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."¹¹

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.”¹²

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.”

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.


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

