

CAPTAIN
GEORGE FLAVEL

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JON DRURY

REDEMPTION 
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PREFACE



If I live, I will return.

—George Flavel

I WAS INTRIGUED BY THIS vow George Flavel made to the captain of a foundering merchant ship before he rowed with others to summon help for the troubled ship.

In a visit to the Flavel House in Astoria, Oregon, I viewed the introductory video in the Carriage House. I was intrigued by the person of Captain Flavel in the film's introduction to the captain and his house in Astoria. For most of us, decisions are governed by personal benefit and comfort. The captain seemed to be governed by pluck, character, courage, and selflessness. I asked at the bookstore, "Do you have a book on Captain George Flavel?" I was told no book had been written.

I love to read, and the narratives of history intrigue me. I love stories that grip the heart and will. From what I heard, the captain's life was a story of piloting endangered ships and their passengers, directing an effective pilot association, and giving character and service to the city and citizens of Astoria. As I began to gather materials, I encountered the Clatsop County Historical Society. They have diligently investigated and preserved the history of Astoria

and the county. The society had valuable material on Flavel, but the materials are not readily visible to the public. The collections of the Astoria Public Library and the Columbia River Maritime Museum also contain valuable reference material that I found helpful.

Though the captain and others spent a night and a day seeking to rescue the ship, most of its passengers were lost. But perhaps the greater rescue the captain achieved was the city of Astoria. As a bar pilot at the mouth of the nearby Columbia River, and as a businessman, he spent his life there, invested his resources advancing the city's interests, and saw the city grow by more than tenfold.

I hope you will enjoy a journey into the captain's life as much as I continue to do.

ONE

SEA GATEWAY



*Astoria is the gateway by sea, and Portland is the gateway
by land. I suspect that Astoria will not be quiet
and obscure for long.*

—George Flavel

“**L**ITTLE VILLAGE. DON’T LOOK like much. Ain’t big enough to whup a dog in.” This was the observation of the ship’s first mate in answer to the query of his twenty-five-year-old captain, George Flavel, who had asked what could be seen on the shore in their passage in the fall of 1849.

“You sound like Wilkes!” said Flavel. “He lost the *Peacock* back at the bar.” Lieutenant Charles Wilkes of the United States Exploring Expedition had encountered trouble at a place that became notorious—where the mouth of the Columbia River met the Pacific Ocean. The fickle and dangerous bar has been blamed for over two thousand shipping accidents over the years.¹

“In Oregon, Astoria is the gateway by sea, and Portland is the gateway by land. I suspect that Astoria will not be quiet and obscure for long. Appearances can be deceiving. There is history here. It’s a strategic location,”

“Don’t look very strategic to me,” the mate answered.

This imagined dialogue illuminates George Flavel’s first encounter with Astoria, Oregon.² From the deck of the *John Petty*, the sun illumined a small town at the water’s edge, surrounded by forest. A few small fishing boats clung to their docks. There were homes, a few shops, and several church spires rising above the rooftops. The ramshackle appearance of the hamlet founded by fur traders surprised Flavel.

That first view of the otherwise insignificant village must have made an impression on the captain. He would become significantly involved in its growth into prominence in northwest shipping and commerce, and the town would likewise affect the captain deeply for the rest of his life.

Flavel was aware that fur trader Jacob Astor had founded the location, previously called Point George, by way of the merchant ship *Tonquin* in 1811. At the time, four different national powers, including Russia and Mexico, were fighting over control of the West and Pacific Northwest. The American flag flew first over the outpost, a log fort with four six-pound cannons in front, but soon the British North West Company seized control and renamed it Fort George. They were followed by British fur trader Hudson’s Bay Company. It had only returned to American control three years prior to Flavel’s arrival.

It was indeed isolated, but Flavel saw possibility. America was streaming west, as Flavel himself had done from his native New Jersey, to more places than just the gold rush in California. Oregon was growing as the gateway to all manner of pioneer dreams, especially the lush and golden Willamette Valley, which was 150 miles long.

Astoria could be strategic if the problem of the treacherous Columbia River Bar could be solved. The river was named Columbia’s River in 1792 by Captain Robert Gray, the first nonnative to sail into the river. But the troublesome river entrance

plagued mariners. When Lieutenant Wilkes encountered the Columbia River Bar in 1841, eight years before Flavel's arrival, he said, "Mere description can give little idea of the terrors of the bar of the Columbia. All who have seen it have spoken of the wildness of the scene and the incessant roar of the waters, representing it as one of the most fearful sights that can possibly meet the eye of the sailor."

