

## WHITMAN'S FIRST EIGHTEEN YEARS 1802-1820

All of the six missionaries who were involved in the founding of the Oregon Mission of the American Board—namely, Samuel Parker, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, Henry and Eliza Spalding, and William H. Gray—came from western New York. The first four of these came from a comparatively small triangular area in the Finger Lake district of the State. Samuel Parker lived at Ithaca, located at the southern end of Cayuga Lake. About forty miles to the west lay Prattsburg (originally spelled Prattsburgh), the birthplace of Narcissa Prentiss who became Mrs. Whitman. Nearby is Wheeler where Henry Harmon Spalding was born. About twenty-five miles north by east of Prattsburg is Rushville, which now straddles the boundary separating Yates and Ontario counties, the birthplace of Marcus Whitman. Eliza Hart, who married Henry H. Spalding, came from Holland Patent which is about ten miles north of Utica, New York. William H. Gray was living in Utica when he volunteered to go to Oregon.

### ANCESTRY, BIRTH, AND EARLY YEARS

Marcus Whitman belonged to the seventh generation of the descendants of John Whitman who arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony sometime prior to December 1638. It is believed that John Whitman

came from Norfolk, England, where the family name was originally spelled Whiteman.<sup>1</sup>

Samuel Lincoln, an ancestor of Abraham Lincoln, came to the same New England colony, also from Norfolk, in 1637, or at about the same time as did John Whitman. One of Samuel's sons, Mordecai, married a granddaughter of John Whitman. Their son, another Mordecai, was the great-great-grandfather of Abraham Lincoln. This means that the martyred pioneer missionary of Old Oregon and the martyred President were both descendants of John Whitman.

Beza Whitman, 1773–1810, the father of Marcus, and a younger half-brother, Freedom Whitman, settled at Cummington, a small village in the heart of the Berkshires of western Massachusetts in 1795. In the adjacent town<sup>2</sup> of Windsor lived the family of Hezekiah and Alice Green.<sup>3</sup> Like the Whitmans, the Green family had long been in America. Hezekiah was of the sixth generation of the descendants of Thomas Green who migrated to Massachusetts from England about 1636. Beza Whitman had not been at Cummington long before he fell in love with Alice Green, 1777–1857, the youngest child of Hezekiah and Alice Green. They were married on March 9, 1797, and their first-born, a son named Augustus, arrived on January 7, 1798.<sup>4</sup>

Following the Revolutionary War, a restless urge for more fertile lands sent many New Englanders into western New York and into what was then called the Connecticut Western Reserve, which included what is now northeastern Ohio. About 1796, Henry Green, 1763–1849, an older brother of Alice, the wife of Beza Whitman, moved from Windsor to Ontario County, New York, and became one of the early settlers of Naples.

He moved in 1799 to a place called Federal Hollow. There, Henry Green, later known as Captain Green, operated a sawmill and gristmill on a stream called West River which empties into the southern end of Canandaigua Lake. Henry was so impressed with the opportunities of western New York that he persuaded his sister Alice and her husband to migrate thither.

Sometime early in 1799, Beza loaded his worldly goods onto an ox-drawn wagon and headed for Ontario County. His wife, carrying their year-old son Augustus, rode horseback. The family settled first at Canandaigua. There on August 16 of that year, their second son, Erastus, was born, and died the following October 16. Shortly afterwards,

Beza and Alice moved to Federal Hollow where they occupied a log cabin which shortly before had been vacated by the Henry Green family. There the Whitmans began life anew. According to a local tradition, a bear raided Beza's pigpen one night, an incident which throws light upon the primitive conditions then existing in that frontier community.

There in that humble cabin on September 4, 1802, a third son was born to Beza and Alice Whitman. They called him Marcus. Why that name? Possibly because Beza had a cousin, James Whitman of Belchertown, Massachusetts, who had a six-year-old son named Marcus. It may be that a friendship between the two Whitman families suggested this name to Beza and Alice.

In 1818, at the suggestion of the doctor in Federal Hollow, Ira Bryant, the name of the settlement was changed to Rushville in order to honor Dr. Benjamin Rush, a Revolutionary War patriot and one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. In order to avoid confusion, the name Rushville will hereafter be used to indicate the birthplace of Marcus Whitman, even though the change of name did not occur until he was about sixteen years old.

