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THURSTON COUNTY HISTORICAL JOURNAL



Pioneers of the Nisqually Valley

**Metamorphosis: The Transformation of Olympia from Frontier Village
to Modern Town, 1889—1912**

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THURSTON COUNTY HISTORICAL JOURNAL

The *Thurston County Historical Journal* is dedicated to recording and celebrating the history of Thurston County.

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Submission Guidelines

The Journal welcomes factual articles dealing with any aspect of Thurston County history. Please contact the editor before submitting an article to determine its suitability for publication. Articles on previously unexplored topics, new interpretations of well-known topics, and personal recollections are preferred. Articles may range in length from 100 words to 10,000 words, and should include source notes and suggested illustrations.

Submitted articles will be reviewed by the editorial committee and, if chosen for publication, will be fact-checked and may be edited for length and content. The Journal regrets that authors cannot be monetarily compensated, but they will gain the gratitude of readers and the historical community for their contributions to and appreciation of local history.

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What Is It?

On the cover: *William and Rhoda Packwood of the Nisqually River valley stand on the riverbank in front of the ferry that William operated. Artist's concept by Carol B. Hannum, 2017. See article on page 3.*

FROM THE EDITOR

Karen L. Johnson

Welcome to the second issue of the *Journal*. Our pilot issue was well-received, and to date, we have collected nearly enough funds to support the *Journal* for the remainder of 2017. We extend our sincere gratitude to all government entities, heritage groups, and individuals who contributed financial or in-kind donations.

We hope to continue to bring you well-researched articles on various topics. You, too, can contribute to the *Journal* as an author. We welcome submissions of articles pertaining to local history; personal recollections of past eras or important events would be particularly appreciated.

JOURNAL DISTRIBUTION

Each issue of the *Journal* will be distributed in the following manner, at least for the time being. Participating government entities and heritage groups will each receive a certain number of copies, to be distributed as they wish. State, Timberland, university and high school libraries will also receive copies for inclusion in their circulating collections. Any remaining copies will be available for sale at local bookstores or museum gift shops. Your best bet to receive a copy of your own is to join one of our many fine heritage groups.

ILLUSTRATIONS

The *Journal* is committed to bringing you not just well-written articles, but also relevant illustrations. But mid-19th-Century photos can be as scarce as hen's teeth. Therefore, when seeking illustrations about the 1800s, we have to look to maps, land records, and other contemporary or re-created documents.

A case in point: In this issue, author Tim Ransom writes engagingly of William and Rhoda Packwood, pioneers of the Nisqually Valley. To illustrate his article, Tim wanted to use two sketches of the Packwoods, which were drawn by a newspaper artist years ago. However, the newspaper sketches were protected by copyright and the newspaper wanted a stiff fee for their re-publication in the *Journal*. Luckily, we were able to obtain the services of talented local artist Carol B. Hannum, who combined information from three different sources to create an entirely new sketch of the Packwoods and their Nisqually River ferry. The new sketches violate no copyrights, and provide a relevant albeit artistic look at life during the mid-1800s.

Contact me with any comments at:

360-890-2299

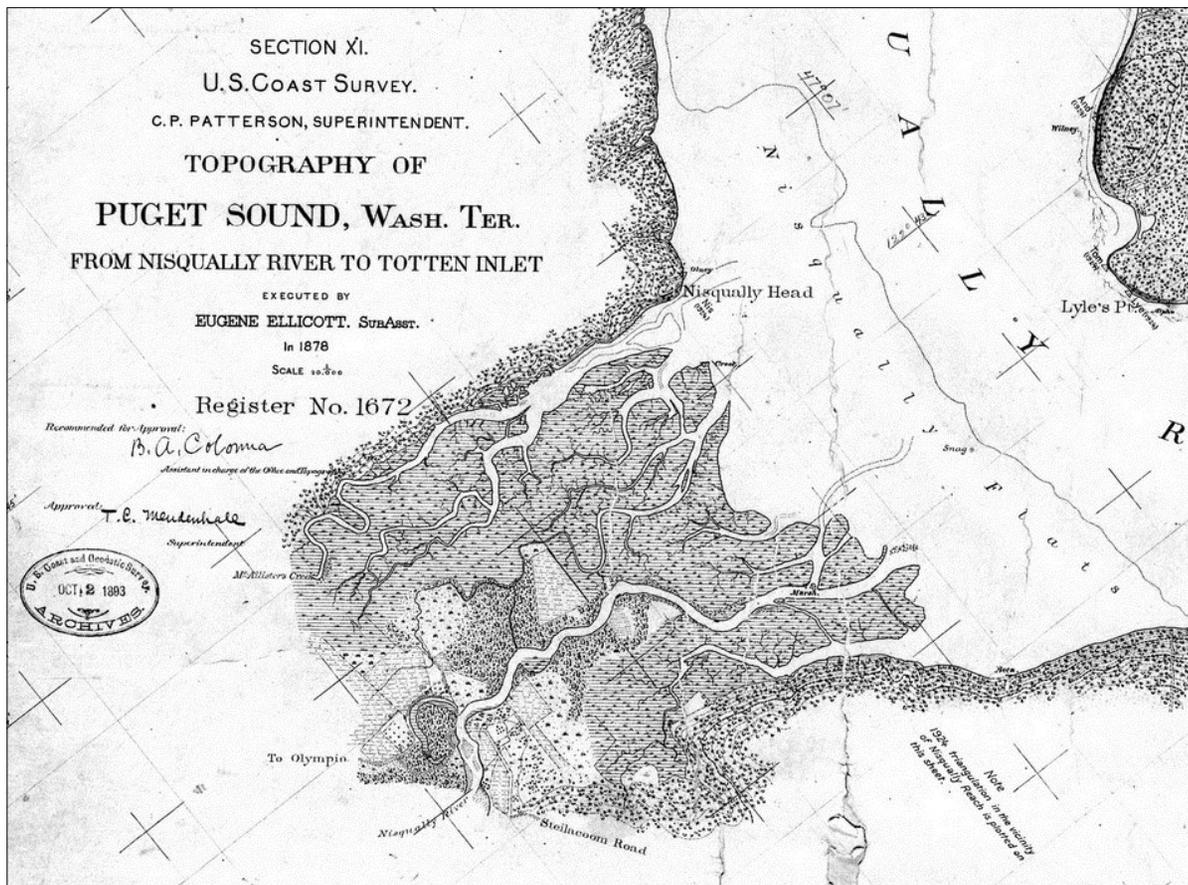
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PIONEERS OF THE NISQUALLY VALLEY

Timothy W. Ransom, Ph.D.

