prevailed ‘after discussion’.” Racially segregated education ended in Portland after five years, and colored children were enrolled in public schools.

The Superintendent concluded the last column of his second term with a summary of his intentions and efforts in carrying out the responsibilities of the office:

“It has been the aim of the undersigned during his official term to stimulate every district in the county to improve its own school by employing good teachers for longer terms; by improving school houses when needful; by reducing the number and variety of books and thus of classes, and by giving a thorough drill in the common studies. It has also been his aim to encourage and to call attention to those teachers who seem to devote
themselves to this work as a profession, and who love the work. It has not been done invidiously, but from a sense of duty to them and to the friends of education. If there has been any omissions or errors in this matter, or if any statement respecting any district has been at all inaccurate, it has been unintentional. In giving up the care of the public schools of the county to my successor elect, it is with the earnest hope that they have increased prosperity under his supervision.”

George also used his church pulpit on behalf of social and educational needs. Oregonian editor and church member Harvey Scott reprinted the full text of Atkinson’s Jan. 22, 1871 sermon entitled “A Juvenile Reformatory.” The scriptural text was from Psalms 68: 5-6, “A father of the fatherless and a judge of the widow is God in his holy habitation. God setteth the solitary in families; he bringeth out those that are bound in chains; but the rebellious dwell in a dry land.”

The sermon began by arguing that “the divine method of care for the human race is to set them in families,” and that “in the family are found the chief educating and guiding influences for good.” The thesis of the sermon was set out: “The need for a Reformatory for vagrant children and youth usually springs from some neglect or disruption of households. Society for its own safety is called upon to do what parents ought to have done.”

The preacher attributed much of the source of family failings to the influence of alcohol and gambling, and bemoaned the fact that as youth drift into criminal activity “the city has no proper place for this class of offenders. The officers must be content first to threaten, then arrest and imprison a few days, in the cold, damp jail with other felons, to become more contaminated.”

Atkinson proposed a reformatory because it would “give vagrants a home (italics in the original), not a cell or a prison, associated with the vicious and criminal. Put them under the best available home treatment. Vice engages the mind as well as the heart of its victims. Virtue must do like wise. There is no place like home to do it.” Citing his own research that showed the existence of 350 such entities in Great Britain and Europe, as well as reports from twenty cities and states in the U.S. including Connecticut, Maine, Baltimore, Michigan, and Wisconsin, he affirmed that
“The work is to restore children to what they have lost. It is a method, dictated alike by public safety, by economy, by humanity, and by all the aims of Christianity.”

In July 1870 Atkinson began his third and final term as School Superintendent. Early the next year he resumed his Oregonian columns. Four appeared within six weeks, all but one in advance of the 1871 annual school district meetings. The first, ‘School Meetings’, began by reviewing, in precise detail, the state law that required organized school districts to hold annual meetings on the first Monday of April. Atkinson suggested that District #1, Portland, consider starting the meeting in the afternoon, recessing for supper, and continuing into the evening. Noting that the previous year’s meeting had rejected a proposal to purchase a block for a new public school, he commented that the decision ‘has proved to the loss of the city’, adding that ‘It is certain that important questions require time and all the light that can be thrown upon them.’ He reported that 800 children of Portland were enrolled in neither public nor private schools.

He reviewed issues that commonly arise in meetings, defending the need for School Directors to occasionally hire a carriage to visit outlying schools, or to travel to a neighboring city to study alternative ways of organizing school work. He chided the East Portland district for failure to erect an adequate building, leaving them with “two small buildings on hand which can accommodate only about 90 of their 265 pupils,” urging the district to erect a two story center building, making wings of the two small existing buildings.

The second in the series, ‘School Teachers’, began with a review of state laws governing teacher certification and employment. Atkinson noted:

“The law further requires that teachers shall maintain order in school, so conduct as to command the respect of pupils, commence school at half past eight o’clock A.M. and close at four o’clock P.M. each day, giving one hour for recreation at noon, unless otherwise ordered by the directors, labor incessantly during school hours to advance the scholars in their studies, to create in their minds a desire for knowledge, principle, morality, politeness, cleanliness and the preservation of physical health, to keep a register of daily attendance, and hand a copy of the same
to the District Clerk quarterly, and give a public examination on the last day of the quarter, and invite the County Superintendent to be present.”

