

Robert Gray Biography

Robert Gray

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Biography

Robert Gray (1755-1806) was the first American to circumnavigate the globe. He discovered the Columbia River while exploring the coastline of the Oregon country.

Robert Gray was born in Tiverton, R.I., on May 10, 1755. He served in a privateer during the American Revolution, and in 1787 he sailed with Capt. John Kendrick on the first Yankee trading voyage to China. The project was to tie the new fur trade of the Pacific Northwest into the ancient commerce of Cathay. Gray commanded the little sloop *Lady Washington*, and Kendrick sailed the full-rigged ship *Columbia Rediviva* (usually called the *Columbia*). Transferred from the little consort to the command of the larger vessel, Gray returned to New England in August 1790, after selling his cargo of sea otter skins in Macao for \$21,000 and buying tea in Canton.

From a strictly monetary point of view, the voyage just about broke even, but it was immensely profitable in terms of American prestige, for Gray had sailed 42,000 miles to become the first circumnavigator of the globe from the United States. Also, he had flown the "Stars and Stripes" for the first time in some of the most out-of-the-way corners of the world.

Gray's greatest service to his country came after he sailed the *Columbia* from Boston in 1790 to Vancouver Island with a cargo of Indian trade goods--copper, iron, and blue cloth. After wintering on the coast and building a second boat there, he explored southward, discovering Gray's Harbor, on which Washington's modern ports Hoquiam and Aberdeen are located. On May 11, 1792, guided by the crew of the little pinnace he had sent ahead, Gray brought the *Columbia* through the breakers of the bar and into the mouth of the legendary "River of the West," which he renamed the Columbia for his ship.

By July 1793 Gray was back in Boston. He married Martha Atkins and settled down to raise a family. Henceforth, the navigator confined his voyaging to the coastal trade. En route to Charleston, S.C., in the summer of 1806, he died on shipboard and was buried at sea.

Gray was largely unaware of the import of his discovery of the Columbia River. He did not know that his discovery, when reinforced by the expedition of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in 1805-1806, would establish a firm American claim to the Washington and Oregon area of the Pacific Northwest.