The valley and surrounding prairies of the Nisqually River delta, where Thurston County, to the west, and Pierce County, to the east, now meet at the south end of Puget Sound, were the epicenter of important events in the development of the history, politics and economy of the region. The Hud-

son's Bay Company (HBC) came there in the 1830s to exploit the region, and the Native Americans, for furs; later, through its subsidiary, the Puget Sound Agricultural Company, the HBC expanded into ranching (sheep and cows) and farming to feed its forts elsewhere and the Russian colonies to



This 1878 map shows the Nisqually Valley area. North is to the upper right. Image courtesy of NOAA: NOAA Shoreline Data Explorer, Map #T1672.

the north. Chief Leschi, famed leader of the Indian uprising of the 1850s, was from the Nisqually Delta area, and died at the end of a hangman's noose in nearby Steilacoom. His brother, Quiemuth, was murdered in Olympia, only a few miles to the west.

Early in the 20th Century, behemoths of a burgeoning military-industrial complex—the U.S. Army, the E. I. DuPont Company, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the ports of Tacoma and Olympia—looked to the resources of the delta region to expand their empires. Their initiatives ultimately gave rise, in the 1960s and '70s, to citizen activism that would goad local governments, the state, and even the federal government to initiate a series of steps—shoreline protection, growth management, and the like—to protect our environment for future generations.

Like in many other valleys in the region, serious immigration, at first mostly Americans migrating from the east and south of the U.S. via the Midwest, began in the 1850s. In small groups and after incredible hardship, hardy pioneers made their way over the Oregon Trail and north along the Cowlitz River, or later by heroic labor over rough trails through the Cascades, and began populating the southern coasts and islands of Puget Sound. At first, land changed hands frequently, as some new arrivals left to make or lose their fortunes or their lives in the gold fields of California. Others hankered for greener pastures further north on the Sound or back in

Oregon's Willamette Valley, or parlayed their initial claims into grubstakes for land elsewhere. Eventually ownership became more enduring, and like in many other regions given over to farming and ranching, a few families began to consolidate acreage. In the Nisqually delta region, the Mounts family, Alson Brown, the Bragets and the Bennetts would control most of the land around the estuary for much of the first half of the 20th Century.

It is easy, but incorrect, to overlook the influence of early pioneers. The passage of time and changes in ownership appear to have erased traces of them, barring a few place names and perhaps a gravestone. But the first pioneers brought with them an ethic, expectations for behavior and relationships, that endured. Fierce independence, strength in family, the rights and rituals of neighborliness and a belief in the value of hard work and private ownership—all were passed down to subsequent generations and later arrivals. These attributes would play out in the development of strong communities in places like the Nisqually Valley. In communities like these a still young nation struggled to come to terms with the challenges of growth and the ever expanding competition for limited resources.

The adventures of some Nisqually pioneers recounted here began in the mid-19th Century, before there was a Washington State or a Washington Territory, even before there was an Oregon Territory. Before that there was

Oregon Country, and the Provisional Government of Oregon. In 1843, the latter adopted the Organic Laws of Oregon to protect the pioneers from the Natives and each other, until such time as the mother ship, the USA, took notice of their beautiful country in a possessive sort of way. Before Thurston and Pierce Counties existed, Lewis County (originally Vancouver County) extended at one point from the Columbia River north to what would become Alaska. Thurston, covering all of the Puget Sound region and the Olympic Peninsula, was carved out of Lewis by the Provisional Government at the beginning of 1852, then gave birth to Pierce, King, Island and Jefferson Counties before year's end. All of this, of course, was superimposed upon a Native culture that had been in place for centuries but which, when push came to shove, was considered expendable.

For arriving immigrants, the legal and political distinctions among counties probably had little relevance, at least until the one in which they found themselves started to levy taxes and require everyone to help make and maintain the roads. The more insistent challenge was how to get along with, and perhaps help ease on out, those the new immigrants found already there, the Indians and the British. Back in 1818, the United States and Great Britain had signed a Joint Occupancy Treaty for Oregon Country, to at least delay the takeover of the area by the former while the latter extracted what it could from one of the richest regions of the continent. Under

the treaty, economic interests of Great Britain—primarily the Hudson's Bay Company and its subsidiary, the Puget Sound Agricultural Company—established commercial and trading centers (e.g., Fort Nisqually, first established at Sequelitchew Creek a few miles north of the Nisqually River, in 1833) and agricultural outposts (Cowlitz Farm near present-day Toledo, and sheep camps that dotted the Nisqually Plain). In the meantime, intrusions by American interests, especially small farmers, were kept at bay by the lack of any real mechanism by which they could claim land in the jointly-held area.

All that changed in 1846, when the United States abrogated the Joint Occupancy Treaty, essentially pulling its finger out of the dike that had been holding back American expansion. Having eyed Oregon Country hungrily for some time, the American public was incited by presidential candidate James K. Polk's rallying cry of "Fifty-Four Forty or Fight!" signifying his campaign promise to push the British claim north of the 54th parallel, to just south of Russian Alaska. A new wave of immigration from the east began. Faced with the possible loss of their investment in the fur trade, along with the Puget Sound Agricultural Company and associated forts and lands, the British held out for the Columbia River, at about the 46th parallel, as the demarcation. But reports from the members of the Wilkes Expedition and others of the importance of Puget Sound and its harbors strengthened the resolve of Polk's government, and



President James K. Polk, shown about one month before the 1846 treaty was finalized. Image courtesy of Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-10700.

when it offered a compromise at the 49th parallel, the British accepted.

In June 1846, a new treaty was concluded, opening the Pacific Northwest to American colonization, while calling for British rights to be respected until such time as final financial compensation could be made. During the ensuing 24 years and until the final accounting was completed, this “gray zone” that was controlled by the Brit-

ish but increasingly dominated by Americans was the site of frequent conflict, particularly between the Hudson's Bay Company and new claimants—both recently arrived immigrants and retired HBC employees—for the land.