Beza was an industrious worker. He built a tannery on West River and plied his trade as a shoemaker.<sup>5</sup> He so prospered that sometime before 1807, he was able to build a frame house which was used as an inn as well as a home.<sup>6</sup> Courthouse records at Canandaigua show that Beza purchased forty acres of land about half-a-mile south of Rushville in December 1809 for \$450.00. Two other sons and a daughter came to the Whitman home in Rushville following the birth of Marcus. They were Samuel, 1804–1875; Henry, 1806–1854; and Alice (Mrs. Wisewell), 1808–1887.

We know very little about the early life of Marcus. A niece of his, Mary Alice Wisewell, gives us the following glimpse into the Whitman home: "His parents lived in a log house -the country was new and wild, and as his father was a tanner and currier, his mother being lonely often used to go and sit with her husband in the little shop opposite the house, binding shoes. Having left him [i.e., Marcus] a baby in his cradle one evening, she was much startled to find on her return that a log had fallen from the fireplace and had burned the lower end of the cradle, and that he was nearly suffocated by the smoke."<sup>7</sup>

Only one reference has been found in the 175 letters Marcus

Whitman is known to have written [see Appendix I] of any boyhood experiences. In his letter of April 13, 1846, to Secretary Greene, Whitman wrote: "I was accustomed to tend a carding machine when I was a boy." A carding machine was used in the preparation of wool for spinning. We may safely assume that the kind of life Marcus lived during the first eight years of his life in Rushville was an important preparation for his later experiences as a missionary to the Indians in Old Oregon where living conditions were even more primitive than in western New York.

From such information as is available, Marcus resembled his mother. The Rev. S. W. Pratt, D.D., who served in 1907 as Moderator of the Presbyterian Synod of New York, once wrote: "Marcus was said to have derived much of his vigor and energy and resoluteness from his mother, who was physically very strong and untiring, weaving for her household, making cheese and performing other industrial duties. She had no patience with laziness... She never spent any time in sentiment, but abounded in deeds."<sup>8</sup>

As a missionary doctor in Old Oregon, Whitman was remembered as having these same characteristics of "vigor and energy." In a letter which a Methodist missionary, the Rev. H. K. W. Perkins, wrote to a sister of Narcissa's on October 19, 1849, we find the following appraisal of Dr. Whitman: "He could never stop to parley. It was always yes or no... he was always at work" [See Appendix 6]. As was the mother, so was the son.

## TEN YEARS IN MASSACHUSETTS

Sorrow came to the Whitman home in Rushville on April 7, 1810, when Beza Whitman died in his thirty-seventh year. He was buried in the Baldwin Corners cemetery near the village, where one can still read on the brown sandstone marker the following epitaph, so characteristic of that period:

*Stop here my friend and think on me  
I once was in the world like the  
This is a call aloud to the  
Prepare for Death and follow me*

The widow was left with five children all under twelve years of age. The financial burden was too great for her slender resources, so she turned to relatives for help. In the fall of that year Marcus, then

only eight years old, was sent to live with his late father's half-brother, Freedom Whitman, at Cummington, Massachusetts. Thus Marcus suffered a double tragedy. He was not only bereft of his father, but was also separated from his mother, his brothers, and his younger sister. However, in the slight of events which stemmed from his residence at Cummington and nearby Plainfield, it is most likely that Marcus Whitman would never have gone to Old Oregon as a medical missionary had he remained in Rushville.

In Whitman's first letter to the American Board, dated June 3, 1834, he summarized his early life as follows: "My Father died when I was about seven years old and I was sent to reside with my Father's brother in Massachusetts where I received my early education and religious instruction. My Grand Father (for he resided in the same family) and Uncle were both pious & gave me constant religious instruction and care. I was under their care mostly for ten years." In the ecclesiastical terminology of that generation, "pious" meant what the word "religious" now implies. Uncle Freedom and Grandfather Samuel, both devout Baptists, left an indelible impression upon young Marcus.<sup>9</sup>

Marcus lived with his relatives in Cummington for five years, 1810-15. The village is located in the northwest corner of Hampshire County, about twenty miles south of the Vermont border and on the eastern slope of the beautiful Berkshire Hills. After this range enters Vermont, the highlands are known as the Green Mountains. About six miles north of Cummington is Plainfield where Marcus lived for the next five years. Near Plainfield is West Mountain which rises 2,160 feet above sea level and is the highest point in the county. Running through the valley is Mill Creek on which, in those days, several mills were located. There in those villages of Cummington and Plainfield, surrounded by hills, forests, water, and farm lands, Marcus spent ten years of his youth, 1810-20.

