

## Thomas Cox

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By Sara J. Pittock

The Oregon Trail led pioneers over rugged mountains, across raging rivers, and through hostile territory, each of them hoping to claim fresh land and opportunities. Emigrants arrived from all over the country, finding happiness in the form of free property. Settlers arrived in the Willamette Valley eager to snatch up Donation Land Claims, and among them was Thomas Cox, a businessman who established the first store in Salem.

Thomas Cox was born on October 22, 1790, in Virginia. He moved to Ohio with his parents, where he met and married his wife, Martha Cox, who had the same last name, but did not have any relationship to him. As the years passed he built several grist and carding mills in Ohio before moving to Illinois. Cox made a name for himself. Along with building more mills and manufacturing gun powder, he established his first store. Finally, in 1846, Cox set his sights on the Oregon Country.

Along with his son Joseph, and his two sons-in-law Elias Brown and Peter Polley, Cox made preparations for the long journey across the Oregon Trail.<sup>3</sup> He attempted to sell his store to the same men who provisioned his mills, but they attempted to short sell him on the value of his merchandise. Rather than settle for the deal, Cox ordered custom-made wagons to ship his dry goods over the Trail.<sup>4</sup> With this merchandise the freight wagons, and the wagons used for his family stretched over three city blocks.<sup>5</sup> The families met in Missouri, and awaited the additional goods Cox had shipped by river.

After a month the goods still had not arrived so Cox, by now elected captain of the train that had grown to forty wagons, left Missouri for Oregon.<sup>6</sup> James Cox, one of his descendants, described the route: "Took the Fort Hall Route" on the Oregon Trail "through the Snake River Country, crossing the Blue mountains near where Pendleton is now located, then over the Cascade range, near the foot of Mt. Hood via the Barlow Trail...Here they descended the terrible Laurel Hill, where they were obliged to tie trees to the rear of the wagons to act as brakes."<sup>7</sup> A snow storm killed most of their animals, making it difficult to get to Salem with all the merchandise. As usual, Cox came up with an unusual solution. He left one man in charge of the goods while he and the families continued on to Silverton (where his two brothers had settled),<sup>8</sup> and then to Salem. There he hired Indians with sixty packhorses to help unload the wagons and retrieve the goods to his new home.<sup>9</sup>

Cox's business had a slow start. His family moved into the Louis H. Judson House, where he ran his business while he waited for his own building to be constructed.<sup>10</sup> The Judson house was located between what are now Court, Liberty, and Chemeketa Streets.<sup>11</sup> The store, when finished in the spring of 1847, sat on the northeast corner of Ferry and Commercial streets.<sup>12</sup> While his family lived on the second floor, below, Cox operated the business with his son William.<sup>13</sup> The building also served as the first federal post office in Salem. This was in 1849, after President James Polk nominated Turner Crump as the city's first Postmaster.<sup>14</sup> Before Cox opened his store, the nearest general store was in Oregon City, and was owned by the Hudson Bay Company.[HBC]<sup>15</sup>

The store served the needs of the pioneer community. It accepted wheat as currency at \$1 a bushel, which Cox later traded to the HBC in Oregon City.<sup>16</sup> After miners returned from the 1849 California gold

rush, Cox also accepted gold dust as payment.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, some miners tried to swindle him by mixing gold dust with less valuable materials such as yellow sand.<sup>18</sup> "In an effort to try and help proprietors like Cox, the provisional government allowed for the creation of something called Beaver Money to put this valuable dust into a fungible form."<sup>19</sup> Cox purchased groceries from HBC, specifically from Dr. John Mcloughlin, including slabs of molasses and rock salt with pieces as big as walnuts.<sup>3</sup> He received dry goods from around Cape Horn.<sup>20</sup> He sold everything from beef, calico, apples and other fruits, to spelling books.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Cox sold ammunition that he may have manufactured himself.<sup>22</sup>

Cox's business served important citizens of Salem. He furnished, without charge, ammunition to the men chasing after Cayuse Indians in the aftermath of the Whitman Massacre of November 1847.<sup>23</sup> Cox sold merchandise to Salem missionaries such as Rev. J. L. Parrish, L. H. Judson, and David Leslie. W.H. Willson, who platted the first streets in Salem, bought goods at Cox's store. Other notable customers included the Applegates, the Looney's<sup>24</sup> the Macleans,<sup>25</sup> and William Rector, who helped mint Beaver coins and served in the provisional legislature.<sup>26</sup>

In winter 1847, an encampment of Chemawa and Chemeketa Indians caught the measles, and nearly half of them died. Their treatments, using sweathouses followed by dunks in the cold Mill Creek, only made the sickness worse. Dr. W.H. Willson, J.L. Parrish, L.B. Judson, and Cox gave food to Indians, and found them friendly in spite of the ongoing Cayuse conflict.<sup>27</sup> In 1856 Cox helped to establish the Willamette Woolen Manufacturing Mill, along with Joseph Watt, William H. Rector, John Minto, Joseph Wilson, Daniel Waldo, and John Boon. It was the first woolen mill on the West Coast and encouraged the growing sheep husbandry and textile industries.<sup>28</sup> Within a few years, Cox had helped change Salem forever.

