

Holy Ground

Exploring Catholic history in the Pacific Northwest

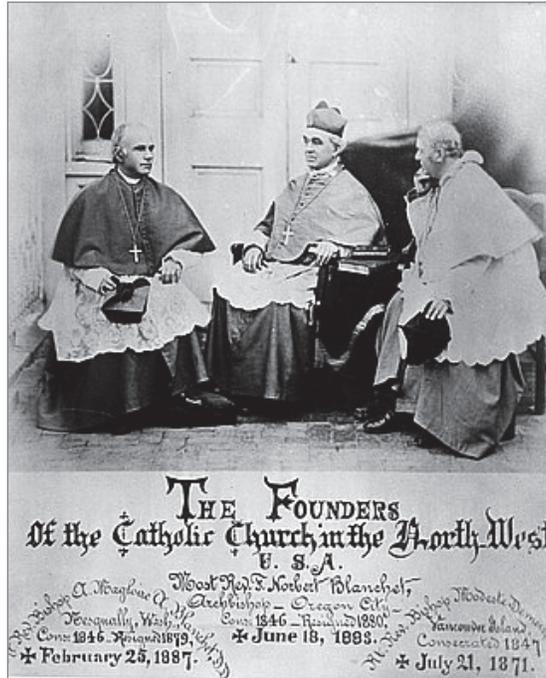
PART 6: BLANCHET A BISHOP

MARCH 8, 2020

Father F. N. Blanchet was certain of two things: that the Oregon country needed a bishop, and that he was not the right person for the job. In his view, the failure of the California missions was attributable to a lack of bishops (a questionable reading of history, at best!) and thus the Church would not thrive in Oregon without a resident bishop. In urging his case to Archbishop Signay of Quebec, Blanchet also made it clear that he did not consider himself a candidate. “I am already old,” he wrote (Blanchet was 44 at the time). “My powers diminish; I am slow at business and it is only by close application that I arrive at a knowledge of anything; I have a treacherous memory; my vigor is gone; I do not know English; I have never had a time to study due to the demands of the ministry where I have always been busy.”

Archbishop Signay agreed that Oregon needed a bishop. Father DeSmet seemed to be the most likely candidate, and his name appeared at the head of the *terna* (a list of three potential candidates for episcopal office). The American bishops, who took up the subject of the Oregon country at the Fifth Provincial Council of Baltimore, agreed. They preferred an American—even if he was a Jesuit!—to a Canadian like Blanchet. But when their request went to Rome, the Jesuits’ Father General flatly refused the appointment of any Jesuit priest as bishop. All eyes then turned to Blanchet. On December 1, 1843, Pope Gregory XVI appointed Blanchet ‘vicar apostolic’ of the Oregon territory. Signay forwarded the news to Blanchet, telling him that if anyone was to blame, it was DeSmet, for “the good Father... has worked harder than myself to have [this dignity] conferred on you.... You can show your resentment over it at your convenience.”

It was not until November 4, 1844 that word of his promotion reached Blanchet in Oregon. He did not even need to open the letter to realize what had happened: the letter came addressed to the “bishop elect”! Though he had resisted the appointment, now that it was done, Blanchet



Archbishop Francis Norbert Blanchet (center), first Archbishop of Oregon City. On the left is his brother, A. M. A. Blanchet, first Bishop of Walla Walla, and on the right is Modeste Demers, first Bishop of Vancouver Island. *Photo from oregonencyclopedia.org.*

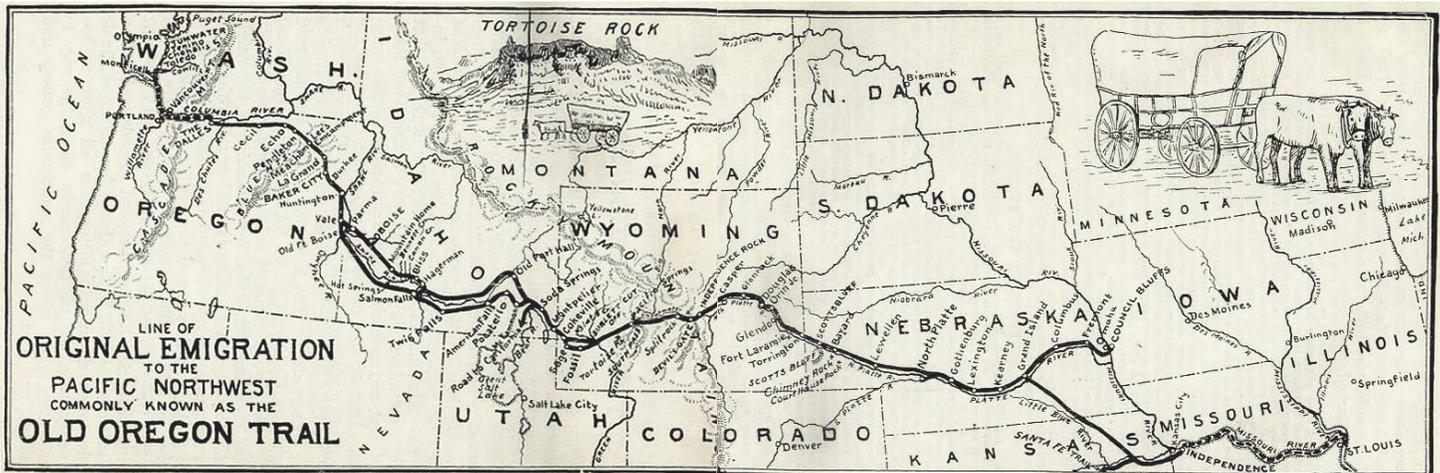
embraced it. He wrote his first pastoral letter and then departed for Canada to receive episcopal consecration from Bishop Signay.