If the dike was breached by the new treaty, it was altogether destroyed by the so-called Oregon Donation Land Claim Act of 1850. Now for a short time the U.S. government was offering free land in Oregon Territory, including all the area west of the Continental Divide and north of the 42nd parallel (the present-day border between Oregon and California). Fueled by a regional sense of manifest destiny, American federal and local politicians and the settlers themselves gradually but systematically proceeded to push out or assimilate the Indians and the remains of the British presence, mostly Scotsmen and a few Sandwich Islanders (Hawaiians). Initially, the Indians were seen as a convenient and readily available labor force; eventually policy, both official and practical, began to marginalize, assimilate and, ultimately, to eliminate them. The best land was up for grabs!

Those already in the Territory fared best; the new Donation Land Claim (DLC) law required only that a male settler be over eighteen years of age, a U.S. citizen (or intending to become one), a resident of the Territory before December 1, 1850, and to have lived on his land for four years, in order to be granted 320 acres (640 if married). Those over the age of 21 who settled in

the Territory (or turned 21) *after* December 1 could claim 160 acres (320 with a wife). In 1853, the provisions of the DLC Act were extended for another two years, with a new provision that reduced the required tenure on the land to two years, if the claimant was willing to pay \$1.25 an acre for his claim.

Though kept haphazardly, incompletely, and sometimes not quite by the letter of the law, the files associated with the donation land claims provide a wealth of information about the recipients, their friends, neighbors and associates. To claim acreage, settlers had to provide to a local government official (usually one of the few attorneys in the Territory) quite a bit of information about themselves and their land, including:

- A notification describing the land, either by legal description if it had been surveyed, or by natural features if not (the latter was usually the case, and often resulted in a hodgepodge of claims across the countryside);
- An affidavit stating the settler's date of arrival in the Territory and of his/their settling on the land;
- Date and place of birth of the settler (s) and, if applicable, date of their marriage (often this is the only place such information is readily available);
- An affidavit signed by two witnesses (usually the settler's immediate neighbors) that attested to cultivation of the land;
- The (male) settler's oath that the land was for personal use and that he had not sold it before the required

length of time was up;

- Proof of the man's citizenship, if naturalized;
- A list of his legal heirs (optional).

When a settler concluded that he had fulfilled the Act's requirements, he submitted these papers, in whole or in part, and two more proofs of cultivation, another affidavit testifying to his present marital status, and an oath of allegiance, to the General Land Office (GLO) in Washington, DC. Sometimes these documents were accompanied by a file of correspondence concerning legal issues, such as boundary adjustments and inheritances. When the claim was approved, the GLO sent a patent to the settler, via the local official, and the claim was legally his, to keep, trade or sell.

What appears to have been a relatively straightforward, if burdensome, process, however, actually was far from being so, given some of the rudimentary administrative practices of the time. Documents were filled out and copied by hand, more or less legibly (depending on the lawyer or his clerk), and then transported back and forth between local magistrates and the federal government by canoe, horseback, perhaps stagecoach and eventually the railroad. Add some highly creative, usually phonetic, spelling, inconsistencies in providing dates for past events, and an occasional touch of larceny, and resultant records provide us with as many questions as answers. Often ownership of a claim was disputed after it had changed hands several times, or after the death of the

original claimant, leading to more work for the lawyers and, hopefully, ultimate resolution in the courts.

LUTHER COLLINS

Nonetheless, the DLC files chronicled the history of the first American settler known to have claimed land in the Nisqually Valley, one Luther Collins. By the time the Collinses—Luther, Diana and their daughter Lucinda—arrived in the Territory in the late 1840s, what had been a trickle of immigrant Americans from the east was becoming a steadier stream. Born in 1814 in Oneida County, New York, Collins first emigrated from the Mohawk Valley to Illinois and then to Iowa, where he met and married Diana Borst in 1837. Lucinda was born there the following year. Records of the Hudson's Bay Company place Luther Collins at Fort Nisqually in March 1849 when he ran up a bill at the company store, and again in November, when he "returned from California" with enough cash to pay off his \$42.75 debt and make additional purchases.¹ By early 1850, the Collins family had found the Nisqually Valley and established a claim on 640 acres, "including nearly all of the bottom land not subject to high tide," on the east and north side (now the Pierce County side) of the Nisqually River.

As often seems to have been the case with first claims, however, the Nisqually bottom land did not hold Luther Collins' allegiance for long, and in fact he may have never stopped looking for greener pastures. Collins' next

foray apparently was back to the California gold fields, for while returning to the Willamette Valley with Jacob and Samuel Maple and others in the summer of 1851, he met up with a party that was also fresh (and flush) from the gold fields and in search of suitable land.² Among the group was 34-year-old Henry Van Asselt, a Dutchman who had arrived in the Territory in 1847 and who was bent on settling in the Willamette Valley. Pioneer Arthur A. Denny's granddaughter, Roberta Frye Watt, characterized this meeting as a most significant one for those involved, and for the future of Puget Sound Country in general and Seattle in particular.³ She wrote, "Collins, being a frank, open-hearted man, fond of talk, frequently told stories of the grand country on the Sound, the clams and oysters of the bay, the delightful climate, and the wild fruit and fowl and fish."

Collins prevailed upon Van Asselt to visit him at Nisqually and then, when the Dutchman showed little liking for that valley's land and threatened to return south, told him of another river valley some 40 miles to the north that might appeal to him more. Writing from personal experience, but 38 years later, Elwood Evans gave us an account of what happened next.⁴ Van Asselt had decided to return to the Willamette Valley, but Collins changed his mind by offering to hire a boat to take them "down Sound" to the Duwamish River valley, where he thought they would find suitable land. They set sail on September 12, 1851, and two days later camped near present-day

Milton, on the Puyallup River. Not surprisingly, Evans was ready to discount the presence of any aboriginal culture there. "The site . . . was a howling wilderness, inhabited by nothing but Indians; and at that time there was not a white settler within the boundaries of King county." In fact, at the time the Dkhw'Duw'Absh, descendants of indigenous peoples that had been living along the river for thousands of years, were residing there in more than 90 longhouses, in at least seventeen villages, in and around the site of modern-day Seattle.⁵

Van Asselt liked what he saw as the next day the party continued on to the Duwamish, proceeding up that stream as far as the mouths of the White and Black Rivers. He proposed to take up a claim and promised to "second," as required by the donation land claim laws, any who would join him. Collins was among those, including Eli and Jacob Maples, who agreed to locate a claim there, but only on the condition that he could dispose of his interest in the Nisqually land. According to Evans, he found a purchaser in a man named "Balland," most likely an unfortunate named John Balance, one of those who would be overwhelmed by the challenges of life in the wilderness (but that is another story). Collins, the Maples and Van Asselt all staked out claims, and then Collins and Van Asselt returned to Nisqually and Olympia, where they purchased a scow for transporting their household goods. They drove their stock, some twenty head of cows and horses, overland to Puyallup and then up the beach to

Milton where they were loaded on the scow and taken to the new claims. Eventually Collins, the Maples and Van Asselt all attested to each other's claims, which for Collins amounted to 644 acres.