At the time Marcus arrived in Cummington, a youth six years older than he, by the name of William Cullen Bryant, was living in the same village. The Bryant home, a large rambling structure of three stories, is still standing, and visitors are shown a room on the third floor where, in 1811, Bryant, then only seventeen years old, wrote the well-known poem "Thanatopsis." In this poem, for the first time in published American literature, the word "Oregon" is used.

Take the wings  
Of morning, pierce the Barcan wilderness,  
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods  
Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound,  
Save his own dashings...

The Oregon! This was the name by which the “River of the West” was then called. Evidently this name was unknown to Captain Robert Gray who discovered the river in 1792 and named it after his ship, the Columbia. Bryant, on the other hand, had never heard of Captain Gray’s discovery when he wrote his “Thanatopsis.” The question raises: How did that seventeen-year-old youth in Cummington, Massachusetts, learn in 1811 about a mighty river some 3,000 miles to the west called the Oregon? The most plausible answer is that Bryant had access to Jonathan Carver’s *Travels Through the Interior Parts of North America in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768* which had been published in London in 1778. Carver had spent the winter of 1766–7 with some Sioux Indians near present-day Minneapolis and, during the following year, made another exploring trip, this time penetrating into what is now western Canada. In his book Carver made mention of a river which flowed into the Pacific Ocean which he called the “Origan” and also the “Oregon.” Much has been written on the origin of this name.<sup>10</sup> For our story, it is sufficient to indicate that in all probability Carver’s work was the source of the word “Oregon” in “Thanatopsis.” Even though Bryant was six years older than Whitman, the two attended the same school in Plainfield at the same time; hence it is altogether possible that Bryant told Whitman about that mysterious river far to the west which flowed into the Pacific Ocean and which, in time, gave its name to that vast territory, in what is now the Pacific Northwest, first known as Old Oregon.

Marcus returned to Rushville in 1815 to visit his mother and relatives. He had changed so much during his five-year absence that his mother did not know him. His niece, Alice Whitman Wisewell, tells the story: “When thirteen years old, he unexpectedly returned home for a visit of three weeks. Coming in at evening, he went up to his mother and reached out his hand, saying, ‘How do you do, Mother?’—and she drew back thinking herself no mother to him. This so grieved him that he burst into tears. My mother says that it was during this visit that she first saw him [i.e., her brother] to know him—being six years younger.”<sup>11</sup>

During the five years Marcus had been away from Rushville, his mother in 1811 had married Calvin Loomis, 1766–1840. To this marriage, the second for each, three children were born—Erastus, 1813;12 Oren Green, 1841–81; and Luther, 1816–17. Calvin Loomis continued the business activities which Beza Whitman had been conducting: the tannery, the shoeshop, and the tavern. Thus when Marcus returned to his home, he found it necessary to become acquainted with a stepfather and a baby half-brother.

## FIVE YEARS AT PLAINFIELD

After returning to Massachusetts, Marcus went to Plainfield where he lived in the home of Colonel John Packard.<sup>13</sup> The change of residence from his Uncle's home in Cummington was made because Marcus was to attend the school in Plainfield taught by the pastor of the local Congregational Church, the Rev. Moses Hallock, and the Packard home was located about a mile from the school. Colonel Packard, a charter member of the Plainfield church and one of its deacons, was a man of considerable influence in both the community and the church.<sup>14</sup>

Here Marcus lived from 1815 to 1820 when he passed from his thirteenth to his eighteenth year. These were the years of adolescence, the critical teen-age period when every normal boy looks forward to the future and dreams of what he will do when he reaches man's estate.

References to the activities of Marcus during these formative years are almost non-existent. The *Hampshire Gazette* of Northampton, Massachusetts, in its issue of July 22, 1884, carried the following about Whitman: "He is distinctly remembered by some of his associates, as an energetic youth, possessing a good mind, and good principles." The *Gazette* also reported the following incident: "By his daring, promptness, and skill, when a large boy, he saved another boy on the point of drowning from a watery grave."

The center of the Plainfield community was the Congregational Church and this became a dominant force in molding the character of young Whitman. A characteristic of the religious life of New England of that generation was the strict emphasis placed on the observance of Sunday, or the Sabbath as it was then called. Here we see the influence of Puritanism which took root in England before 1600 and which left a deep impression upon the evangelical churches of both England and

New England for several generations. In Whitman's day, the proper observance of the Sabbath was one of the most important outward signs of being a Christian. Strictly speaking, the Sabbath is Saturday, the holy day of the Jewish faith, but for the Puritans, Sabbath was the same as Sunday. The misuse of this term continued in Protestant circles in the United States until the early 1900s.

