

Early Public Lands Surveyors in the Northwest

DAVID P. THOMPSON

By William W. and Jeanne E. Glenn

The survey of the public lands in Oregon and Washington was conducted from 1851 through 1909 by US. deputy surveyors on a contract basis. Today's surveyors who retrace and resurvey these lines surveyed under the contract system come to know those early surveyors primarily by their surveying records and marks left in the field.

I am one of those surveyors.

For the most part, little is known about the contract surveyor's origin, family and non-surveying interests.

My interest in the early surveyor began when I found my first "original" comer in 1950 while working under Thomas A. Tillman as a surveying aid for the Bureau of Land Management. My interest continued to grow when I became a cadastral surveyor performing dependent resurveys and directing a field party of my own. Later as chief branch of cadastral surveys, I met and talked with many surveyors who expressed an interest in knowing more about those hale and hardy individuals who left the footsteps we follow.

Now that I am retired, I and my wife have begun to research the background of the contract surveyor We would like to share with you in the following article and others in subsequent issues of this magazine some of our discoveries about these surveyors' "other side".

--William W. Glenn

DAVID P. THOMPSON served as U.S. deputy surveyor holding numerous contracts for the survey of public lands from 1857 until 1880. His other contributions to the development of the early Northwest were many.

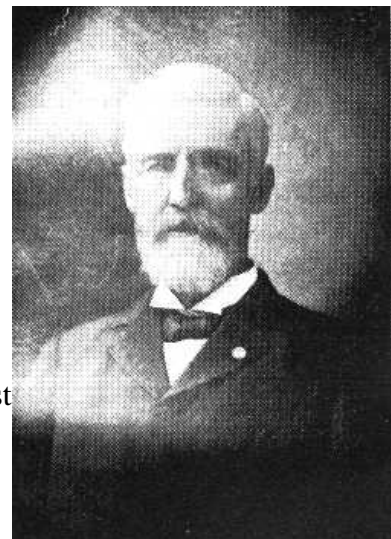
Thompson, of Irish and Scotch descent, was born in Cadiz, Ohio, November 8, 1834. His father owned and operated a mill around which Thompson played.

In his later years, he remarked how as a boy when standing on the hilltop to the west of his childhood home, he thought he had almost reached the confines of the world. As a young man he began to broaden that horizon and explored the world beyond Cadiz.

Thompson served an apprenticeship in blacksmithing under Elijah Lazure. Then he began acquiring knowledge and practical experience that laid the foundation for his later successes by doing railroad surveying.

In 1853, 19-year-old Thompson walked the entire distance from Ohio to the Northwest, working at whatever he could find along the way. After reaching the Oregon territory (with only a quarter in his pocket), he earned his livelihood as a blacksmith assistant and woodcutter.

David E Thompson married Mary R. Meldrum, daughter of Oregon pioneers John and Susan Meldrum, in 1861. They had two daughters, Bessie M. and Genevia, and a son Ralph.



Thompson's brothers-in-law, John W. and Henry Meldrum, and nephew, Rufus Moore (son of Margaret Meldrum Moore), were also U.S. deputy surveyors.

Thompson's most active period as deputy surveyor was from 1857 to 1869 when he held several contracts under which he surveyed many townships and hundreds of miles of line. Many of these surveys were in northeastern Oregon in what is now Umatilla, Morrow, Union and Gilliam counties. One of the townships he surveyed in Union county is T3S, R38E in which the city of La Grande is located. Other work includes surveys in Jackson, Josephine, Klamath and Deschutes counties. The first contracts were in his own name, but in 1864 he held a joint contract number 104 with Daniel Chapman. In 1868 he was a partner in contract number 124 with B.J. Pengra and John Meldrum. On November 24, 1879 (at the same time he was mayor of Portland), he entered into a joint contract number 345 with Henry Meldrum and Rufus Moore. This contract, which called for surveys in Deschutes and Klamath counties, was executed in the field by Meldrum and Moore in 1880.

