

# Ben Holladay (1819-1887)

*By Unknown*

Ben Holladay was a businessman involved in the stagecoach and railroad industry in the West. He was responsible for many of the stageline roads and railtracks in western Oregon.

Born in 1819 in Kentucky, Holladay moved with his family to Missouri as a young boy. In Weston, Missouri, Holladay operated a store and a hotel, doing business with Indians in Kansas. He married Notley Ann Calvert when he was 23. After she died in 1873, Holladay married Esther Campbell.

When the Mexican American War broke out in 1846, he supplied U.S. Army General Stephen Kearny's forces. After the war ended in 1848, Holladay bought surplus army supplies at bargain prices, and over the next several years he sold these supplies in Utah and California. In 1862 Holladay bought the Overland Mail Express, whose owners were in debt to him. He expanded the company and by 1864 controlled most of the stage and freight traffic between the Missouri River and Salt Lake City. Holladay also had a federal mail contract worth nearly one million dollars annually.

He sold his stage routes to Wells Fargo and went into the railroad business, beginning with his Oregon and California Railroad Company. He began in 1868 to construct tracks from Portland along the east side of the Willamette River in competition with the "Westsidiers" to win a contract to build a north-south route to California. Competing for both traffic and a federal land grant, the two sides agreed that whichever company first built twenty miles of line would buy out the other. Holladay won the race and expanded the east and west side lines to the towns of New Era in 1869, Albany in 1870, and Roseburg in 1872. His line on the west side of the Willamette reached Hillsboro in 1871.

In 1873, Holladay began to default on loans. Known as an extravagant spender, Holladay owned numerous mansions on both coasts and had over-extended himself financially, which led to near-total ruin. His investors replaced him with Henry Villard. Prior to his replacement, he was a popular and omnipresent figure in Portland business and social circles, known for throwing lavish parties. At one time he controlled much of the transportation commerce on the lower Willamette River.

Holladay died in Portland in 1887 and is buried in Mount Calvary Cemetery.

Further reading: J. V. Frederick. *Ben Holladay, the Stagecoach King: A Chapter in the Development of Transcontinental Transportation*. Glendale, Calif., The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1940. David T. Mason. "The Effect of O. and C. Management on the Economy of Oregon." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 64:1 (Spring 1963), 55-67. © 2002 Oregon Historical Society

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