The records of the Plainfield church show how strictly Sunday was observed. Sabbath began at sundown on Saturday and continued until sundown on Sunday. Such innocent pleasures as boating or even loitering on a river bank were strictly forbidden. In 1800 the Plainfield church acquired a 650 pound bell and when this sounded on Sunday, be it morning or evening, all were reminded to go to church. Woe unto him who absented himself without good reason. All this explains why Whitman and his associates in the Oregon Mission laid such emphasis on the importance of Sabbath observance.

The Plainfield Congregational Church erected a building shortly buildafter its organization in 1786 which measured 42½ x 55½ feet. The building contained forty-four box pews on the main floor and nineteen in the gallery. The pew occupied by Colonel Packard and his family, and therefore also by Marcus Whitman, was located in the southwest corner of the main floor.<sup>15</sup> During the "long prayer," it was customary for the congregation to stand. The seats in the pews were hinged and when the people stood, these were lifted up in order to give more room. When the "Amen" was pronounced, the seats all fell back into place with a bang and clatter that would astonish a present-day congregation.

### THE INFLUENCE OF THE REV. MOSES HALLOCK

Marcus Whitman was highly favored during his adolescent years in having the scholarly Rev. Moses Hallock for both his teacher and his minister. Hallock was called to the pulpit of the Plainfield Congregational Church in 1792. He was then thirty-two years old, an ex-Revolutionary War soldier, and a graduate of Yale in the class of 1788. He served the Plainfield church for thirty-seven years, dying in 1887.

Shortly after his installation as pastor of the church, Hallock opened a school which he conducted with great effectiveness until 1824. More than three hundred students, of whom thirty were girls, studied under his direction. A few boarded in his home. The non-boarding stu-



dents, including Marcus, paid a dollar a week for some meals, perhaps the noon luncheon, and for tuition. Hallock's school was established a year after the founding of Williams College, thirty miles distant. One hundred and thirty-two of Hallock's students are reported to have gone to college, most of them at nearby Williams College.

Several of Hallock's students later became well-known. Among these were William Cullen Bryant from nearby Cummington and John Brown of Harper's Ferry fame. Bryant has left for us the following account of his experiences as a student in Hallock's academy: "I was early at my task in the morning, and kept on until bed-time; at night I dreamed of Greek, and my first thought in the morning was of my lesson for the day. At the end of two calendar months, I knew the Greek Testament from end to end almost as if it had been English."<sup>16</sup>

John Brown's contact with the Hallock school was of short duration; the exact time is not known. In 1818, Brown, whose home was in Hudson, Ohio, decided to study for the ministry. Since Hallock was a relative of Brown's mother, it was natural for the young man to go to Plainfield to study. Brown was two years older than Whitman; in all probability the two were students in Hallock's school at the same time, as Whitman did not return to Rushville until 1820. Brown's well-known concern with the slavery issue, came long after he left Plainfield. Whitman's letters mention slavery only once or twice. He was too far removed in distant Old Oregon after 1836 to be involved.

The strong religious influence which Moses Hallock exercised over the young men who were his students is evident in the number who entered the ministry or who became missionaries. Fifty out of 304 students, including two of his own sons, became ministers, and seven became missionaries.<sup>17</sup> The Plainfield church started a Sunday school in May 1819. Since the American Sunday School Union, as a national organization, was not established until 1824, it is to the credit of the Plainfield church that it adopted this means of Christian education so early. Marcus, then in his seventeenth year, enrolled in a class taught by Deacon James Richards. Commenting on his interest in the Sunday school movement, Whitman in his letter to the American Board dated June 3, 1834, wrote: "I have attended as a scholar, teacher or Superintendent ever since."

All three of Deacon Richards' sons entered the ministry, two of whom became foreign missionaries. James Richards, Jr., after complet-

ing his work in Hallock's school, went to Williams College. He was one of the five young men who took part in the haystack prayer meeting held in August 1806, to which reference has already been made. James, Jr., was one of the first appointees of the newly organized American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and was sent as its pioneer missionary to Ceylon. How logical to suppose that Deacon Richards would have told the boys in his Sunday school class about his son in a faraway "heathen" land. Another son, William, who was a couple of years older than Marcus, was a member of a party of missionaries sent by the Board to Hawaii in 1822.