Looking to the future, the superintendent offered five recommendations about employment, oversight, and support of teachers. They are summarized here:

1. Give material encouragement to the teacher’s work. Pay the gentleman or lady whom you employ to teach your children according as you value the minds and hearts, the intelligence and virtue of those children.

2. Employ the same teachers, if possible, term after term, and year after year, and make them feel sure of their places, and thus encourage them to prepare themselves better for the work.

3. Provide the best buildings and grounds, and furnish the best helps for teaching, such as charts, books, blackboards, platforms, and good seats.

4. Visit the schools, become intelligent respecting its modes, its excellencies and defects, encourage its discipline and sustain its reputation, not only by good words, but by sending your children regularly.

5. Give teachers a day or two every quarter to attend County Institutes, and require them to attend, and to show eagerness to improve in their art.”

The third article, ‘School Grounds’, began with the Oregon School Law, observing that School Directors, ‘when authorized by a majority vote of the district, shall purchase, lease or build school houses, and buy or lease lands for school purposes.’ He then added, perhaps sarcastically, ‘the lands specified evidently mean sites for school houses – not fields or farms.’

The article strongly recommended that all schools have sufficient land for recreational and drill activity on school grounds, noting that many older
large cities had not made such provision, but that Portland, in all cases but one (the Harrison School, located on half a block) had purchased full blocks (115,200 square feet) for each school. The superintendent concluded with some recommendations for playground supervision:

“School grounds are a part of the teacher’s domain as much as school rooms. Two teachers, in our large schools, a gentleman and a lady, should always oversee the pupils, during recess and in intermission, on the play grounds, or in any basement, or room appropriated to recreation. In no other way can quarrels, or bad words, or vexatious and oppressive conduct of older, and stronger, pupils over the younger, weaker, and more timid ones, or immoral tendencies be checked or repressed, and the best manners and habits be cultivated. The most common evils of our schools, and the chief complaints, arise from the rude, wild, improper and some reckless conduct of a few pupils during recess and intermission. Good order in the playground will secure it in the recitation room.”

The fourth article, ‘School Houses’, appeared on April 29, 1871, and began with a statement of architectural philosophy (anticipating Louis Sullivan’s “Form Follows Function”):

“The object of a building should govern its construction. The clearer and more comprehensive the idea or aim, the more distinct will be the outline, and the more simple and harmonious all the parts. A dwelling for a family must differ from a store, or a church, and a school room should be unlike a hot-house, a furnace room, or an ice cellar. A prison even ought not be underground, or destitute of good light and air, in order to gain the ends of punishment, discipline or reform; but rather to be built so that light, air and comfort, as well as confinement and toil, may serve these ends, and thus impress the benevolence of justice, as well as its power. The brightness of a school room ought to be adapted to the wants of the human eye, not glaring, not deeply shaded, and its temperature ought not to be oppressive or chilly.”
A VISIONARY SUPERINTENDENT

Drawing on information from Boston and New York, the superintendent proposed standards for school buildings regarding light, ventilation, temperature, ceiling height, desk arrangement, and class size. His conclusion was a restatement of one of his core beliefs: “A good free school draws and binds to itself the families that comprise the real strength, physical, social, intellectual and moral, of every community.”

Atkinson’s role in public education did not lessen his interest in Pacific University. He wrote to the AHMS about the achievement of Pacific:

> “Its growth is slow, yet sufficient to be obvious to the communities of Oregon & to command increasing confidence. The institution has been born and nourished in the breath of prayer, & we trust it will be a blessing to our churches & work for the extension of freedom, intelligence, truth & piety through our part of the nation & even regions beyond.”

As already shown, George was a strong and consistent advocate of educational opportunities for women. Records of the Pacific’s Trustees show a sequence of events, involving Atkinson, which led to the admission of women to Pacific University. On May 8, 1867 the Trustees approved an action “that the faculty be hereby offered to give ladies the opportunity to pursue the college course, and also that they be authorized to add French & German – optionally to the students – to the college curriculum.”

