

A Hebron Connection with Portland, Oregon by Howard Oedel

Most people living or vacationing in Hebron are acquainted with the Ball family, farmers on Tenney Hill. We are also aware of John Ball (1794-1884), the tenth child of Nathaniel and Sarah Ball, who was graduated from Dartmouth, joined the third transcontinental party after Lewis and Clark, and eventually distinguished himself by founding Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Few people, other than those who have read his autobiography, Born to Wander, are aware of his many life-time exploits. One of these was a year-long sojourn in Oregon where he left the Wyeth Expedition and settled down in the Hudson Bay Company's settlement, befriended "as a guest" by chief factor Dr. John McLaughlin. Eager to "pull his own weight," Ball offered his services as a teacher – the first in Oregon. His students were all half-breeds, as there were no white women in the area. Dr. McLaughlin's wife, as an example, was a Chippewa woman from Lake Superior. There was one light-skinned woman, a Mrs. Douglas – a half-breed from Hudson Bay. The children were eager students and Ball spent a pleasant winter teaching and making friends with the dozen or more employees of the Hudson Bay Company. His reputation as the first educator in Oregon was secured.

The following year, John Ball decided to try his hand at farming on the Willamette River. Here again he gained a solid reputation as the first American farmer in Oregon. Dr. McLaughlin loaned him tools and farming equipment and with some wild horses, tamed for the plow, and part-time help from a Mr. Sinclair and some local Indians, he established his farm. The farm itself was successful, but John Ball spent much of his time fighting off a persistent illness. So, in September 1833 he traded his crops for passage on a Hudson Bay Company ship bound for San Francisco and Hawaii. His sojourn in Oregon was ended but not forgotten.

A friend, Martha Kinsella, who lives in Portland has kindly kept me in touch with remembrances by Oregonians of John Ball's impact on their early history.

He is first and foremost remembered as Oregon's first school teacher.

At the Champoeg State Heritage area – an Oregon State Park on the Willamette River, John Ball's farm is duly noted and honored as "the first American farm in the Northwest."

Also significant in Oregon history in their contribution to the war effort in World War II. Some 149 "Liberty Ships" were built in Portland. One of them was christened "John Ball."