By 1849, Cox's life turned to a new direction. His wife died, and shortly thereafter Cox retired from the store.<sup>29</sup> He left the store to his son William and his friend Turner Crump who renamed the store "William Cox and Co."<sup>30</sup> Cox purchased the land claim of Walter Helm on Ankeny Hill and employed his son-in-law, Peter Polley, to take care of the land and install fences.<sup>31</sup> Using seeds he had brought across the Oregon Trail Cox turned to farming, growing peaches and apples.<sup>32</sup> He developed a variety of peach called Cox's Golden Cling "Which remained popular in Western Oregon through the 1930s."<sup>33</sup> In 1860 he fell off his horse while riding along the Pudding River. He never fully recovered from the accident.<sup>34</sup> Thomas Cox died on October 3, 1862, just short of his seventy-second birthday, and was buried in the cemetery that bears his name.<sup>35, 36</sup>

Cox died a seasoned pioneer, a savvy businessman, and a dedicated farmer, leaving Salem with a lasting legacy. He established the first store in Salem and hosted the first federal post office. Along the way he helped American Indians, and crossed paths with fur traders and missionaries. Cox helped to establish the first woolen mill in the region and developed his own variety of peaches. Salem still seems to carry his spirit, a stubborn will to succeed in the face of overwhelming obstacles and fierce competition.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hochspeier, Ann & Sherrill; Neely, Sally, *Oregon, Marion County, Cox Cemetery, (1849-1988)*. 1-2, 5.

<sup>2</sup> "Address Honors Thomas Cox, First Salem Merchant: Biographical Sketch by Burt Brown Barker at Unveiling Exercises". *Oregon Statesman*, September 30. 1931.

<sup>3</sup> Hochspeier, Ann & Sherrill; Neely, Sally, *Oregon, Marion County, Cox Cemetery, (1849-1988)*. 1-2, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Hendricks, R.J, "Bits for Breakfast". *The Oregon Statesman*, February 22, 1931. 4

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> James W. Cox, "Memoirs of Early Salem". *Marion County History*. Volume III. 34-35

<sup>8</sup> Down, Robert Horace M.A, *A History of the Silverton Country*. 36-37.

<sup>9</sup> Hendricks, R.J, "Bits for Breakfast". *The Oregon Statesman*, February 22, 1931.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> R.J. Hendricks, "Bits for Breakfast". *Oregon Statesman*, August 28, 1936.

<sup>12</sup> Ladd & Bush Bankers, *First Dry Goods Store is Opened*. 27

<sup>13</sup> James W. Cox, "Memoirs of Early Salem". *Marion County History*. Volume III. 34-35

<sup>14</sup> Winston H. Taylor, "Trading in Gold Dust, Pigs, Wheat: Feature of Salem's First Store" *The Oregon Statesman*, November 23, 1947.

<sup>15</sup> "Early Salem Merchant to be Honored." *Oregon Journal*, September 27, 1931. Sec. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Wilma Bonsanti, "Cox Cemetery Buried in Stillness, Flowers" *Oregon Statesman*. May 28, 1972 (Section B.)

<sup>17</sup> Lewis Hubbel Johnson, "Sketches of Salem: Its History from the Date of its First Settlement". *Marion County History*. Volume II

<sup>18</sup> Scott, John, interview.

<sup>19</sup> Ladd & Bush Bankers, *First Dry Goods Store is Opened*. 27

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Cox, William Cox, and Company; *Daybook and Ledger*.

<sup>22</sup> James W. Cox, "Memoirs of Early Salem". *Marion County History*. Volume III. 34-35

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> "Early Salem Merchant to be Honored." *Oregon Journal*, September 27, 1931. Sec. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Winston H. Taylor, "Trading in Gold Dust, Pigs, Wheat: Feature of Salem's First Store" *The Oregon Statesman*, November 23, 1947.

- <sup>26</sup> Ladd & Bush Bankers, *First Dry Goods Store is Opened*. 27
- <sup>27</sup> Henry Brown, "The Last of His Tribe—Quinaby." *Marion County History, Volume XII*. 30.
- <sup>28</sup> Bancroft, H. H., *Biography of Thomas Cox of Salem Oregon*. 13 pages.
- <sup>29</sup> Hochspeier, Ann & Sherrill; Neely, Sally, *Oregon, Marion County, Cox Cemetery, (1849-1988)*. 1-2, 5.
- <sup>30</sup> Down, Robert Horace M.A., *A History of the Silverton Country*. 36-37.
- <sup>31</sup> Hochspeier, Ann & Sherrill; Neely, Sally, *Oregon, Marion County, Cox Cemetery, (1849-1988)*. 1-2, 5.
- <sup>32</sup> Bancroft, H.H, *History of Oregon Volume I*. 629-630.
- <sup>33</sup> Hochspeier, Ann & Sherrill; Neely, Sally, *Oregon, Marion County, Cox Cemetery, (1849-1988)*. 1-2, 5.
- <sup>34</sup> S.S. Steeves, "Thomas Cox—1847." *Book of Remembrance of Marion County, Oregon, Pioneers 1840-1860*. 154-157.
- <sup>35</sup> Hochspeier, Ann & Sherrill; Neely, Sally, *Oregon, Marion County, Cox Cemetery, (1849-1988)*. 1-2, 5.
- <sup>36</sup> The cemetery can be reached by 1-5 exit #243, west on Ankeny road, left on Buena Vista for 1 mi, right on Sidney for 2 m. It is located behind the Ankeny Hill Winery and the gate can be reached by contacting the owner of the winery

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