

The Commonwealth of Oregon

A Brief History of the Organization and Development of One of the Forty-eight United States of America, Submitted in a Series of Comprehensive and Interesting Letters, Written Particularly for Those Who Have Commenced Studying and Preparing Themselves to Pass the Examination for American Citizenship.

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SOME FACTS ABOUT OREGON'S STATE GOVERNMENT II.

THE ACT of Congress admitting Oregon into the Union as a state was passed in 1859. Two years before, a Constitution had been written, the following year it was adopted by a two to one vote of the people, and almost immediately afterwards the new government was organized. Hence when the admission act was passed by Congress, the state government had already been in operation for some months.

This constitution is a very unique and interesting document. This is very apparent in the preamble which is one of the shortest statements of the kind ever written. And yet it contains all that need be said. The constitution itself is characterized by clearness, definiteness and force. Its wording makes it very evident that the makers meant that Oregon's citizens should never have any valid excuse for not knowing their rights and obligations as citizens.

The words of the preamble are as follows: "We, the people of the state of Oregon, to the end that justice be established, order maintained, and liberty perpetuated, do ordain this constitution." That is all. As the reader sees, it is concise and pointed, yet clear. Here are the fundamental purposes of state government, — justice, order, liberty. When a government does not accomplish these three ends, it has failed and its citizens have proven themselves incompetent as citizens in a free republic.

Let us consider briefly the Bill of Rights, — the most important part naturally of any constitution. To establish justice, several rights are guaranteed. They are such as the following: there shall be no religious test in our courts for witnesses or jurors; justice shall be administered in open courts and without delay; an accused person is guaranteed the right to jury trial and to meet all witnesses against him face to face; bail must be allowed in all cases except treason and murder; the right of trial by jury in civil cases shall never be suspended; bail must never be excessive in amount; private property shall never be taken for public use without just compensation; and certain other rights of small moment. These are enough, however, to show that no citizen of Oregon can legally be treated unjustly and arbitrarily by his state government. That order may be maintained, there are named also certain rights and duties. They are such as the following: the people shall have the right to assemble for their common good; they have the right to petition their legislatures for the redress of grievances; they have the right to bear arms in defense of themselves and the state; jury service is required of all competent citizens; the manufacture, sale and importation of intoxicating liquors are prohibited. A word of explanation about the carrying of arms should be given. Arms carried in defense of one's person may be carried openly. The carrying of concealed weapons is forbidden by law, the supposition being that they are being carried for no good purpose.

To perpetuate freedom, the following rights are stated: all men are equal in right in any social compact; free governments are founded on the authority of the people; they shall always have the right to alter, reform or abolish their government in such manner as they think proper; there shall be no restricting the right to speak, write or print freely on any subject whatever, but every person is responsible for the abuse of this right; there is no religious test for office; exclusive privileges cannot be granted to any citizen or class of citizens; titles of nobility cannot be granted; all elections are free and equal; electors are free from arrest in going to elections in all cases except treason, felony and breach of the peace.

In this statement of the rights of the citizens of Oregon, there are thirty-eight clauses; in the statement following which covers the rights and duties of citizens in suffrage and elections, there are eighteen clauses. They are clearly and forcibly stated; every citizen, native born and foreign born, should know them. The safety and perpetuity of our government, both state and national, depend upon an active and understanding citizenship. Americanism is "an understanding love for America," a love so deep as to lead us not only to fight for but also to vote for and work for our country, and an understanding broad enough to cover our many civic obligations. In like manner, Oregonism might be said to be "an understanding love for Oregon." This these pioneers had; they have left us no excuse for lacking it.

When we learn the kind of men these pioneer state-builders were, we shall be able to understand why they made their statements of civic rights and duties so strong. They were pioneers who in coming here had crossed two thousand miles of wilderness and desert where they were in constant danger of savage attack, where they endured many privations. They had come seeking greater freedom, greater opportunities, better homes. Hence, they were a brave, self-sacrificing, self-reliant, self-ruling freedom-loving, independent type of men. They were the descendants of those early colony-builders who in a fine spirit of courage and hatred of oppressive government had found their way to America over three thousand miles of a perilous sea voyage. Back of them were the men and women who had fought so long in England and other countries of Europe for the liberty and justice which they finally built for themselves in our country, where they learned to govern themselves, to vote their own taxes, elect their own officers and make their own laws, and where finally they had won their independence of the rule of an autocratic king. These rights, they had hardly won; hence they were determined that they should not easily be given up. That is why, I believe, they wrote a preamble of such tremendous force and a bill of rights and duties so clear, so definite and so strong. Could we expect weak words from so virile a people? In my next letter, I shall tell more about our state government.