

[CHAPTER FOUR]

THREE YEARS AT WHEELER
1832-1835

On a large granite boulder at a crossroads in the village of Wheeler, New York, is a memorial plaque which states that the medical office of Dr. Marcus Whitman once stood at that place. The two-story building was constructed out of heavy hand-hewn timbers covered on the outside with boards. According to a local tradition, Whitman used the building as both his home and office. Just why Whitman selected Wheeler as the place where he would practice medicine after receiving his M.D. degree is not known. According to a census taken in 1835, Wheeler township had about 1,600 people scattered over more than forty-six square miles. Possibly the town had no doctor before he arrived. The fact that Wheeler was within forty miles of Rushville might also have been an attraction.

About two miles south of Wheeler is another marker along the roadside which states that Henry H. Spalding was born near that place on November 26, 1803. How strange that these two, who were to be so closely associated for eleven years in the Oregon Mission of the American Board, should each have had contacts with the little village of Wheeler. In 1832, when Whitman settled in Wheeler, Spalding was a senior in Western Reserve College at Hudson, Ohio.

Whitman's practice was largely in the country. The only practical way for him to visit his patients was on horseback. In such communities in those days, a doctor might ride ten or fifteen miles to see a patient and then find upon his return home a call to go a similar distance in another direction. If a doctor could keep up his practice by owning but one horse, it was evident that his calls were not numerous and consequently he could not be a popular or competent doctor. Such a man was called a "one-horse doctor" and the term came to be used to imply mediocrity.

Whitman's methods, medicines, and instruments, like those of other doctors of his generation, were as primitive as the community in which he lived. He had no fever thermometer, for doctors then did not appreciate its importance, as has been mentioned in the preceding chapter. Since very few stethoscopes were then in use, it is doubtful if Whitman had one. A set of amputating knives cost about fifty dollars. Whitman probably secured a set together with some surgical saws early in his professional career. The doctor in that day was also the dentist and with the aid of a turnkey would extract teeth, sometimes leaving a splinter of a tooth in the jaw. The cost of such a service was usually ten cents for each tooth.

It may be that Dr. Whitman did not have any obstetrical forceps, because his professor of obstetrics, Dr. Westel Willoughby, was much opposed to their use. The germ theory of disease was unknown and, of course, the wonderful antibiotics so common today were then in the future. Such a precaution as boiling instruments to sterilize them before use was not common practice. The properties of a weak solution of lye or of iodine as disinfectants were somewhat appreciated, although the real reason for their effectiveness was unknown. Usually doctors would merely wipe their instruments clean after use and put them away. Suppuration was commonly thought to be essential to healing and much was said about "laudable pus" until as late as 1870.

Because of a common belief that disease was caused by an excess of blood, the doctors of that generation often bled their patients. This was a remedy which had been practiced for centuries even on patients who had suffered an accident. Rarely, however, do we read of Whitman following this custom.¹ Anesthesia with its merciful power to produce unconsciousness was then unknown. In amputation cases, the patient might be made drunk; be stupefied with heavy doses of opium; or be held by

strong men and bonds while the doctor worked as fast as he could. Some surgeons boasted that they could amputate an arm in three minutes and a leg in five. Sometimes an ordinary carpenter's fine-toothed saw was used if the operating surgeon lacked a surgical saw.

The doctor of that generation had to be his own apothecary as only the largest towns had drug stores. Very few medicines were given in liquid form. The doctor would buy his drugs in bulk in crude form and then pulverize them with a hand mortar. He had to know how to manufacture his own pills. Inventories of drugs used in Whitman's day show that a good doctor would have about fifty different kinds. Great reliance was placed on calomel, a compound of mercury and chlorine, which was an effective purgative. When Whitman rode his district, he must have carried with him a variety of the most used drugs in his saddlebags. Thus he was able to supply the medicine needed at the time he called on his patients.