Although the minutes give no reason for this decision at this time, a donation from George appears to have played a role leading to adoption of the new policy. In 1857 he had purchased twenty acres, originally donated to the school by a Mr. Catchings, from the University. The purchase apparently served two purposes: (1) providing needed operating funds to the school; and (2) serving to retain the land for future use by the school. On Feb. 4, 1862 the Trustees approved a motion: “Resolved that the 20 acres of land on the Catchings claim, sold to Mr. Atkinson as per vote, be received again from him at his request and be appropriated for female instruction in the Institution as he requests.” This action is the only time that the minutes of the Trustees show discussion of admission of women before acting on their inclusion in 1867.

Continuing financial progress at Pacific University was achieved under the leadership of President Marsh. On June 16, 1867 he reported to the
Trustees that his second fund-raising trip to the East, recently concluded, had brought $25,228.04 into the coffers of the school. A third trip, in 1869, produced $20,942.75. 25

1873 found the trustees of Pacific University troubled by a change of policy and procedures by the American College and Education Society. The issue first appears in the records of the trustees’ annual meeting, on June 3:

“June 3, 1873. Pres. Marsh submitted blank bonds from the Secretary of the College Society to be filled in duplicate to prevent alienation of gifts to State or Ecclesiastical control.” The ensuing discussion is not recorded, but the next day’s minutes show an action: “June 4, 1873, Resolved that G.H. Atkinson and E.D. Shattuck be a committee to consider and report upon the proposed bond to the College Society.”

The minutes are silent regarding discussion, but the third day of the meeting brought with it an important change to the Constitution of the school, possibly in response to the policy change of the ACES:

“June 5, 1873 – The following Preamble (was) passed: Whereas Tualatin Academy and Pacific University is not and cannot ever be by its corporate law or Constitution under any state or ecclesiastical control, resolved that it will welcome the friendly sympathy and aid of the State and of any and all denominations of Christians. Resolved, that by virtue of its origin it seeks and expects the fraternal cooperation (especially) of all the Congregational churches of our state and region.” 26

The change of policy and procedure at the ACES had come shortly after the death of its founding executive, Theron Baldwin, the man who, in 1847, had challenged Atkinson to build a college in Oregon. Baldwin had been an unabashed enthusiast for starting colleges and seminaries in the west. The ACES now wanted more accountability over the purposes for which the schools used funds received through the Society. The proffered blank bonds seem to have raised hackles among Pacific’s trustees, and quite possibly the trustees of other schools receiving aid from the Society, as well.
Resolution of the matter dragged on for at least two years. Atkinson received a letter, dated July 23, 1875, from H.P. Butterfield, Baldwin's successor. Butterfield's letter shows that at least one of the causes for the Society's new policy was unhappiness about events in California that had changed a church college in Berkeley into a state school. The brisk tone of his writing would not have sat well with recipients:

“Now about the Agreement. I think you misunderstand its scope.

1. As I understand the matter, it can never have any retro-active [force] whatever.

2. In any case, it renders you liable to pay back only such sums as shall hereafter go to you through this Society & be covered by specific receipts drawn in accordance with, & in reference to the Agreement. I have no copy of the printed form of receipt at hand, or I would inclose it.

3. You must be guilty of a real breach of trust before you can become liable to pay the sums covered by these receipts. We give to you & encourage others to give to you as a Christian College. Now if you take out the “Christian,” & make the College heretical: or if you destroy the grade, & make the College a high school, or a mere academy, you break the implied condition on which Christian men give you money, & we, under the Agreement, can recover everything for which we hold your receipts. And do you think that a hardship? Would it not be hard, if we could not recover? Do you think we look with any kind of patience upon the THE OUR ALIFORNIA BRETHREN SECULARIZED IN TURNING it over to the State University? Fifty years hence your successors may WANT TO DO SOME SUCH FOOLISH UNJUST THING but IF THEY MUST PAY THIS SOCIETY OR SO BEFORE DOING IT THEY may hesitate. So, my good bro. this Agreement will not load your Academy or shadow your University. It will only be your formal & legal pledge to us that the money it covers shall never be diverted from the object you had in view in asking & the givers had in view in bestowing it. ‘Only that & nothing more.’ It can never restrict your liberty as Trustees, till you try to do
wrong in these two ways just described. The sooner you execute it the better.
Very Cordially, H. Q. Butterfield”

Atkinson responded to Butterfield one month later, accepting the agreement:

“While we wish to assure the College Society that the former funds received have been sacredly kept and their income used for the Collegiate expenses, and that the Trustees hold this sacred purpose for the future, we shall recommend our Board to enter into the ‘Covenant and agreement with the Society for the Promotion of Collegiate and Theological Education & their Successors’ with reference to all funds entrusted to us through their agency in future after this date. We will call a meeting of the Board at as early a day as is Convenient and inform you of their action.

