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.

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.”1 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
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.
3. Ibid., 25-6.