False teeth were only for the wealthy, and even so, were ill-fitting and uncomfortable. Spectacles were available for those who needed them, but these were fitted by the trial and error method, usually with no consideration of the fact that one eye might be out of adjustment with the other. Thus a pair of spectacles often did more harm than good. Sometimes the same pair would be used by several members of the family.

Considering the medical conditions of Whitman's generation, we need not wonder that a medical student could be licensed after riding for a couple of years with some doctor and then attending a medical college for sixteen weeks. By that time he had learned about all that could be taught. The fact that Whitman returned to the medical college for a second term means that he was better prepared than the average doctor of his day.

The business side of a doctor's practice is of interest. He usually received a fee of twenty-five cents for a call in his office, including any medicine prescribed. The fee was doubled if the doctor had to make a house call within a five-mile radius. Beyond that distance, there was an extra charge of six and one-fourth cents for each mile. An obstetrical case would cost from two to five dollars. The usual fee for amputating a leg was ten dollars.²

In spite of the limitations and handicaps under which Whitman worked, as compared with modern-day conditions, we know that he

was favored, as every successful physician should be, with a personality which inspired confidence. The people of Wheeler and vicinity grew to love him. After he had practiced medicine in the community for three years, word was spread abroad that he was planning to go to Oregon as a medical missionary. In Parker's letter of January 1, 1835, to the American Board, we may read: "I am afraid that the people in Wheeler and the vicinity on account of their [being] unwilling to spare one whom they so highly esteem as a physician and Christian will dissuade him from offering himself." In 1869, some thirty-five years after Whitman's appointment, an elder of the Wheeler church wrote to the New School³ Presbyterian Board of Home Missions protesting the fact that so important a person in the local church and community had been sent as a missionary to Oregon. "Dr. Whitman was an elder in our church," the unnamed correspondent wrote, "and a very good and useful member, practiced medicine all over the town. Everybody liked him and he had great influence over the inhabitants."⁴

THE CHOLERA EPIDEMIC

Little did Marcus Whitman suspect, as he rode the byways of Steuben County during 1832, 1833, and 1834, that he was preparing himself for a special emergency which was to arise when he and Samuel Parker were on the western Missouri frontier in 1835. The emergency dated back to the introduction of the dreaded Asiatic cholera into the United States in 1832.

During World War I, Spanish influenza spread from city to city, from nation to nation, and across oceans with terrifying rapidity, leaving in its wake millions of newly made graves. A century earlier, or, to be exact, in 1817, a similar epidemic, Asiatic cholera, originating in Bengal, India, began its deadly march around the world. Transportation was slower then, but the march once begun never stopped even though at times it was delayed. It swept across Russia and Poland and reached Berlin by the summer of 1831. There the epidemic claimed seven thousand lives. By November of that year it had reached Scotland. In February 1832, the dread disease appeared in London and by March was in Liverpool. In June the cholera crossed the Atlantic in a boat from Belfast bound for Quebec and within a week, cholera was found in Montreal. From there it spread southward through the waterways down to New

York, and across the state along the Erie Canal to the Great Lakes. Cases were reported in Detroit on July 5, and soldiers going to the Black Hawk War carried the disease to Chicago. Continuing its relentless march, the epidemic moved southward along the Mississippi River and by mid-September was in New Orleans.

The terror of the people was nearly as dreadful as the disease itself. They had reason to be afraid, for the epidemic struck with fearful rapidity. Oftentimes people left their homes in the morning, apparently in the best of health, only to be dead before sundown. From the records of reliable contemporary physicians, we learn that not more than one-third of the cases recovered in 1832. In following years, as the doctors learned more about the disease, they were able to save more of their patients.