H. W. Corbett, G. H. Atkinson.”

Atkinson had long prided himself on his relationships with Theron Baldwin, the ACES, and its predecessor society, but in the matter of the covenant with the ACES he seems to have been in full agreement with the Trustees and, it may be assumed, President Marsh. A recent history of Pacific University argues that Trustee Secretary George Atkinson and President Sydney Harper Marsh were on opposing sides of a controversy that is variously described as over “ecclesiastical control” or “Congregational control.” Yet the above material shows, as does Atkinson’s earlier letter to his uncle, Josiah Little, that Marsh and all of the trustees, including Atkinson, were in substantial agreement as they shaped their response to the change of policy and procedure by the ACES.

The ACES, of course, continued to provide modest financial aid to the University, as it did to each of the colleges that it had approved for support. The Annual Reports of the ACES are unclear about the amount of direct aid given, but in the thirty year period between 1853 and 1883 their reports show a total of $96,176.20 received by Pacific University. Marsh’s own fund-raising efforts account for the bulk of those funds. The report for the year 1883, however, includes a listing of twenty-eight eastern churches and individuals who together contributed $8,113.46 to Pacific University.
Included are Frederick Billings ($1,000) and his wife Julia Parmly Billings ($300).

Marsh chose the twenty-fifth anniversary of his Pacific presidency to give a lengthy address reflecting on his work. The audience was limited to Pacific’s Trustees, at their annual meeting. In one portion he referred to denominational relations:

“I must refer to another matter about which there has been much needless agitation, viz., the denominational relations of the institution.” He began by setting out his understanding of what it meant for Pacific to be Congregational in character. . . .

“believing that I know and approve the doctrines as well as the polity of the old historic denomination I have believed that as I individually worked for Christ as a Congregationalist, while not working for Congregationalism, so the institution while following the methods, exercising the moral discipline and working out in instruction the ideas that originated our old New England colleges, knew no such object as advancing the interests of the denomination.”

He then clarified his stance regarding the independence of the school from ecclesiastical control or direction:

“There is a tendency in some Congregational conferences to assume a special right of visitation or supervision, for which composed as they are sometimes of members differing widely in theological and educational views, they are altogether disqualified. The Institution is under a Board of Trustees that fills its own vacancies, a majority of whom are Congregationalists that will maintain this connection, not to make it sectarian, but to shut off all sectarian controversy and like true Congregationalists preserve it free from the influence of an outside body, and see that it is conducted in the true, simple Christian spirit to which we have referred.”

Marsh did not refer to Atkinson personally in his comments and, as we have already seen, Atkinson had elsewhere expressed himself in agreement
with Marsh’s position in favor of non-sectarian teaching. Still, it can safely be assumed that Marsh spoke against “conferences that assume the right of visitation and supervision” because he had had to fend off such efforts. Those would-be influences must have been ministers in Oregon, since no other Congregationalists were nearby. Further evidence of tension between the two can be found in a letter that Atkinson had written to the AHMS two years earlier:

“Prof. G.H. Collier has left Forest Grove for the same reason that Bro. Ellis did. He has accepted the professorship of Mathematics in Willamette University reluctantly but for the sake of peace he says. So far as our missionary & Christian work is concerned, I am often tempted to regret efforts for the college and almost wish it had never been, but out of the darkness I still hope for light. It has done good. It could do much more for the churches if permitted.”