While ferrying his chattels from Nisqually to the Duwamish, Collins chanced upon another party of hardy pioneers containing some representatives of Seattle's "first families"—David Denny, Lee Terry and John Low. Having left their ailing relatives in Portland to explore Puget Sound country in late September 1851, these young intrepids found themselves camped at a site on the east side of Alki Point called Skwudux, near a fishing camp then in use by Chief Sealth (or Seattle) and his people, the Dkhw'Duw'Absh. According to Roberta Frye Watt, they heard white men's and women's voices coming over the water one evening and hailed the passing scow. Collins told them of the Duwamish Valley with enthusiasm, and of the claims recently established there. The three young men were entranced by Collins' descriptions, and by the sight of Diana and Lucinda conversing with the scow's captain, Robert Fey, in the Chinook jargon. However, they elected to stay put at their new home at Alki.

As they traveled back and forth on the Sound, Collins and others of the Duwamish Valley pioneers continued to visit the little settlement at Alki, which was notably swollen in November by the arrival of a passel of Dennys, Bells, Terrys, Lows, and Borens.⁶ Visits were exchanged at Christmas time,

and Collins appears to have been Charles Terry's first customer at his shop in "New York," the name that Terry chose for the Alki settlement. Terry's first entry in his account book showed a purchase of "6 pans, 1 large and 2 small pails, 6 pint basins, 1 coffee pot, 2 frying pans, 2 candlesticks, and 1 dipper," in exchange for which Collins supplied Terry with twelve salmon.

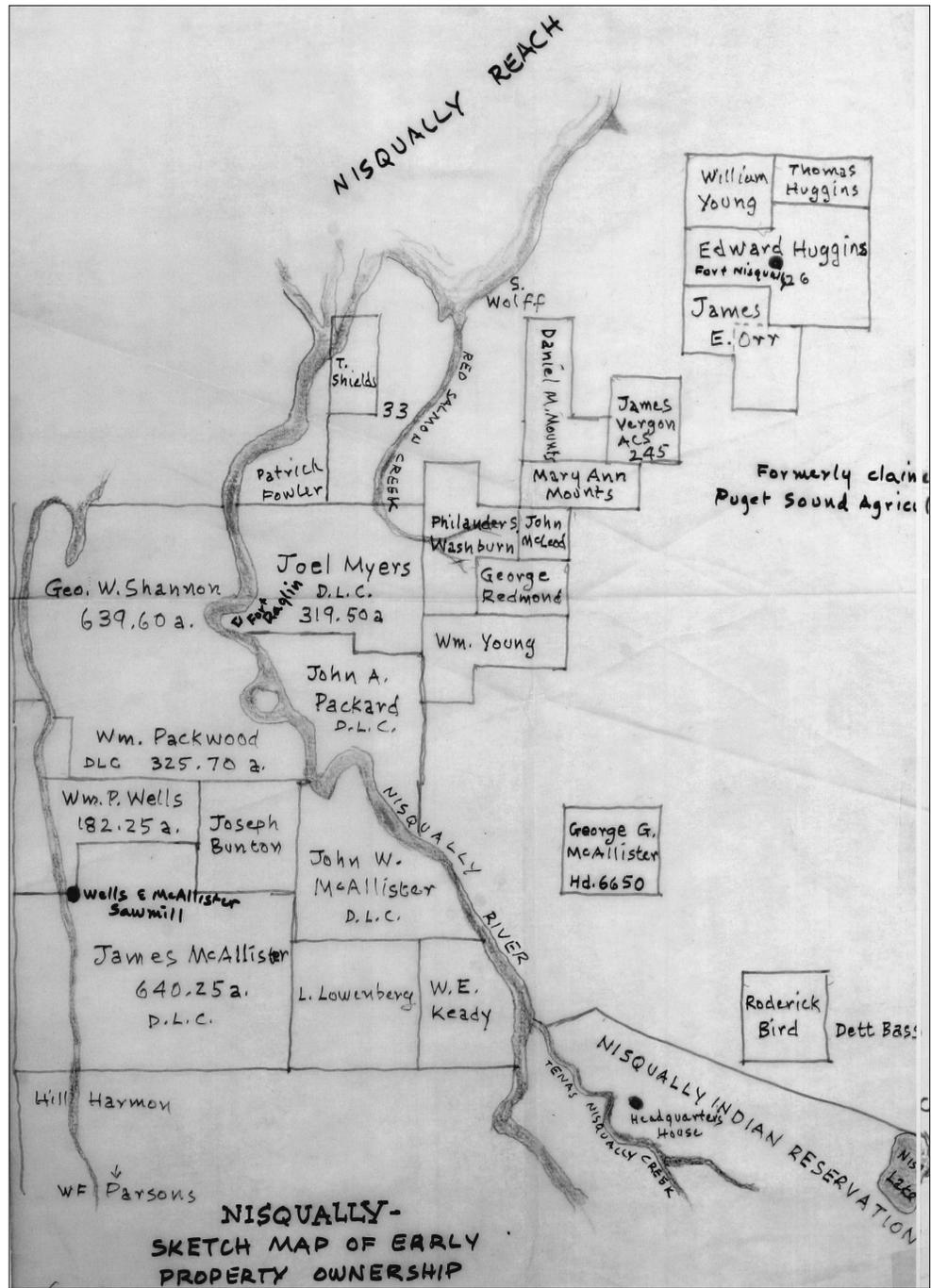
The claim established by Collins, Diana and Lucinda (the "first white women of King County" according to Watt) later became part of Georgetown, a small but thriving urban community that was not incorporated into greater Seattle until 1910. No traces remain of their King County homestead, nor of their small log cabin and orchard in the Nisqually Valley, which were eventually taken by the river. Collins' name, however, shows up repeatedly in the developing history of Seattle. He was frequently involved in road development, ran for office, and, with J. N. and Arthur Denny, was one of the first county commissioners for King County.