Among Dr. Whitman's contemporaries was the Rev. Joel Wakeman, 1809–1889, whose personal reminiscences of both Marcus and Narcissa appeared in a Prattsburgh, New York newspaper in 1893 and again in 1898. One of his unpublished manuscripts, written sometime after 1890 in his old age, is entitled "The Fearful Scourge of 1832." In this he wrote: "No summer in the history of the American people has ever equaled 1832 for excitement and general prostration of all enterprise. Every newspaper was freighted with the number of the dead and dying in the city—every breeze that swept by our doors, brought rumors (and often greatly exaggerated rumors) of the rapid increase of the scourge in the villages and inland towns... The plague was bad; so exceedingly bad that the present generation can form no adequate conception of its fearful ravages. Merchants were afraid to travel to the cities to buy goods. Because of the lack of knowledge about disease germs, all kinds of foolish superstitions swept the country. Some thought that food was responsible for the disease and for a time melons, cucumbers, green corn, and other vegetables were rejected, and even in some place their sale was forbidden by law."⁵

People fled in fear from the infected areas. It was noticed that many of the towns inland from the routes of travel escaped the contagion and to these many of the refugees went. Some towns of five thousand or more located in the midst of the contagion lost half of their population in a single day because of the precipitous flight of their residents.

METHODS OF TREATMENT

The helplessness of the physicians was almost as great as the terror of the people. Marcus Whitman, who had received his M.D. degree in January of that year, had been given no instruction whatsoever upon the subject of cholera in the Medical College. Ordinary remedies had no effect. Many physicians resorted to that old, old panacea of bloodletting, but this only left the unfortunate patient less able to combat the disease.

A few doctors began to make some astute observations. They noticed that deaths were prevalent among the lower strata of society, especially among those who lived along rivers and canals. These people were careless about their toilet facilities. Frequently they took their drinking water from these waterways which had been polluted but, not knowing anything about germs, this did not concern them. It was also observed that those addicted to intoxicating liquors were most prone to contract the disease. This, we now know, was due to the fact that the saloons were usually along the water fronts and the customers were provided with drinking water dipped up from the most convenient river or canal.

Slowly the doctors came to some basic convictions. They advised cleanliness, isolation for the sick, and the use of copperas and chloride of lime in drains, cesspools, and outbuildings. Members of the famed medical society of the University of Edinburgh studied the problem and issued a pamphlet with their recommendations for the prevention and treatment of the disease. This pamphlet was brought to the United States and its contents reprinted in some of the country's newspapers. It was not then unusual to see a doctor using a country newspaper as the latest authority on how to treat Asiatic cholera.

Wheeler was sufficiently distant from the Erie Canal to avoid the major impact of the epidemic and yet it was near enough to bring fear to the hearts of the people. Dr. F. C. Waite, the medical historian, writing in January 1936, commented: "From what we know of Marcus Whitman, we cannot imagine that he did other than get all the information he could about the symptoms and treatment of cholera. He had an education both preliminary and professional much above the average. Moreover he was ambitious to learn. Otherwise he would not have returned to the medical college for further instruction after four years of practice."

The cholera epidemic lasted for about three years. The fact that Whitman learned to recognize the symptoms and was acquainted with

the most approved methods to prevent its spread and to minister to the afflicted proved to be of inestimable value in the spring of 1835 when he and Parker were on their exploring tour to the Rockies with the caravan of the American Fur Company. This story belongs to a later chapter.

WHITMAN MEETS THE PRENTISS FAMILY

Living in nearby Prattsburg, when Dr. Whitman was in Wheeler, was the family of judge Stephen Prentiss. He and his wife were the parents of nine children, four boys and five girls. Their third child and eldest daughter was Narcissa, and their second daughter was Jane. Whitman's professional and church interests often took him to Prattsburg where one day he attended a prayer meeting in the Prentiss home. Years later, in a letter addressed to Jane, May 17, 1842, Marcus refreshed her memory of their first meeting: "I was just telling Narcissa what an interest I had taken in yourself ever since I was introduced to you at your father's house... at the close of a prayer meeting. That was my first introduction to the family. From that moment my heart has been towards the family. But you smile, I suppose, and say it was Narcissa; no, it was Jane; Narcissa was in Butler. I presume you will have no recollection of the introduction; if so, let it rest on my recollection, which is vivid." Butler was in Wayne County, about seventy-five miles to the north where Narcissa may have been teaching school.

