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# BEACON ROCK

ON THE COLUMBIA



*Legends and Traditions of  
a Famous Landmark*



By HENRY J. BIDDLE

*THIS IS THE STORY of Beacon Rock, the lofty and rugged sentinel guarding the Columbia. Through the public spirit and generosity of Mr. Biddle, who has built trails and bridges to the summit, Beacon Rock has been made an observation point, from which may be viewed one of the most beautiful and entrancing scenes in the world. The story of Beacon Rock is reprinted from The Spectator.*

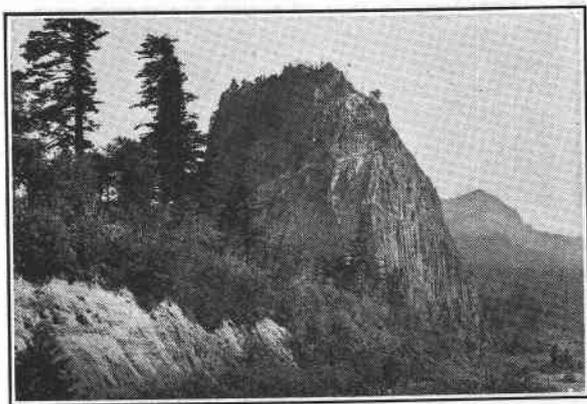
---C. F. A.

# Legends and Traditions of Beacon Rock



**B**EACON ROCK, like a huge pillar, rises on the north bank of the Columbia River, a few miles below the Cascades, and nearly forty east of Portland. Its history begins in remote geologic times, before the Cascade Range was elevated, or the vast sheets of basalt were poured out, which now form the cliffs along the Columbia Gorge. It was the pipe, or chimney, through which the lava of a volcano reached the surface. This lava cooled as a frothy, slaggy mass, of red color when it came in contact with the air; but in depth it formed a dense hard gray rock, and, through contraction in cooling, split into pillars.

The surface of the earth must have been about at what is now the summit of the rock when this eruption took place; and this red rock still shows there. The pillars or columns, formed by the cooling of the rock, are of unusually large size, being from four to eight feet in diameter at the base of the rock, and higher up reaching a diameter of as much as twenty feet. They formed at right angles to the cooling surface, and in consequence those on the sides of the rock are horizontal, or nearly so, but where the surface of the rock has been removed by erosion, on the river side, the columns in its center are seen to be vertical.



BEACON ROCK, NAMED BY LEWIS AND CLARK IN 1805

—*Photo by Henry J. Biddle.*

It seems to have become the fashion for writers to speak of this rock as a "monolith," a word which means "single stone"; but from the foregoing description it is evident that this term can not be properly used.

After the great sheets of Columbia River Basalt had been poured out, the Cascade Range was uplifted; and during this uplift the river kept its channel cut practically to sea level. Thus the present Gorge of the Columbia was formed; and all the softer material surrounding our volcanic pipe having been washed away, the mass of hard rock was left standing alone in its present stately grandeur.

The Indians of this region were, no doubt, well acquainted with the rock, but there is not a particle of evidence that they ever climbed it, or used it for signalling purposes. Indeed, even had they been capable of the feat of ascending the rock, their superstitious fears would probably have kept them from doing so.

That they had such fears is evidenced by the warning an old Indian, living near the Cascades, gave us shortly after work had been commenced on the trail to the summit of the rock. It will be remembered that the year 1916 started with a succession of violent sleet and snow storms. This old Indian told us the bad weather was a sign of the anger of the gods, anger caused by our having blasted on the rock. The Cascade Indians called the rock "Che-che-op-tin," but they could not explain the meaning of this name, which was, no doubt, given to it by some more ancient inhabitants of the region which they displaced.

Perhaps another fact might be taken as evidence that the rock was considered a sacred spot by the Indians: In 1904 some carved wooden figures, resembling "totems" were found at the base of the cliff, on the east side of the rock, and at a place where the cliff overhangs. These figures, two of which are shown here, are about three feet high, and show traces of red and black coloring. In the narrative of the Lewis and Clark expedition mention is made of the Indians near the Cascades having in their abodes similar figures, which they adorned with trophies of war and the chase.