Flavel had studied the best charts available and knew of the two navigable channels through the sandbar created by the outlet of the powerful Columbia River. But the chart did not depict the dramatic storms, tides, and winds that all too often held sway over mariners and their ships. Eventually, shipwrecks of those vessels coming and going from the mouth of the river would number more than two thousand.

But who was Captain George Flavel? Though some records placed his birth in Protestant North Ireland birth date of Nov. 17, 1823,³ census takers record his birth, and that of his parents, in New Jersey. The earliest primary record of Captain Flavel is a certificate of membership for the Odd Fellows Lodge, stating he joined the organization on October 5, 1846, in Norfolk, Virginia.⁴

Though Flavel was not secretive, he was never very forthcoming about the details of his background. Dr. Bethenia Owens-Adair, a close friend of his, said:

He was of a proud and reticent nature, which repelled any inquiry into his private affairs; not that there was, presumably, anything to conceal, for during the whole of his long life in Astoria, which was open to all, his honor was unquestioned, and he invariably showed the greatest scorn for hypocrisy or meanness of any description. But there was a dignity and reserve in his demeanor which even those nearest him did not venture to attempt to break through.⁵

Of Flavel's nautical training, there is no surviving record. He left Norfolk in January 1849 with his ship, the *John Petty*, carrying fourteen passengers and stocked with merchandise for the gold rush in California.

Norfolk was one of the oldest cities of Hampton Roads. As early as the late 1600s, Norfolk blossomed as a major port city due to its natural deep-water channels. By the late 1700s, it had become one of the most prosperous cities in Virginia, a major shipbuilding center, and an important transshipment center for import and export.

The type of ship Flavel captained—a brig—was a sailing vessel with two square-rigged masts. They were fast and maneuverable and were used as both merchant vessels and naval warships. The design, popular in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries during the sailing era, fell out of use with the arrival of steamships. A brig required a relatively large crew for its small size and was difficult to sail into the wind.

Flavel's arrival in San Francisco after a journey around the horn of South America was delayed by an accident that required him to dock at Rio de Janeiro for repairs. Then he discovered that the "gateway to the goldfields" was filled with ships, and the market was overstocked. Though most of his passengers disembarked, he sold precious little of his cargo. However, word on the street suggested he might find a market several sailing days north, in Portland, a city that was growing as the hub of the Willamette Valley. He sailed past Astoria, his future home, on that first trip to Portland. In Portland he sold all his cargo at a profit to a William Hopkins. The November 15, 1849, *Oregon Spectator* advertised goods on the ship "from the United States."⁶

Flavel returned to San Francisco and Sacramento. He remained curious about the prospect of gold mining, and he even tried his hand in the goldfields for a short period. But after a matter of months, he returned to what he knew best—sailing. He arrived

in Portland with merchandise, again for William Hopkins, in the *John Petty* on February 7, 1850. Reports in the paper show he made at least one more trip commanding that ship and that he captained the vessel as late as spring 1850.⁷

Soon Flavel was given command of the side-wheel steamer *Goliah*. The *Oregon Spectator* recounts his arrival in Portland as captain of that ship on April 19, 1850. He then ran trips between San Francisco and Sacramento, operating a passenger service mainly for miners.⁸ In 1850 he became pilot and mate on the *Goldhunter*, a 172-foot, 511-ton steamship running between San Francisco and Portland. The ship was owned by the owners of the Portland townsite. It was on these repeated trips as a pilot that he became intimately familiar with the ever-treacherous Columbia River Bar. It was likely on one of these trips that he first docked in small Astoria.

Situated on the south bank of the mouth of the Columbia River, Astoria docked ships in transit from all over the world—if, that is, they could solve the puzzle of the violent Columbia River Bar, nicknamed “the graveyard of the Pacific.” Yet Astoria was an opportune spot for a wise and knowledgeable pilot to build a career guiding ships across the bar.

For the captain and other shippers, sailors, and merchants, the town was a day’s sail away from Portland, so it served as a convenient docking place. It was also the site of the United States Customs House established by John Adair in April 1849.

When he stayed in Astoria, Flavel boarded at the Astoria Hotel, owned and operated by Conrad Boelling. He made the small town his home. Boelling’s daughter, Mary Christina Boelling, would become Flavel’s wife four years later.

But what can be learned of the founding of this strategic gateway?