We have no evidence that Marcus and Narcissa met before the Prentiss family moved to nearby Amity in Allegany County in June 1834, yet in light of later events, it appears that they had become acquainted. Marcus was sufficiently well acquainted with the pastor of the Prattsburg church, the Rev. George Rudd, to request his endorsement upon the application he sent to the American Board in December 1834. This common interest in the Presbyterian Church and the proximity of Wheeler to Prattsburg would certainly have been favorable to the forming of a friendship between Marcus and Narcissa.

WHITMAN REJECTED BY THE AMERICAN BOARD

When we read the many references made by Whitman's later associates to his great physical strength and endurance, we are surprised to learn that when he first applied for an appointment under the American Board, he was rejected because of ill health. Nearly a year before Whitman

heard Parker make his plea for missionaries to go with him to Old Oregon in the Wheeler Presbyterian Church, he had been considering offering his services to the American Board to go as a medical missionary to some tribe of American Indians. Evidently Whitman had never forgotten his youthful ambition to be a minister, and being a medical missionary to some Indian tribe appealed to him as a good substitute.

Sometime during April 1834, Whitman visited his mother in Rush-vile. While there he discussed with the Rev. Henry P. Strong, then pastor of the local Congregational Church, his idea of being a medical missionary to the Indians. Strong endorsed the proposal and, on April 25, took the initiative and wrote to the American Board, thus bringing to its attention for the first time the name of Dr. Marcus Whitman: "I write at this time to make known to you the request of Doct. Marcus Whitman. He is a young man of about 30 or 35 years of age, of solid, judicious mind, of, as I hope & believe, more than ordinary piety and perseverance, a regular bred Physician. He has practiced several years with good success & credit. He is, in my opinion, well qualified to act as a Missionary Physician: & altho I know not that he thinks of it, yet I think he might, if thought expedient, after a time be ordained to advantage. *He has formerly been in poor health*, but is now better, & thinks a station with some of our western Indians would be useful to him. He has thought of being a missionary for some time past, & I think him better qualified to do good in that capacity than most young men with whom I am acquainted. He would be glad to hear from you, as, should he go, he would have some worldly concerns to arrange."⁶

Since the secretaries of the Board were having difficulty finding qualified persons to go as missionaries to the American Indians, they were immediately interested. Secretary B. B. Wisner, then in charge of Indian missions under the Board, wrote to Strong on May 1: "Your account of him is so far satisfactory as to induce me to request you to suggest to him to address me a letter in which he shall give some account of himself, his parentage, education, religious history, views and feelings on the missionary subject &c, &c. We wish also to be informed whether he is married; and if he is, whether he has children, and if so, how many; if not married, whether he expects to be. We shall be glad to receive a communication."

Upon receipt of this letter, Strong wrote to Whitman informing him of what the Board wished to know. In his first letter to the Board, dated June 3, 1834, Whitman gave a brief review of his life, mentioning such facts as his residence in Massachusetts, his studies under Moses Hallock, the Sunday school class he had attended which was taught by Deacon Pichards, and his joining the church at Rushville. He referred to the “constant religious instruction” he had received from his “pious” grandfather and uncle at Cummington. Theologically, Whitman was an orthodox Calvinist.

Regarding his views on the missionary cause, Whitman wrote: “I regard the Heathen⁷ as not having retained the knowledge of the true God and as perishing as described by St. Paul... I am willing to go to any field of usefulness at the direction of the A. Board. I will cooperate as Physician, Teacher or Agriculturalist so far as I may be able, if required. I am not married and I have no present arrangement upon that subject. Yet I think I should wish to take a wife, if the service of the Board would admit.”