**T**HIS brings us to the first historical mention of the rock by the great explorers. Their toilsome journey across the continent nearing its end, the last obstruction at the Cascades safely passed, they here recognized the effect of the ocean tides, and the rock must have seemed to them a beacon guiding them to the haven of their destination.

In Capt. Clark's diary, under date of Nov. 2, 1805, he mentions it as "a remarkable high rock on Star'd Side about 800 feet high & 400 yds, round, the Beaten Rock." On their return journey, in the



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—Photo by Henry J. Biddle.

spring of 1806, the explorers camped near the base of the rock, and in their mention of it they correct the original error in spelling. Capt. Lewis, under date of Apr. 6, 1806, speaks of it as “\* \* \* the beacon rock which may be esteemed the head of tide water \* \* \*.” The remarkable accuracy of observation shown by these explorers is witnessed by the fact that the Geological Survey gives the height of the rock as approximately 850 feet above sea level, or something more than 800 feet above the level of the river at that point.

The name “Beacon Rock” seems to have been forgotten. On a map accompanying the report of the Wilkes Exploring Expedition,

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and dated 1841, the name appears as "Castle Rock." How early this designation was applied will perhaps never be known, but it is certain that the later name clung to it, and was generally used until 1916. In that year the United States Board of Geographic Names rendered a decision that the correct name should be "Beacon Rock." As should be the case, that decision has been practically universally accepted.

THE ground upon which the rock stands was patented by the United States government to Philip Ritz. He was an Oregon pioneer of 1850, and worked assiduously to promote the building of the Northern Pacific Railroad to the Pacific Coast. In this way he became acquainted with Jay Cooke, the Philadelphia banker, and the leading financier of the country during the period of the Civil War. Ritz deeded the rock to Cooke in 1870. What Mr. Cooke's plans were in acquiring the rock will perhaps never be known; correspondence with his relatives in Philadelphia only elicited the information that he did *not* intend to build a castle upon it. Jay Cooke became bankrupt in the disastrous financial panic of 1873; but he afterwards settled with his creditors, and remained the owner of the rock for many years.

However, he let the taxes on it become delinquent, and a portion of the property was sold for taxes to a neighboring land owner. In 1904, Charles E. Ladd, of the well known family of bankers in Portland, learning that some persons were trying to acquire the rock for quarry purposes, bought the portion which had been sold for taxes. Other persons, acting through Mr. Ladd, bought the remainder of the property from Mr. Cooke, who was still living at a ripe old age in Philadelphia. Mr. Ladd's idea was always to preserve the rock from defacement, and when he, and his associates, sold it to me in 1915, a clause was inserted in the deed to that effect.

My purpose in acquiring the property was simply and wholly that I might build a trail to its summit. This had been in my mind for many years, and the idea of building a model trail in perhaps the most difficult location in which a trail had ever been built appealed to me most strongly. But before describing the trail up the rock, it will be well to mention those who ascended the rock without the aid of a trail.

FOR NEARLY a hundred years after the first white man saw the rock, no one seems to have made any serious attempt to reach its summit. Then on Aug. 24, 1901, Frank J. Smith and Charles Church of Portland, and George Purser of White Salmon, made the ascent. These first climbers showed great skill and courage; after they had placed spikes and ropes at the most difficult places, the task was naturally made much easier. They were fol-

lowed by many others, among whom was Mrs. Frank J. Smith, the first woman to make the climb.

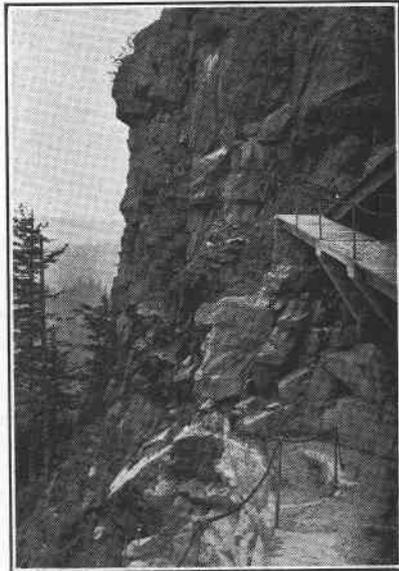
Many subsequent climbers left their names, inscribed on bits of paper, in a tin tobacco box on the summit; but so many of these names were obliterated that it would be impossible to give any complete list. Mention will only be made of a climb by a party of Mazamas, under the leadership of E. C. Sammons, on Oct. 11, 1914, when 47 persons reached the top. This was undoubtedly the largest party to climb the rock before the building of the trail.