But he was also among those indicted for the lynching of an Indian called Masachie Jim who was thought to have killed his wife. While still a county commissioner, Collins, along with William Heebner and David Maurer, was brought before the grand jury (of which Heebner was a member) by then U.S. Attorney Elwood Evans and Frank Clark, prosecuting attorney for Oregon Territory (and a future owner of Nisqually land). The accused were

defended by Joseph Cushman of Olympia and W. C. Pease, captain of the U.S. revenue cutter *Jefferson Davis*. Apparently the trial was one of many in the Territory that were less than enthusiastically pursued, as enmity between whites and Indians grew in the pre-war days. Watt reported, "They did show, as Cornelius Hanford says, 'a disposition to enforce law without favor and without prejudice,' but when it came to actually punishing members of their own race for hanging Indians, they faltered in their task." Maurer and Heebner were acquitted, and the case against Collins was thrown out.

Collins' role in worsening relations between Indians and settlers did not end there. A year later, in 1854, he reportedly incited a mob to lynch two Snohomish Indians that were thought to have killed James B. McCormick. Accounts vary as to whether the men had been properly tried and found guilty before they were hanged, and as to who hanged them: the mob, including sailors from a vessel tied up at Henry Yesler's dock, or members of their own tribe.⁷

Called by Watt "the Daniel Boone of the Seattle group," Collins kept an eye open for new opportunities. At the end of the 1850s, he joined the pursuit of gold in eastern Washington, officially made its own territory in 1853. There he met his end by drowning in the Snake River in 1860. Twelve years later H. L. Yesler claimed that Collins was still alive and that he had sold his claim on the Duwamish to another.



Hand-drawn map showing Nisqually Valley property ownership as it existed circa 1880. Map by Delbert McBride. Image courtesy of Albert McBride.

However, the government believed Diana when she stated that her husband had drowned “some years since,” and awarded a patent for the land to her and their heirs five years later. Van Asselt settled on land that is now part of Boeing Field, became a U.S. citizen in 1854, and eventually married his neighbor’s daughter, Jane Maple, with whom he had four children. Later he moved into Seattle and established a cabinetmaker’s shop. By his death in 1902 at age 85, Henry Van Asselt had left a legacy of good neighborliness and philanthropy, and had assured his continued presence on the landscape by donating land for the first schoolhouse in King County. The Van Asselt Elementary School, Van Asselt Street and associated playing fields remain today.

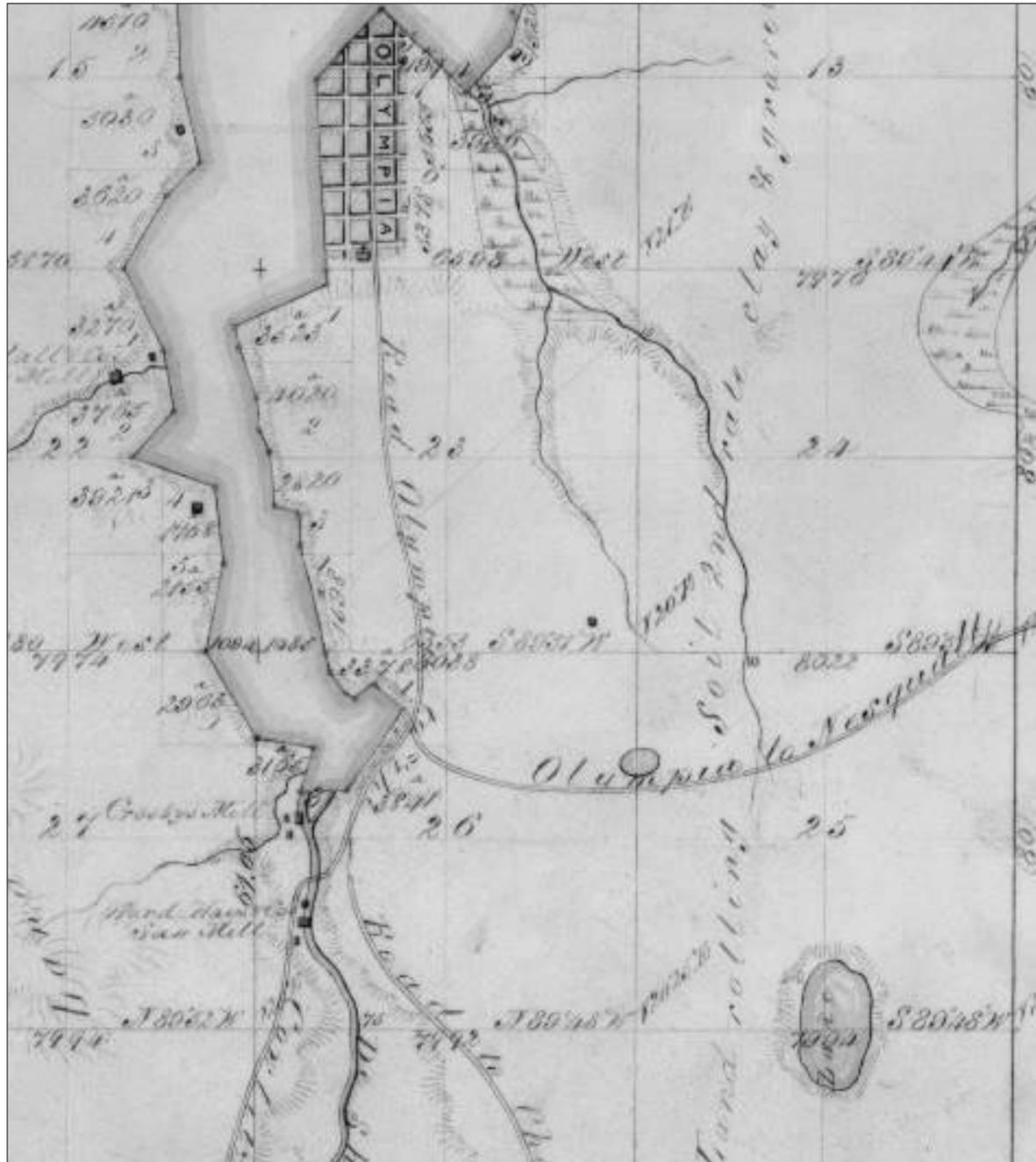
THE FAMOUS MCALLISTERS

Despite the Collinses’ change of heart, the Nisqually Valley offered good land, a fact that was not lost on the building wave of immigrants from the American south and, eventually, the northeast. Early on, pioneers discovered the valley by exploration or, as would be the case of the James McAllister family, at the invitation of local Indians. Later, as first Olympia, to the west, and then Steilacoom, to the east, began to develop as urban centers, travelers between them became well acquainted with the valley and the river, which they had to cross by canoe or ferry. Some stayed. In just a few years the valley became all but filled by a patchwork of American claims, and a Nisqually Valley “neighborhood” devel-