Whitman’s letter was satisfactory in all respects save one—he made no reference to his health. On June 14, Wisner answered Whitman’s letter and mentioned the fact that Strong had reported that he had been in poor health. Wisner wrote: “Now good health and good constitution are very important prerequisites for missionary service; for if a man in this civilized and Christian society needs to take great care... what would be likely to be the case with him among savages & pagans & all the privations and perplexities of missionary service? Please write, as soon as practicable, and give us your history as to health.”

Wisner also asked: “What should you think of going to the Marquesas Islands [in the South Pacific]? We are now in need of a physician for that mission.” Wisner recommended that Whitman be married should he be appointed, “if you can get a good missionary wife.” On that same June 14, Wisner wrote to Strong and mentioned the fact that Whitman in his letter of application had made no reference to his health which was “a very important point.” Wisner asked about Whitman’s “talents and mental improvements.” He wanted to know if Whitman had “the ability to appear respectable among sensible and respectable people, and to make a general good impression, to acquire the respect of others, and to get and keep an influence over others?”

As has been stated in the previous chapter, Whitman answered Wisner's inquiries about his health in his letter of June 27. He then explained how he had suffered from what he thought was "an inflammation of the spleen," which led him to give up the practice of medicine for a time. After studying theology for several months and finding that his health had not improved, Whitman returned to his practice of medicine. In further explanation, he wrote: "I have not been for any length of time without a slight pain & for the last two or three weeks there has been an agravation of pain & soreness so that I have used remedies & shall have to use more still..." Whitman stated that he felt able to work in a temperate climate but had "some fears of a hot climate." Therefore, he was unwilling to accept an appointment for the Marquesian Islands. He closed his letter by saying: "I have some lands in possession which I should wish to sell & considerable business to settle if the Board should approve of me.⁸ It shall be done as soon as I am notified to that effect."

Whitman's letter was dated June 27 but postmarked at Wheeler on the 30th. It took five days for the letter to be carried from Wheeler to Boston. Wisner was puzzled as to what to say in reply and waited nearly two weeks before writing. In his letter to Whitman dated July 17, Wisner wrote: "I have hardly known what answer to return to it [i.e., Whitman's letter of June 27]. Millions of heathen are perishing for lack of the knowledge of the Gospel... and you are willing and desirous to go... But your health is such that you think you cannot go to a warm climate & in such climates are the *immense* majority of heathen. Among no others have we any mission except among the Indians... & among these we have no demand for a physician at this time. Indeed it seems doubtful whether your health is such as to justify your going on a mission at all." And there the matter rested.

On August 12, 1824, Strong wrote a belated reply to Wisner's letter of inquiry of June 14. Part of the delay in writing, he explained was due to illness. Strong then gave the following recommendation for Whitman: "I find that his talents are above mediocrity, his mental improvement respectable, in his profession above ordinary Physicians; in appearance, among respectable people, rather forbidding at first, but makes a good impression & retains influence, will be a pleasant missionary companion, cooperates well with others. Upon the whole, his

acquaintance with the world is respectable & his friends think he will do well as a missionary.”

Strong’s recommendation came too late as the Board had already decided not to appoint Whitman for the time being. Some good, however, came out of the correspondence as all of the preliminary investigations regarding Whitman’s fitness to be appointed, provided his health improved, had been made. Thus, when Whitman’s name was again brought to the Board’s attention in the following December, quick action was possible.