Atkinson’s 1873 move from local pastor to general missionary did not end his activities on behalf of public education. His successor as County Superintendent, Unitarian pastor Thomas Lamb Eliot, served two terms, but early in the first the region served by the County Superintendent’s office was reduced when Portland established the office of City Superintendent of Schools. S.H. King was selected City Superintendent in 1873. In 1877 King was succeeded T.H. Crawford, who continued in the office until 1888. King’s first annual report states:

“At a meeting of the Board of Directors, May 26, 1874, Dr. Atkinson was selected to serve on the Examining Committee. This committee was instructed to conduct an examination in the various departments of the public schools.”

Atkinson soon reported:

“The candidates for the High School were fairly tested in ten studies . . . of forty-seven sets of papers the average credit of 70 per cent and over was given to twenty-three or twenty-four numbers, thus authorizing them to pass to the High School at
the beginning of the next term in September . . . It is well for those pupils, and all others, and their parents also, to see how they stand in every study. It will guide the parent and stimulate the child to make up deficiencies and move on and up for surely the next time.”

The exams, which Atkinson continued to administer, were given in February and July. His commitment to community service was sorely tried by the amount of his schedule given to travel, but his name appears each year in the Annual Report of the Multnomah County Superintendent of Schools.

2. Ibid., Aug. 24, 1864.
3. Ibid., Nov. 22, 1864.
4. Ibid., Jan. 7, 1865.
5. Ibid., Jan. 19, 1865.
6. Ibid., July 19, 1866.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., August 10, 1866.
9. Ibid., January 24, 1867.
11. Failing and Shattuck were also associated with Atkinson in other educational efforts (Failing at Pacific University and Shattuck at both Pacific University and Clackamas County Female Seminary).
12. Daily Oregon Herald, April 2, 1867, 3. This writer is indebted to Tim Hills, Historian for McMenamins Pubs and Breweries, Portland, Oregon, for this research.
14. Reynolds, History of the Public Schools of Portland, Oregon, 1845 to 1871.
15. Atkinson, Oregonian, June 17, 1868.
17. Ibid., March 24, 1871.
18. Ibid., March 29, 1871.
19. Ibid., April 5, 1871.
20. Ibid., April 29, 1871.
21. Atkinson to AHMS, May 6, 1864. AHMS Archives, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University.
22. Cited elsewhere in this work are his visits to Wailuku Seminary (Maui) in 1848, Mt. Holyoke Seminary (Massachusetts) in 1852, and Benecia Seminary (California) in 1868, as well as his efforts, strenuous but ultimately unsuccessful, on behalf of Clackamas County Female Seminary in Oregon City.
23. Trustees, Tualatin Academy and Pacific University, minutes, May 8, 1867. Pacific University Archives.
24. Ibid., Feb. 4, 1862.
26. Trustees, Tualatin Academy and Pacific University, minutes, June 3-5, 1873. Archives, Pacific.
27. The “College of California”, begun in Oakland (with aid from the SPCTEW) by Congregationalists and Presbyterians in 1855 and then moved to Berkeley. It had become a state institution, the University of California, in 1868. Website, University of California, accessed May 22, 2007.
31. See chapter seven, endnote 26.
32. ACES, Annual Reports, Congregational Library, Boston MA.
33. Marsh “Reflections”, Trustees, minutes, June 5, 1878. Pacific U. Archives. Marsh’s use of the word ‘conference’ to characterize the churches of a region shows his eastern background. The term would not begin to be used among western Congregationalists for another thirty years. In 1878 they were still calling all regional organizations ‘associations’.
34. Atkinson to AHMS, September 14, 1876. AHMS Archives, Amistad.
36. Ibid.
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
HE SAW THE POSSIBILITIES

George Atkinson arrived in Oregon at the right time. A turbulent, energetic period of scattered settlement and political uncertainty was about to end. An officially sanctioned government was about to be formed. He came expecting to stay, and to make a difference. His wide-ranging skills and irrepressible optimism made valuable contributions during the formative stages of the region and state.

George H. Atkinson, ca. 1885.
Credit: Used by permission, Oregon Historical Society.
He arrived in 1848 with the expectation of spreading Congregational churches across the Pacific Northwest. That was slow to occur. He saw little growth in numbers of members or of churches until the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1884. Those long years were a disappointment to his sponsoring mission society, but he used the time effectively to advance the cause of education. The staid newcomer who had hoped to plant the institutions of the East soon came to adapt appreciatively to his new setting. Whether it was settlers staking mile-square claims, neighbors rushing off to newly opened mines, extemporaneous ‘stump speakers’, climbing a mountain, planting his garden or building his house, he accepted life in Oregon on its own terms. He rarely passed up an opportunity to take part in it, sing its praises and trumpet its potential.