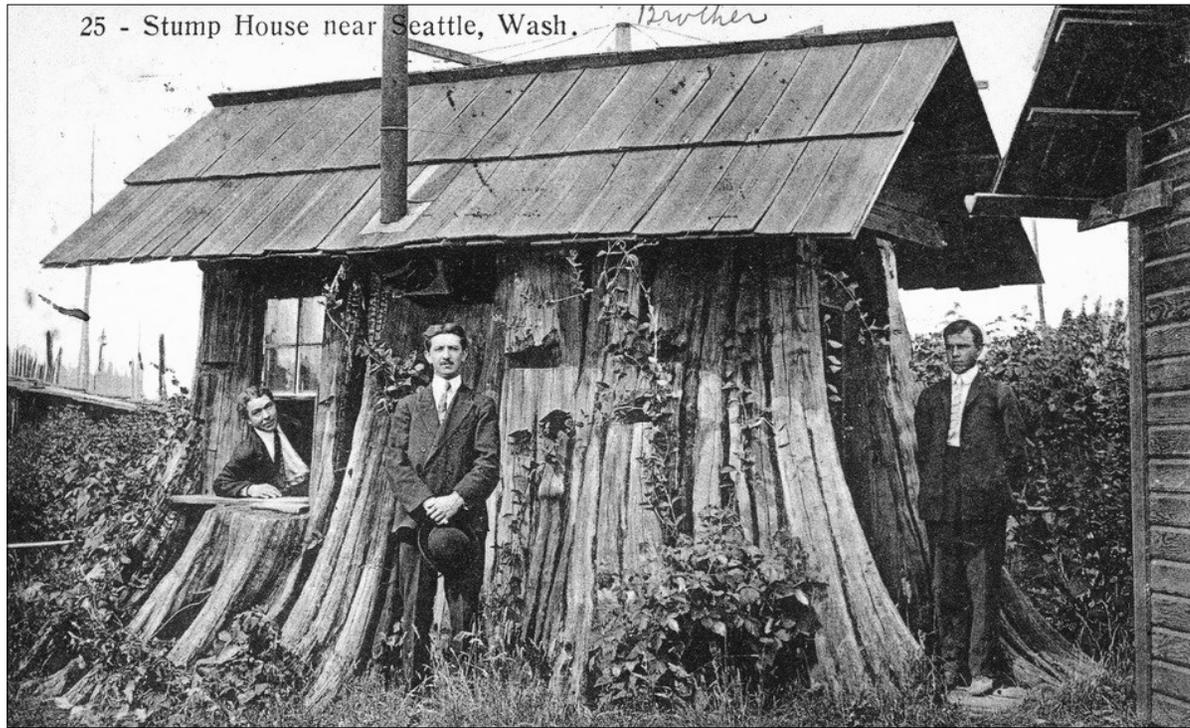
oped, bolstered by common problems, shared labor and, eventually, intermarriage. The skein of relationships that developed is visible, though sometimes barely, in the records that have survived from that time.

Among the first Americans to arrive in the Valley, with the Collinses and others, were Kentuckian James McAllister (or McAlister, as James signed his donation land claim application), his wife and five children. Born in Greenup County, Kentucky in 1811, James married sixteen-year-old Charlotte Smith from Knox County, Tennessee, in Missouri in 1834. Nine years later the family started west by ox team in the company of friends and neighbors, including the Michael T. Simmons and George Bush families. Originally headed for the Rogue River Valley, this famous group of pioneers was on the trail from Missouri to the Whitman Mission, near Walla Walla, for nine months. After taking eight weeks to recover from the journey and illnesses, the group continued on to the Columbia River, where they spent the winter of 1844-45.

Forced north by the racial policies established by the provisional legislature for the territory south of the river (though of mixed race, George Bush was considered a black man), the group left Fort Vancouver for Puget Sound in the fall of 1845, following the lead of Simmons, who had explored their destination the previous summer. After fifteen days of bushwhacking between Cowlitz Landing and the southern end of Puget Sound, the



This detail from an 1854 map, drawn for the Surveyor General's Office of the time, shows Olympia and Tumwater, and roads leading to the area. Image courtesy of U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Oregon State Office: Willamette Meridian, Cadastral Survey, Township 18 N, Range 2W, 1854.



The McAllisters' cedar stumphouses probably looked much like this Seattle example. Image courtesy of author.

families arrived at the falls on the Deschutes River, near where it empties into Budd Inlet. There Simmons and his family settled, ultimately establishing New Market, which would become the city of Tumwater. The rest, including the Bushes and McAllisters, settled on an open prairie a few miles to the south.

A year later, in 1846, the McAllister family continued on to the Nisqually Valley, where James was befriended by the Nesquallies. There they camped on the west side of the river, while James, reportedly with the help of the Indians, built a cabin "at the junction of the Shnonabdaub and Squaquid

creeks, on the council ground of the Nisqually tribe." Fifty years later their daughter, Sarah McAllister Hartman, wrote that her mother refused to be left behind on Bush Prairie while James broke ground at Nisqually Bottom. When he told her he had seen two big cedar stumps, side by side, and that he would take her along if she would live in them, Charlotte "told him she would go, so father scraped out the stumps and made a roof, and mother moved in with her six children. She found it very comfortable, the burnt out roots making such nice cubby-holes for stowing away things. Mother continued to live in her stump house until father built a house, the

work being necessarily slow, for father had but a few tools.”⁸

The following spring, Charlotte gave birth to James Benton McAllister; the McAllisters would have ten children altogether, nine of which survived to adulthood.⁹ The DLC records show that James and Charlotte filed claim on 640.25 acres in the Valley. Despite the lack of tools, James was able to build a two-and-a-half-story home, with ten rooms on the ground floor, though he was unable to finish the upper stories. Before time ran out on him, McAllister had built a saw mill on the banks of the Nisqually River, set up a blacksmith shop, opened a general store, and served two terms in the legislature. He also found time to pursue gold in the Queen Charlotte Islands aboard the ill-fated *Georgiana*—another story for another time.¹⁰