WHITMAN COMMISSIONED BY THE AMERICAN BOARD

By 1834 the American Board was experiencing great difficulty in finding suitable missionaries who were willing to go to the American Indians. This problem is clearly outlined in a letter that Secretary David Greene wrote on September 10, 1834, to the Rev. Cyrus Kingsbury, then one of the Board’s missionaries to the Indians in what is now Oklahoma. After stating that “very few candidates for missionary service are willing to go among the Indians,” Greene wrote: “They had rather learn a language spoken by tens of millions & live among a dense and settled population, have daily access to thousands, & think that the fruits of their labors will be felt by large nations and through future generations, than to spend their lives in what they apprehend will be almost fruitless toil in reclaiming small tribes of sparsely settled migrators and nearly inaccessible men, who are wasting away and seemed devoted to extinction. Men of talent and energy, and of other missionary qualifications, are not disposed to engage in such a field...”⁹

PARKER’S APPEAL FOR MISSIONARIES

During 1834 events were taking place elsewhere which, before the end of the year, were to have a life-changing effect on Marcus Whitman. Samuel Parker, who left his two companions, John Dunbar and Samuel Allis, on the Missouri frontier to open a mission among the Pawnee Indians, returned to his home in Ithaca, New York, sometime during the first part of July. During the first week of August, Parker visited the headquarters of the American Board to report on his trip to St. Louis. The Prudential Committee was so favorably impressed with the outlook

that it approved his proposal to look for associates and make a second effort to go to the Rockies in 1835.

Parker was directed to act as an agent for the Board “in such parts of the State of New York, and in such manner as shall seem best by the Rev. Chauncey Eddy, Genl. Agent for the Board of that State;”¹⁰ to seek volunteers for a proposed mission in Oregon; and to raise money. “In looking for suitable persons to be missionaries or teachers,” wrote Wisner to Parker on August 7, “you will exercise great discretion, being well satisfied that they are qualified for the service, and so circumstanced that they may and ought to be engaged in it, before you bring the subject to them.”

When Parker spoke in the Wheeler Presbyterian Church on an evening late in November 1834 on the appeal of “the Wise Men from the West,” he unwittingly brought to a focus the unfulfilled dreams and aspirations of Marcus Whitman. Parker’s appeal for missionaries opened a door for Whitman. This was exactly what he had long wanted to do. The fact that Parker’s destination happened to be Old Oregon was incidental. Whitman was ready to accept any invitation which might have come from any western Indian tribe. We can only imagine the conversation which took place that November evening after Parker had spoken. Whitman’s eagerness to be accepted by the Board was matched by Parker’s desire to have someone go with him to the Rockies the next spring. Parker urged Whitman to make immediate application to the American Board for an appointment and suggested that he solicit testimonials from the pastors of the churches in Wheeler, Prattsburg, and Rushville to be sent with his letter.

WHITMAN REAPPLIES TO THE BOARD

Whitman lost not time in getting the needed testimonials. He turned first to his pastor, the Rev. J. H. Hotchkin, who on November 27 wrote: “I hereby certify that I have been intimately acquainted with him for about two years past... he is a member in good standing, and a Ruling Elder in said church, highly esteemed as a Christian of hopeful piety, and possessing in a good degree the spirit of active benevolence. In his medical profession, he has deservedly been held in estimation, and has a good share of practice.” Hotchkin heartily recommended his appointment. Three of the elders of the Wheeler church

added their signatures to the testimonial with the statement that they “most cordially” concurred in the opinions of their pastor.

Whitman then rode to Prattsburg where on Saturday, the 29th, he secured the endorsement of the Rev. George R. Rudd. Whitman then hastened on to Rushville where, on December 1, the Rev. H. P. Strong added his testimonial. Strong wrote: “I have simply to say as before, that the most judicious friends of Missions think him well qualified for the undertaking.” Having collected these endorsements, Whitman wrote to the Board on December 2 and asked to be appointed to go with Parker on his mission “beyond the Rocky Mountains.” “My health is so much restored,” he wrote, “that I think it will offer no impediment. I find no sensible inconvenience from my former difficultys and think I shall not [suffer] from the climate or labour of such a Mission.” This letter with the accompanying testimonials was received by the Board on December 9.¹¹

In the meantime Parker wrote to his family on December 5 saying that he had found Dr. Whitman, but for some reason he did not notify the Board until the 17th of that month. Writing then from Dansville, New York, he said: “Doct. Whitman... whom I saw a few weeks since made up his mind to offer himself... He has the name of being a good physician and a devoted Christian. I think there can be no doubt in this case.” After Parker’s return to Ithaca, he wrote a second time about Whitman’s offer on December 25: “His general reputation is regard to all the particulars required and into which I have made particular inquiry, I think places his case beyond any particular doubt. He wishes to accompany me in my expected tour.”