Work was commenced on the trail in October, 1915, and it was completed in April, 1918. Omitting time lost in the winter, about two years were consumed in the work. While this length of time might seem unreasonable, it must be remembered that much of the construction of the trail was like driving a tunnel; only one man had room to work at the head. I was fortunate at the start in securing a very competent foreman in the person of Charles Johnson, who had held a similar position in the building of the Columbia Highway. He not only helped me in many of the minor details of engineering, but also exercised such care in the work that in spite of the extremely dangerous location, it was consummated without the loss of a single life, or even a minor accident.

Owing to the steepness of the rock, it was impossible to survey much of the trail in advance; all that could be done was to drive a

THE TRAIL, ABOUT FOUR THOUSAND FIVE HUNDRED FEET LONG, FOUR FEET WIDE, WITH MAXIMUM GRADE OF FIFTEEN PER CENT, IN PLACES IS MADE OF CONCRETE SLABS, GUARDED BY WIRE CABLE AND WROUGHT IRON RAILING.

—Photo by Henry J. Biddle.



narrow trail ahead, selecting the most suitable points as they were reached. After eight months of this work, not knowing at any time that an impassable point might not be encountered, gentler slopes were reached, and it was possible to climb to the summit, and stake out the location of the trail to that point. This I did on May 16, 1916, and hoisted the American flag on the summit, replacing the small fragment still left of the flag put there in 1901. After that, there was no uncertainty that the trail could be completed as planned.

**T**HE TRAIL is about 4500 feet long, 4 feet wide, and with a maximum grade of 15 per cent. It extends from the North Bank Highway, on the north side of the rock, to within about 20 feet of the summit. The rock there becomes so narrow that the construction of a wide trail was impracticable, so a narrow flight of steps leads to the topmost point. There are 52 hairpin turns in the trail, 22 wooden bridges, and over a hundred concrete slabs, spanning the minor fissures in the cliff.

By building concrete slabs on the outer edges of the trail much excavation, and consequent defacement of the rock, was avoided; but this work was naturally expensive, as all the material, gravel, sand, cement and even water, had to be packed up on the backs of donkeys. At all the steeper points the outside of the trail is guarded by a railing of wire cable supported on iron stanchions; at many of the turns there are ornamental railings of wrought iron.

The building of the trail opened to view portions of the rock which had, no doubt, never before been seen closely by human eye. It revealed unsuspected beauties. The color of the cliff, due to mosses and lichens, varies in every shade of gray, brown and green. During the winter months, this coloring is the most beautiful; and from April to November there is a succession of wild flowers blooming in every crevice. Not counting the blooming shrubs, there are probably not less than sixty species of flowers blooming on the rock, a remarkable number for such a small area.

Space does not permit the mention of all these, but one of the most notable is *Pentstemon rupicola*, a bright crimson flower, growing from imperceptible crevices in the face of the cliff, and blooming about the middle of May. Later in the season, *Pentstemon richardsonii*, pink in color, blooms in profusion on the south side of the rock, and at the same time the bluebells, often mingled with it, give a wonderful contrast of color.

The view from the summit is beautiful, and unique, due to the fact that one looks down almost perpendicularly, as from an aeroplane. The range of vision embraces the gorge of the Columbia from Wind Mountain to Crown Point. Yet, in my opinion, the

views seen ascending the trail are the most beautiful. The distant background is then framed by the rugged contour of the cliff in the foreground, and to *see* the rock one should stop at every turn in the trail, and take a good look.

Since the completion of the trail, it has been open to the public without charge, and with only the restrictions that would be enforced in any public park. Thousands climb to the summit every year, and the Mazamas, the Oregon Trails Club, and other organizations make annual visits to it.

But it is a sad commentary on our civilization that a few among those who visit Beacon Rock seem to delight in doing all they can to destroy its beauty. Mosses and ferns are torn up along the trail, the wild flowers picked, loose rocks rolled down, and names scratched at every available point. The perpetrators of these deeds, when called to order by the caretaker, often retaliate with the vilest abuse. When will the uncivilized element of our population be educated to the point that it will be content to enjoy beauty without trying to destroy it?