Along with surveying, Thompson's interests were extensive. Using the knowledge of the lands and opportunities he gained as a surveyor, he placed all he could save in investments. These investments increased in value with the growth and settlement of the Oregon and Washington territories, making him a wealthy man.

He developed a strong interest in the construction of railways and establishment of navigation lines in Oregon and California, recognizing them as a valuable factor in the development of the west coast. Thompson was prominent in building the first railroad in Oregon (Oregon City) around the falls of the Willamette River.

He served as vice president and director of the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company and president of Oregon Construction Company which built a large portion of the navigation company's line.

In 1866 Thompson became manager of the Oregon City Woolen Manufacturing Company, at that time the largest woolen company in the Northwest.

In the late 1870s, as part owner of the Sterling mine in southern Oregon, Thompson helped with one of the first pieces of difficult engineering in that area which later would be called a "remarkable" feat for the time. To develop the mine, water was brought for 23 miles over mountainous and heavily timbered country.

Thompson also was involved with the Willamette Falls Light Company and was president of the Anderson Stock Company for several years.

Thompson's interests also included banking. At one time he served as president or director of 17 banks in the Northwest. Portland Savings Bank, Commercial National Bank, Savings Bank, Farmers' and Traders' Bank of Pullman and Bank of Johnston, Washington, were some with which he had an association.

Thompson served in the First Regiment of Oregon Volunteers from 1861 until the close of the Civil War. He retired with the rank of Captain. He offered his services under the call of President Lincoln but was declined because of the expense of sending the troops by way of the Isthmus of

Panama. As a devoted member of the Grand Army of the Republic he marched each Decoration Day in the ranks of the veterans.

Active in his community, he served on the Portland school board at least 8 years, was president of Portland Business College and regent of the University of Oregon for 10 years.

Thompson made generous financial contributions to schools.

He demonstrated his love for animals by providing financial aid and moral support to the Oregon Humane Society.

He also held a variety of public offices: 1866-72, represented the 12th district (Clackamas County) in state legislature -- 4 years as senator; 1874, appointed governor of the Territory of Idaho by President Grant (returned to Portland in 1876); 1876, delegate to Republican National Convention 1878, served in state legislature (house, Multnomah County); 1879, elected mayor of Portland; 1881, re-elected mayor of Portland; 1882, served in state legislature; 1884, presidential elector on republican ticket, delegate to national convention which nominated President Hayes, member of committee that officially notified him of nomination; 1888, after returning from trip abroad, again served in state legislature; 1890, republican nominee for governor of Oregon (defeated); 1892, appointed U.S. Minister of Turkey by President Harrison (replaced by democratic successor next year).

In May 1901 Thompson began a trip around the world. After traveling as far east as Iowa, he became ill and returned home. He passed away December 14, 1901. A plain granite slab marks his grave in Portland's Riverview Cemetery.

ALONZO GESNER was appointed U.S. deputy surveyor in 1873 to survey public lands in Oregon and Washington. He was involved in public land surveying until 1908. He also was Marion county surveyor and Salem city surveyor.

Alonzo Gesner was born in Coles County, Illinois, March 2, 1842. His father Reuben A. Gesner, a native of New York, had settled in Illinois about 1834. He married Mary V. Bailey of Kentucky.

The expected passage of the Donation Land Claim Act brought Reuben Gesner, his wife and two children to the Oregon territory in 1845. The anticipated "act" would allow each married man to claim 640 acres of land after meeting certain requirements.

Upon reaching The Dalles after crossing the plains, the pioneers found no road over the Cascades. The Gesner family continued their journey down the Columbia River by canoes and rafts guided by Indians. Further down the Columbia the family continued by keel-boats.

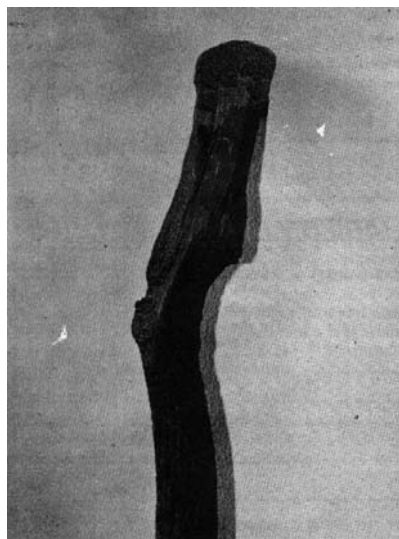
The Gesners went directly to Marion county and staked a claim on land southwest of Salem.