The Prudential Committee met in Boston on January 6, 1835, at which time Whitman’s application for an appointment was reconsidered. Since his health had evidently been improved, there was no longer any hesitancy to give him a commission to go with Parker that spring on an exploring tour to the Rockies. Writing to Whitman on January 7, Secretary Greene reported the action of the Prudential Committee and stated that Parker would be conferring with him “respecting the time of starting, the kind of outfit which will be required, and other topics connected with the undertaking.” As will be noted later, few persons were less qualified to give advice on such matters than Samuel Parker.

Greene in his letter to Whitman of January 7 gave the following wise advice: “On such a tour as this, as well as in your missionary labors

among any of the wandering tribes of our continent, great patience, fortitude, & perseverance are necessary. You must be willing to encounter hardships, dangers, self-denials in almost every shape & discouragements without being moved by them from your purpose. Nothing but an unquenchable desire to do good to the souls of the Indians, originating and cherished by a supreme love to Christ and firm faith in the promises, can sustain you and carry you through.”

Secretary Wisner, who had been in charge of the Board’s Indian Mission and the first to correspond with Whitman, died on February 9, 1835. He was succeeded by his assistant, the Rev. David Greene, who, throughout the history of the Oregon Mission was in charge of that field. No one can read his letters to the missionaries without being impressed with his good judgment and wise advice.¹² Through his correspondence, Greene played a significant role in the history of the Oregon Mission of the American Board.

Although the Board made a grant of \$450.00 a year to Parker for the support of his family during his absence while on his exploring tours, no allowances for a salary for either him or for Whitman were made. This was true of all missionaries who joined the Oregon Mission. They received necessary travel and living expenses, and that was all. After getting settled in their respective stations in the Old Oregon wilderness, they were expected to be self-supporting. Naturally the time and energy spent on farming and looking after their livestock meant that less could be done in learning the language and in civilizing and evangelizing the natives. More will be said later about this fundamental weakness in the Board’s policies.

WHITMAN LEAVES FOR THE ROCKIES

After receiving Greene’s letter of January 7 with the news of his appointment, Whitman went to Ithaca to see Parker and to make plans for their exploring tour. Upon his arrival at Parker’s home, he was disappointed to learn that no one else had been found to go with them. Whitman was also disappointed in discovering how indefinite Parker was as to the objectives of their prospective exploring tour.

After returning to his home in Wheeler, Whitman wrote to Greene on February 2 and asked for more instructions regarding the “intentions of the committee as to the extent and design of our commission.”

Whitman also told Greene that he planned to start on his long horseback ride to St. Louis on February 16, provided he had received a reply by that date. Whitman asked that Greene send his reply to him at Rushville which indicates that he was planning to spend some time there with his relatives before leaving for the West. He reassured Greene regarding his health by writing: "My health is generally good."

Parker was planning to go by stage to Pittsburgh and then by river steamer to St. Louis, taking with him some of Whitman's baggage. The two men planned to meet in St. Louis on or about April 1. They would then have plenty of time to assemble their outfit and be ready to leave with the caravan of the American Fur Company from the western frontier of Missouri in early May.

Two documents are extant from the days when Whitman was closing out his business affairs and getting ready to leave for the Rockies.¹³ Each is dated February 5, 1835. One is a receipt for eleven dollars signed by Whitman and given to the father of a boy whom he had treated for an attack of scarlet fever. The second is a church letter given Whitman by the Rev. James H. Hotchkin. This was the first letter of transfer of membership given to a church member who expected to join a Protestant church somewhere west of the Rocky Mountains. After reviewing the circumstances which had led Whitman to request such a certificate, Hotchkin stated: "He is hereby on his request [dismissed] from his particular relation to the church of Wheeler, and affectionately recommended to the christian regard of any of God's people wherever he may travel and to the fellowship and communion of any particular church wherever God in his providence may cast his lot."