In 1819 the religious revival that swept through many New England communities came to Plainfield. Evangelistic meetings were popular, and when extended over several days or weeks were called "protracted meetings." Among those at Plainfield who felt a spiritual quickening was Marcus Whitman. In a letter of June 3, 1834, to the Board, he wrote: "I attended the administrations of Rev. Moses Hallock at which time I was awakened to a sense of my sin and danger and brought by Divine grace to rely on the Lord Jesus for pardon and salvation."

Even though Marcus had what could be called a conversion experience, he did not join the church in Plainfield. Possibly he found himself caught between conflicting loyalties. His uncle and grandfather in Cummington were Baptists. Denominational distinctions were so sharply drawn then that the records of the Congregational Church in Plainfield show that some members had been dismissed for holding "the Baptist error." Possibly Whitman decided, under the circumstances, to postpone joining a church until he returned to Rushville.

The same influences that molded William Cullen Bryant into one of America's most articulate poets in the expression of his Christian faith; which contributed to the iron resolve of John Brown to be faithful unto death for his convictions; which sent James Richards, Jr., and his brother to the foreign mission field; also moved the heart of Marcus Whitman. He too would be a minister. "My preliminary education," he wrote in his first letter to the Board, "consists of the English branches with some knowledge of Latin and some little of Greek." As a student in Hallock's school, Marcus had received the classical education then required of young men who planned to enter the ministry.

The ten years that Marcus Whitman spent in Massachusetts were the decisive years of his life. There he had the good fortune to come under the influence of such active Christian men as his uncle and grandfather, John Packard, Deacon Richards, and especially the Rev. Moses Hallock. Home, church, and school combined to give young Marcus Whitman a strong Christian faith which gave direction to his life. He resolved to live to serve his fellowmen and his first choice was the Gospel ministry. It seems safe to say that if Marcus Whitman had never gone to Massachusetts, he never would have gone to Old Oregon.

CHAPTER 2 FOOTNOTES

- 1 Charles H. Farnham, *History of the Descendants of John Whitman*, New Haven, 1889, provided genealogical information for this section.
- 2 The word “town” is used in New York State and in New England to indicate a township. In other parts of the United States, a town is a village.
- 3 Samuel S. Greene, *Genealogical Sketch of the Descendants of Thomas Green*, Boston, 1858.
- 4 From entry in the Whitman family Bible, now in Coll. W.
- 5 Little is known about Beza Whitman. Coll. W contains a receipt in his handwriting.
- 6 Information supplied by Robert Moody of Rushville. This house remained standing until about 1905.
- 7 Wisewell letter, Coll. W. See Drury, *Whitman*, following p. 24 for pictures of the sister and brothers of Marcus Whitman.
- 8 *Sunset Magazine*, XXIII(August 1909), p. 186. Also, Drury, *Whitman*, pp. 25–6 for an account of the discovery of what is believed to be a picture of Whitman’s mother and for a reproduction of the photograph.
- 9 Nahum Mitchell in his *History of Bridgewater, Mass.*, Boston, 1840, states that Samuel Whitman “was plunged,” i.e., baptized by immersion, when over ninety years of age. Samuel and his son Freedom were charter members of a Baptist Church established in Cummington on May 29, 1821.
- 10 Several accounts of the origin of the name “Oregon” are to be found in various issues of the *O.H.Q.*; Bancroft, *Oregon*, I:17 ff; *The Record*, Washington State University, Pullman, p. 27; and George R. Stewart, *Names on the Land*, New York, 1945, pp. 153 ff.
- 11 Wisewell letter, Coll. W. This letter, written during the lifetime of the author, was dictated by her to her daughter. It gives us, therefore, authentic glimpses into the early life of Marcus Whitman.
- 12 The name Erastus had also been given to Mrs. Beza Whitman’s second son who also died in infancy. In that generation, it was quite customary for parents to use the same name a second time if the first child had died.
- 13 The original John Packard house, now known as the Laurens Seely home, is still standing and is occupied. The house has been remodeled.
- 14 Charles N. Dyer, *History of the Town of Plainfield*, Northampton, 1891, p. 93. Dyer gives much detailed information about the church and its pastor, Moses Hallock.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 16 W. A. Bradley, *Wm. Cullen Bryant*, New York, 1905, pp. 22–3.
- 17 Dyer, *op. cit.* For some reason Dyer did not include the name of Marcus Whitman as being one of the missionaries, although in that day work with the American Indians was usually classified as foreign missions.