

## Astor and the Oregon Country

*"On the waters of the Pacific we can found no claim in right of Louisiana. If we claim that country at all, it must be on Astor's settlement near the mouth of the Columbia."*

—THOMAS JEFFERSON.

It is not particularly surprising that, in the financial fairyland of a new world, a capital of seven flutes and twenty-five dollars should have been transmuted into a great fortune; many have been built in America on no capital at all. But this was a fortune with a difference, acquired by no mere turn of spectacular good luck or by shrewd manipulation of non-existing values, but painstakingly, in legitimate trade, and so far reaching in scope and in effect as to give it a quite special significance in American history. And yet luck, both good and bad, being to some extent a partner in all human experiments, is not entirely absent from this one.

When the young German boy John Jacob Astor sailed from London about a century and a half ago with his small stock of musical instruments and his few dollars laboriously saved during two years of hard work in England, his future course of action presented itself in no more definite form than hope and a very fearless and determined ambition; before he left the sailing vessel, ice locked for two months in Chesapeake Bay, it had found the direction he was to follow to supreme success.

The American colonies had just emerged from their desperate revolutionary effort and the treaty of 1783 had solved the more pressing of the moot questions between the new nation and the old.

It was a time for great beginnings. The raw materials of achievement prodigally awaited shaping hands; the little states hugging the Atlantic fringed an unconquered and unmeasured wilderness and doubtless the sense of it there, and of America's destiny toward it, must have broadened the scope and quickened the pulse of every man's desire. But in actual practice the new Americans had not yet had much time to look westward; there was enough to do within the limits of their half-grown commonwealths east of the Alleghanies.

So far the only product of the vast hinterland had been fur, and the habit of two hundred years had formed a deep channel along which this traffic continued almost undisturbed, to flow. The French of the St. Lawrence, the Royal English Company on Hudson's Bay, the Montreal merchants who succeeded to the com-