Passage of the Act of September 27, 1850, (known as the Donation Land Claim Act or simply the DLC Act) provided for establishing the Public Land Survey System and surveying the donation land claims in the Oregon territory. When the surveys were extended as far south as Salem, it was determined that Gesner's DLC was located in two townships--claim no. 47, T8S, R2W, 607.59 acres and claim no. 70, T7S, R2W, 31.2 acres.

Reuben Gesner resided there until his death in 1888.

Alonzo Gesner attended Willamette University, then taught school for one year. However, he preferred manual labor. One "season" cutting cord wood earned him enough money to purchase 30 acres of land near the family farm.

Gesner gained his first experience in surveying the public lands in 1872 while employed as chainman for U.S. deputy surveyor Jasper Wilkins of Lane county. That year Wilkins, under contract number 174 surveyed lands in Linn and Lane counties (near Marcola) and Crook county in the Paulina area. In 1873 Gesner obtained his first contract, number 187, which called for the survey of lands in the McKenzie River Valley about 35 miles east of Springfield. Between the years 1873 and 1908, Gesner obtained several contracts to survey public lands in Oregon and Washington. Most contracts were in his own name, but he did hold joint contracts with Elmer O. Worrick and with his nephew, Frank X. Gesner. The surveys took Gesner to Lane, Linn, Benton, Lincoln, Coos, Douglas and Crook counties in Oregon and Skamania county, Washington.



Wood post monument set at the 1/4 section corner of Sections 26/35, T3N, R24E, Willamette Meridian, Oregon by David P. Thompson, deputy surveyor in April 1869. Monument was recovered by Otis O. Gould, deputy surveyor, General Land Office in 1939.

The solar compass used extensively by U.S. deputy surveyors, was also used by Gesner. In a letter dated June 6, 1901, Marion county surveyor B.B. Herrick, Jr., reports to E.P. Kingsburg, U.S. Surveyor General in Olympia, Washington, that he had been requested to examine Gesner's W.J. Young's solar compass. Herrick tested the instrument on the meridian in both a.m. and p.m. and stated "the instrument left my hands in adjustment". This instrument could very well have been used on Gesner's survey in Skamania county because the contract for that work is dated 1901.

Three of the field assistants employed by Gesner went on to become U.S. deputy surveyors. They were: Mark Fullerton, Aaron E York and Elmer O. Worrick. Perhaps Gesner, while not enjoying teaching school, found teaching field assistants surveying more to his liking.

In 1872 he was elected Marion county surveyor and reelected in 1876 and 1878. A railway station east of Salem was named after the Gesner family. As county surveyor, Alonzo Gesner may have been involved in the name selection.

In 1882 Gesner and U.S. deputy surveyor and former surveyor general William H. Odell purchased the Oregon Statesman. A short time later Gesner sold his interest and on March 2, 1884, accepted the appointment by President Arthur to Indian agent to the Warm Springs Reservation. He held the office for 19 months, until the change to the Cleveland administration.

He was elected Salem city surveyor by the city council January 1890 and 1891. He was elected joint senator from Marion and Clackamas counties in 1894.

Gesner served 9 years in the State Militia. For almost 3 years he was Captain of Company I, Second Regiment, Oregon National Guards, headquartered in McCoy, Oregon.

Alonzo Gesner and Rhoda E. Neal were married in 1875 in Salem. They had three children, Stella R, Leroy L. and Rhoda M. Gesner's brother Vanison and nephew, Frank X., son of B.B. Gesner (another brother to Alonzo), were also U.S. deputy surveyors.

This article originally appeared in the April 1990 issue of The Oregon Surveyor. Reprinted with permission from William Glenn.