Replying to Whitman's request for more definite instructions, Greene on February 9 wrote to Whitman directing his letter, as requested, to Rushville. Greene wrote: "Respecting the object, extent & nature of your tour, you can learn from communications addressed to Mr. Parker last year or the present; especially from two long letters of instructions written to him last spring." Parker had left the letters with Dunbar in the summer of 1834; hence Whitman had not been able to see them. Greene, however, summarized what had been written: "The object of the Com. is to learn as fully as possible the conditions & character of the remote & secluded tribes, that they may more effectually call upon the Christian church to furnish them the men & the

means in other respects for giving them the gospel." Greene promised to forward Whitman's official commission certifying his appointment as a missionary of the American Board to him at St. Louis.

Whitman received Greene's letter on Thursday, February 19, which was several days later than Whitman had planned for his departure for St. Louis. After bidding his mother and other relatives farewell, he mounted his horse and started on the long ride westward. He spent the week-end at Amity, New York, where Narcissa Prentiss was then living with her parents. There Whitman was a guest in the home of the Rev. and Mrs. Oliver S. Powell. Powell was pastor of the Amity Presbyterian Church in which the Prentiss family were members. During that week-end Marcus Whitman and Narcissa Prentiss became engaged.

When Whitman resumed his travels on Monday, his cup of happiness was full and running over. Although his youthful dream of becoming a minister had not been realized, now he had found an acceptable substitute in his appointment as a medical missionary. Adventure, travel, Christian service, and the lure of the unknown, lay before him. He would return as soon as possible to claim his bride. No doubt he found it difficult to leave Narcissa so soon after becoming engaged, but a high sense of duty bade him go.

Greene's letter of February 9, 1835, notifying Whitman of his appointment by the American Board was the cue which called for his entry into the great drama then taking place on a national scale involving the destiny of Old Oregon.

1 After carefully checking the letters and diaries of the members of the Oregon Mission for references to bleeding, I was able to find only three instances where Whitman followed this practice.

2 F. C. Waite, "The Equipment of a Country Doctor in Northern Ohio in 1822," *Ohio State Medical Journal*, July 1936.

3 The Presbyterian Church divided into two parts in 1837 known as the Old School and the New School. Each of these branches divided over the slavery issue. The two Southern branches united in 1861 to become what is now the Presbyterian Church in the United States. The two Northern branches joined in 1869 to become the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

4 *Presbyterian Monthly*, New York, iv (December 1869):272.

5 Wakeman ms., Coll. Wn.

6 Hulbert, *O.P.* V:244 ff, gives the correspondence of the American Board with Strong and Whitman regarding the latter's appointment. The italics in this quotation are the author's.

7 In the commonly used ecclesiastical terminology of that day, non-Christians were referred to as "heathens" or "pagans." Such terms did not then carry any derogatory meanings.

8 S. W. Pratt wrote: "About this time Whitman bought a farm of 150 acres on the Pultenay Estate, lying about midway between Wheeler and Prattsburg . . . on this he built a log house where he dwelt for a time." Pratt ms., Coll. Wn.

9 Hulbert, *O.P.*, V:266. The Rev. A. B. Smith, who went out to Old Oregon in 1838 as an appointee of the American Board, emphasized in his letters to the Board this same observation. See Drury, *Spalding and Smith*, p. 109, and *passim*.

10 Eddy's office was in Utica, New York.

11 The secretaries of the American Board were accustomed to note on letters received the date of arrival and also when answered.

12 Some of Greene's letters to Whitman and other members of the Oregon Mission have been included in Hulbert, *O.P.*

13 Both documents in Coll. W.