

Colonel Thomas Ramsey Cornelius



Thomas R. Cornelius was born November 15, 1827 in Missouri to Benjamin and Elizabeth “Betsey” Adams Cornelius. In 1845, at age 18, he and nine siblings went with their parents to the Oregon Territory. Their group of wagons left the old trail at Ft. Boise with Stephen Meek and followed the now infamous Meek Cutoff. Seven grueling months after leaving Independence, Missouri, the family finally arrived in the Willamette Valley on November 1, 1845.

Benjamin and Betsey settled their family on 640 acres, four miles north of present-day Cornelius. Sons Benjamin Jr., Jesse and Thomas all took up claims alongside their father when they became of age.

On hearing of the Whitman massacre in 1847, Thomas enlisted as a private to fight the Cayuse. He was soon promoted to First Sergeant. After the Cayuse War, he went to California to try his luck at gold mining. He returned home after some success in 1849. In February of 1850, Thomas Ramsey Cornelius married Florentine Wilkes, whose family was also in the 1845 wagon train to the Oregon Territory.

In 1855, he enlisted again to fight during the Yakima Indian war and was elected to Captain of his company. After the resignation of his commanding officer, James W. Nesmith, he was promoted to Colonel. After retiring from the war in 1856 he was elected to the Territorial Legislature and settled down on his Donation Land Claim. But, in 1861 he was appointed by President Lincoln to raise a volunteer Oregon cavalry regiment and stayed on in the military service until the latter part of 1862. After returning home to farming, he was elected President of the Oregon State Senate in 1866.

In the early 1870’s Thomas heard that Ben Holladay was planning to build a railroad through nearby Free Orchards. He left his farm and moved to Free Orchards where he built a warehouse, store and later a creamery and sawmills – all generating a large volume of business. Meanwhile Cornelius continued being elected to the



Legislature where he served a total of 20 years – twice being elected president of that body. The town of Free Orchards was renamed in 1893 to Cornelius in honor of its leading citizen.

Thomas and wife Florentine had six children; the most famous being Benjamin Peyton Cornelius who became a Washington County Judge. Florentine died in 1864 (the same year his father died). The Colonel married Missouri A. Smith two years later. By that time, he owned about 1,500 acres, covering three farms, sawmill and a general store. He is also known for digging out and building Cornelius Pass Road.

In his later years, Colonel Thomas R. Cornelius suffered great financial loss, deafness and Bright's disease. He was ill for 18 months before dying of pneumonia on June 24, 1899 at the age of 73. He is buried in the Cornelius Methodist Cemetery.

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