To us, Blanchet’s route to Quebec seems fantastically roundabout, but at the time it was both the fastest and the safest route. He travelled by ship, sailing on the *Columbia* from Astoria in Oregon on December 5. The ship stopped in Honolulu where Blanchet was able to spend a few days with the Picpus Fathers and marvel at their “splendid stone church measuring 150 feet.” Departing Honolulu, the ship rounded Cape Horn on March 5 and arrived in England on May 22. Blanchet spent a few days in London, then embarked from Liverpool to Boston and from there to Montreal. When he finally reached Quebec at the end of June, he found that Archbishop Signay was away on a visitation of his diocese, and not due

to return to Quebec for some months. Blanchet was in a quandary—who would ordain him a bishop now? Fortunately, a coadjutor Archbishop had just been appointed in Montreal, and so Blanchet was ordained alongside him in Montreal’s St. James Cathedral on July 25.

Duly ordained, Blanchet spent a few weeks visiting family in Canada before departing for Europe to raise funds and personnel for his new diocese. By the time he arrived in Rome, where he had several meetings with Pope Gregory XVI, Blanchet had conceived a plan for the Oregon country. It was only a vicariate apostolic, not a diocese, but Blanchet envisioned an archdiocese, centered in the Willamette Valley, with seven suffragan sees—all this in spite of the fact that his territory was “a wilderness” with “not a single city... no road, no postal service, not even a sovereign government” (Schoenberg).

And yet, in what Wilfrid Schoenberg, SJ describes as “one of the most amazing decisions in the history of the church,” the Holy Father agreed with Blanchet. On July 24, 1846, he created the Archdiocese of Oregon City—only the second Archdiocese in the United States, which until then had had just one Archbishop, in Baltimore. Blanchet did not get his



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seven suffragan sees, but he did get two: Vancouver Island and Walla Walla.

It would be nearly a year before Archbishop Blanchet turned towards home. He had to collect funds and, even more important, personnel. When he did return to Oregon, he did not go alone: with him were seven Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, eight priests (three Jesuits and five other priests), along with some Jesuit brothers and some young men in various stages of priestly formation—twenty-two people in all. They got a slow start—after loading themselves and their supplies into *L'Étoile du Matin*, there was a dead calm and they were forced to disembark. They spent a week in Brest, working on their English and waiting for wind. At last, on February 22, 1847, they got underway, reaching Oregon seven months later.

Who would lead the other new Northwest dioceses of Vancouver Island and Walla Walla? Father Modeste Demers, who had labored alongside Blanchet from the beginning, was an obvious choice for Vancouver Island. But the appointment of Augustin Magloire Alexandre Blanchet, F. N. Blanchet's younger brother, as the first Bishop of Walla Walla, came as a complete surprise. Unlike F. N. Blanchet, A. M. A. Blanchet had very little missionary experience—in fact, at the time of his appointment, he was serving as a canon in Montreal's St. James Cathedral, a very far cry from the wilds of Oregon country. But, at the age of fifty, he was a seasoned pastor with a range of experience, a stern man of faith who proved an excellent leader for what would, through considerable difficulties, eventually become the Archdiocese of Seattle.

Times had changed since F. N. Blanchet and Modeste Demers had gone west via the Hudson's Bay Company

roundabout “Express” nine years before. A. M. A. Blanchet traveled via the Oregon Trail, by this time a well-established route to the Willamette Valley. He later wrote to the Bishop of Toronto with some helpful pointers for other priests who might be thinking about traveling west: “if he has baggage, it will be necessary to purchase a wagon at St. Louis and to buy some oxen, five or six years old, not too fat; if the load does not weigh more than 1200 to 1500 pounds, three pair will be sufficient for the wagon but it is necessary to have one or two extra pair in case of accidents, which are likely to happen.” The increasing numbers of wagons on the Oregon Trail meant that there was often nowhere for the oxen to graze: “from Fort Hall to Walla Walla there were no less than a hundred wagons abandoned because there were no more beasts to pull them.... My wagons are still usable but the oxen are so worn with fatigue, hunger and thirst that it was necessary to leave along the way some of the supplies carried from St. Louis, such as the plow.” Even more concerning, the trip had cost more than twice what Blanchet had anticipated: “Farewell, then, to the hope of beginning the episcopal establishment with the money subscribed by Quebec and Montreal.” Little did Blanchet know how many more dangers awaited him after his arrival at Walla Walla.

—Corinna Laughlin, *Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy*

Works consulted

- Wilfred P. Schoenberg, SJ, *A History of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest* (1987)
- Roberta Stringham Brown and Patricia O'Connell Killen, *Selected Letters of A. M. A. Blanchet, Bishop of Walla Walla and Nesqually, 1846-1879* (2013)

MAKE A VISIT

There are historic sites all along the old Oregon Trail, starting from St. Louis, Missouri. The closest one to us is the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center in Baker City, Oregon. “Using life-size displays, films and live theater presentations, this Center tells the story of Oregon Trail pioneers, explorers, miners and settlers of the frontier west. The 500 acre site includes remnants of the historic Flagstaff Gold Mine, actual ruts carved by pioneer wagons, and magnificent vistas of the historic trail route.”

National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, 22267 Highway 86, Baker City, Oregon 97814
<https://www.blm.gov/learn/interpretive-centers/national-historic-oregon-trail-interpretive-center>