James McAllister’s name now frequents the history books and is attached to several landscape features, including a creek—formerly known as Medicine Creek, and as *She-nah-nam* by the Indians—that joins the Nisqually River near its mouth on the west side of the valley, and the springs that were the main source of drinking water for the city of Olympia for many years. James, of course, was the first casualty of the battle with the Indians for the control and use of the land and waters in the region. Much has been written about the Puget Sound Indian Wars of 1855-1856.¹¹ Without exception, the men of the Nisqually Valley served in some capacity in the effort, usually as volunteers under the lead-

ership of those appointed by Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens. The women and children relied on the goodwill of the local Indians they had known for years, and/or fled to forts and blockhouses such as Fort Raglan—purported to have been hurriedly erected on an island in the Nisqually River that no longer exists—or at Olympia or Steilacoom. Other settlers with native wives, like the ex-Hudson’s Bay Company employee John McLeod of Muck Creek, found themselves accused of treason for maintaining cordial relations with their in-laws, prior to and even during the outbreak of hostilities. The Indian War was a watershed event—both as an end of the Native American’s independence as a socio-political presence in the region, and as a beginning of the coalescence of the white settlers into a self-supporting political and social community.¹²

The circumstances surrounding the death of Lt. James McAllister, 1st Company, Puget Sound Volunteers (Eaton’s Rangers) in October 1855, have been thoroughly discussed by many historians of those times. There seems to be a consensus that James underestimated both Nisqually leader Leschi’s seriousness and his ability to rally other members of the Native community to the defense of their homeland. James died early in the war while reconnoitering the military road leading toward the White River. Ultimately, Leschi would be hung by the whites in retaliation for the death of Col. Abram Moses, an act of war, not murder.¹³ Sarah McAllister Hartman

gave a riveting account of her family's friendship with Leschi, her father's death on "Fannell's prairie," and her family's plight as they escaped the Indians, only to be interned for more than a year in forts just a few miles from their home. James' body was one of the first to be buried, "with military and Masonic honors," at the cemetery just to the west, above the Deschutes Falls.¹⁴ Only 37 at the time of James' death, Charlotte lived another ten years and married a Nisqually neighbor, William Mengel.

Forty-year-old John Wesley McAllister II, James' cousin and also from Kentucky, arrived in the Territory by way of ox-drawn wagon from St. Joseph, Missouri, in 1852. He was accompanied by his 27-year-old wife of eleven years, Mary Jane Thomas, and their two boys, Joseph and Hiram (a third child, a daughter, had died at age four on the trip west; they would have six more children in Washington Territory). Unlike his strapping cousin, John Wesley was ". . . not tall, with a lean and compact frame. He had blue eyes, a fair complexion, auburn hair, and kept a small moustache, carefully trimmed, throughout his life. He was a neat and orderly man, careful in his dress; as someone remarked, 'he always looked like he'd stepped out of a band box.'"¹⁵ According to William P. Bonney, pioneer and first

president of the Washington State Historical Society, a year later John Wesley and Mary Jane claimed 320 acres "of heavy cedar and maple timber land" straddling the Nisqually River and adjacent to the James McAllister family's holdings.¹⁶

John's notoriety never equaled that of his cousin, if for no other reason than that he survived the Indian War. In 1868, John Wesley did have his moment of fame, though, when he served on the jury in a trial of vigilantes who



Mary Jane McAllister, wife of John McAllister. Image courtesy of www.co.thurston.wa.us, County History in Pictures, submitted by Kelly McAllister.

were accused of doing in two gamblers and suspected cattle rustlers, Charles Daniels and Benjamin Gibson.¹⁷ According to John and Mary Jane's daughter, Emma, one of the defendants in the case, Frank Goodwin, promised to sell his farm nearby on Muck Creek to John for a good price in return for an acquittal in the trial. Selling his Nisqually land for \$900, McAllister paid Goodwin \$500 as a down payment and moved his family to Muck. The so-called vigilantes were subsequently acquitted, but then Goodwin reneged and refused to surrender the deed for the Muck Creek property. Lacking proof of the down payment (no receipt had been given), McAllister was forced to vacate the Muck Creek farm and lost his \$500. This blow exacerbated bad feelings between John and his sons, who had been against the deal with Goodwin from the start.

The family moved to a 160-acre claim near Olympia, where they raised sheep. John's health began to decline after the trial (a blow to the back from a wagon tongue on the Oregon Trail had laid him up for a month and eventually invalidated him). He left Mary Jane a widow in 1874, only a few months after they had departed from Olympia for 160 acres at Hillhurst, not far from Spanaway, in Pierce County. Soon after John's death, Mary Jane remarried, to Philander Washburn, another pioneer from upper New York State and a resident of Nisqually Valley. The Washburns moved to the town of Gate, where Mary Jane lived until her death in 1886.

Frank Goodwin apparently was not done with the McAllister family, for in 1877 he testified at the trial of John and Mary Jane's sons, John Wesley (III) and George Gilmore McAllister, who had been charged with the theft of 79 sheep from a neighbor. They eventually were acquitted, but not before they had a serious falling out with their older brother, Joseph, which lasted the rest of their lives.¹⁸ At least six of the McAllister children survived well into the 20th Century. Of all of John and Mary Jane's children, only George returned to the Nisqually Valley, where he farmed until his death in 1917.

SHASER AND PACKWOOD

George Washington Shaser (or Shazer) and William Packwood headed the next families of note to arrive in the valley. Originally from Erie County in upper New York State and Virginia, respectively, these two men had become friends by 1847-8 when they arrived at Nisqually and lived together on a farm while selecting claims and beginning to build their own homes. Shaser has left relatively little proof of his existence. According to his DLC file, George arrived in the Territory in the fall of 1845, at the age of 30, with Margaret Packwood, his thirteen-year-old Oregon Trail bride of six months (and a cousin of William's) in tow. They had been married on the trail in Kansas Territory the previous spring by the leader of the 80-wagon train that had brought them from Platte County, Missouri, to Portland.¹⁹

Of French and Swiss parentage, Shaser had been an employee of the American Fur Company in the Great Lakes region and was already a veteran of Indian wars, likely one of the volunteers who accompanied federal troops, under General Winfield Scott, in the so-called Black Hawk War of 1832.²⁰ That year 70 settlers and soldiers, and most of the remaining members of the Saux and Fox bands of Indians, died in a clash over land in what is now Illi-



George Shaser's grave in the Ruddell Pioneer Cemetery. Photo courtesy of author.

nois and Wisconsin. Scott's role in ending this last threat to settlement in Illinois came late and was largely ineffective, as his troops deserted and died in great numbers. However, apparently he was popular enough with George and Mary for them to name their firstborn, Winfield Scott Shaser.