Raised in a family of entrepreneurial Yankees, he saw economic resources, business opportunities, and moral challenges on all sides. Drawing on his own student and teaching days, he brought with him schoolbooks and designs for educational systems. Believing universal education to be both a moral imperative and an engine of economic growth, he worked unceasingly for good schools for all children and youth. The quality and longevity of his leadership was such that the wider community came to listen to his voice with trust and respect.

He seemed to be forever on the move. Within Oregon and Washington he became a familiar figure in many communities. Beyond those two states his travel was amazing, touching the White House, Alaska, New England, Illinois, Ohio, Missouri, Panama, California, Oahu, Maui and many points in between. Wherever he went he was both listening and speaking, learning and teaching, spreading a vision of the future while adding new ideas and approaches to his list of causes and concerns.

Atkinson was not free of errors, nor without critics and opponents. He had a recurring pattern of setting impossible goals, or, as S.H. Marsh put it, “he is a man of noble impulses . . . there is no close communication between his means & his ends.” His letters to the AHMS repeatedly pled for more missionaries for his area, while at the same time describing, and trying to explain or excuse, the ongoing struggles of the few churches that had been started in Oregon. Of the several secondary academies that he helped to start, only two lasted as long as ten years.

Though his church work was full of struggles and setbacks, his achievements in the field of education were steady and substantial. He took the
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lead in shaping the educational system of Oregon. For four decades he had a hand in developing, directing and defending it. His philosophy of schooling was clear and comprehensive, as was his ability to implement and interpret that philosophy. He established the foundation on which others have built. He was involved in all of these things:

- teaching sailors to read.
- observing schools and exams on Oahu and Maui.
- selecting and selling textbooks.
- writing the proposal to the legislature for a school system.
- lobbying successfully for the adoption of that proposal.
- recruiting teachers from New England.
- initiating secondary academies for teacher training.
- serving as trustee for two colleges and several academies in two states.
- arranging eastern financial support for the two colleges.
- teaching school in East Corinth VT and Oregon City OR.
- writing regular newspaper columns on major issues in education.
  - school building design.
  - school building construction.
  - classroom furniture.
  - policies for teacher retention.
  - textbooks and curriculum, school ground design and playground management, functions of annual school district meetings.
  - criticizing school districts with inadequate facilities.
- conducting annual student exams.
- leading in-service training institutes for teachers.
- Starting and heading teachers’ organizations.
- serving as a penitentiary commissioner in order to promote education of the incarcerated.
- organizing the community’s response to public charges against the schools.
- defending the right of colored children to an education.
- helping to develop the Forest Grove Indian School.

Two of the many eulogies written in his honor provide a fitting conclusion to this account of George Atkinson’s life:
Harvey W. Scott, Editor and Publisher, *The Oregonian*:

“He was not satisfied to keep pace with the natural development of the country . . . . He saw the possibilities of the Northwest from the day his residence began in it, forty years ago, and he spoke and wrote of its coming greatness during all those years of the country’s isolation and remoteness, when such voices were few.”

John Eaton, fellow alumnus of Dartmouth and Andover, family friend, and for sixteen years (1870-86) United States Commissioner of Education:

“In all the varied service to the different phases of education in those formative States, which the Bureau was enabled to render during the sixteen years of my supervision, I was specially indebted to him. His information was promptly furnished and trustworthy; his opinion carefully matured and thoroughly safe. He was a devoted friend of all good work for the elevation of the people – all the people.

“He saw with unusual clearness the relation of Christianity to the affairs of this life, and he was on the alert to aid in any form of human progress. He was not only wise in promoting civil and religious institutions, but he was a leader in the development of the agricultural and mineral resources, the industries, commerce and varied enterprises of that vast region . . . Dr. Atkinson was one of the most completely rounded men I ever knew, and I shall always be his debtor.”

1. See chapter 11, endnotes 14, 15.