The year they arrived at Tumwater, the Shasers claimed 639.60 acres on the west (eventually the Thurston County) side of the Nisqually River, about a mile north of the McAllisters. James McAllister and his oldest son, George Washington McAllister, were among those that testified to the Shasers' improvement of their land. The Shasers eventually had perhaps a dozen children—eleven of them born in Nisqually—and obviously shared a certain patriotism, for in addition to Winfield Scott, they named one daughter "America." That George was a man of strong passions and a quick temper is revealed in *The Journal of Occurrences at Fort Nisqually*, where it was recorded in January 1851 that Dr. Tolmie, the Hudson's Bay Company's commander of the fort, treated a Mr. Wilson who, after a quarrel with Shaser, had been "cruelly cut and hacked with a knife so much that his life is placed in danger by the injuries received."²¹ About the same time, Shaser was a member of the five-man company (which included journalist, surveyor and road builder, Edward Jay Allen) that was asked by the pioneer community of Olympia to scout out a wagon road through the Cascades direct to Puget Sound. A writer of letters and keeper of journals, Allen

described Shaser in correspondence home on July 20, 1853:

“George Shazer, an original, and a comical kind of genius; an old residenter and mountaineer, who had formerly [sic] traded and trapped for years on the head waters of the Mississippi, making Fort Snelling his headquarters—and subsequently accompanied Fremont in his explorations of that country; he was generous to a fault, impetuous and persevering. . . . He has spent many years among the Sioux and Chippewa Indians, and asserts they eat portions of the flesh of their enemies taken in battle.”²²

Allen subsequently led a party of 40 men into the mountains to build the Naches Road, a rough route that the first wagon train negotiated late in 1853.²³

After that, the Shasers’ trail grows fainter. George was a signer of the Medicine Creek Treaty and participated in the Indian War of 1855-1856. He operated a ferry across the Nisqually River for a time. In 1869 he and Margaret acquired 165 acres on Chamber’s Prairie, around the south end of Pattison Lake, and by 1872 they had sold their Nisqually land, then in excess of a thousand acres, to George Shannon, a contractor who built railroads in Minnesota and New York.²⁴ Early reports from eastern Washington have George and Margaret living on a farm in the Kittitas Valley of eastern Washington in 1869, where George built a blockhouse in response to Indian uprisings in the late 1870s.²⁵

But according to Esther Chambers, William Packwood’s daughter, by 1892 George Shaser was back living in Olympia. Winfield Scott Shaser stayed in this area and married Catherine (Cassie) Elibith Cullen in 1896. George Shaser died in 1899 at the age of 84 and is buried in the Ruddell Pioneer Cemetery. Twenty years later Margaret attested to the details of their lives to the Washington State Library, giving dates and names, including those of all fourteen children.²⁶

George’s friend and uncle-in-law, Bill Packwood, left a much longer and more deeply worn trail. William and Rhoda Bell Packwood began proving up 325 acres, sandwiched between the McAllisters and the Shasers, in the spring of 1851.²⁷ One of fifteen children of Elisha Packwood, William was born in Patrick County, Virginia, in 1813, according to his claim file. Elisha began the trek westward by moving the family first to Indiana, when William was six. When they moved on to Missouri, in 1834, William and Rhoda married just in time to join the trek as husband and wife.

Eventually seven of Elisha’s sons and two of his daughters continued on to the coast, William, Rhody and their three children among them. They arrived in Oregon Country in 1840 and, while the records are somewhat confusing, it appears that they lived in the Willamette Valley until 1847. That year they traveled to Puget Sound country and settled briefly on land near Steilacoom, abandoning it only a few months later to return to the



This detail from an 1853 map, drawn for the Surveyor General's Office of the time, shows Shaser's and Packwood's claims in the center. The blank area on the right was claimed by the HBC's Puget Sound Agricultural Company. Image courtesy of U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Oregon State Office: Willamette Meridian, Cadastral Survey, Township 18 N, Range 1 E, 1853.

Willamette.²⁸ Packwood must have already discovered and claimed 320 acres in the Nisqually Valley, for after spending two years in the California gold fields he brought his family, now numbering eight, to the Valley immediately upon his return.²⁹

Tales of the difficulties of travel at this time in the territory's history are rampant in personal journals, reminiscences and other accounts; Edward Jay Allen's account of his march in the winter of 1852-53 is one of the best firsthand reports.³⁰ In the *Seattle Times'* Sunday Supplement of 1951,

local historian Dr. Kate Gregg recounted the Packwoods' 90-mile trip from the Columbia to the Nisqually Valley, but failed to do real justice to the mud they encountered in the spring:

"[William] rowed, poled and pulled a boat containing [his family] against the rapid current of the Cowlitz from its mouth to Cowlitz Landing, near where Toledo [Washington] now stands. From there the wife and children either rode horses or walked across Cowlitz Prairie where the Hudson's Bay Co. had a flourishing farm, across Jackson Prairie, where John R. Jackson had built his cabin, across Newaukum Prairie, where the Berciers had established themselves, and through the mud of Saunders Bottom where Chehalis now stands.

"Then they went through the waters of the Skookumchuck to George Waunch's cabin and after that, miles of gravel prairie and Chain [Chein] Hill until they came to Tumwater, where Michael T. Simmons' settlement awaited them. Whether they rode over the Indian trail between Steilacoom and Tumwater or went in a canoe around and up the Nisqually has not yet been revealed."³¹

Pioneer life was never easy, and tales of hardship frequent the stories told, usually decades later, by the early settlers and their descendants. No doubt the days were taken up for the most part with boringly repetitive hard work, but after decades it is the highlights and extremes which have survived. In 1904, Sarah McAllister Hart-



Sarah McAllister Hartman, daughter of James and Charlotte McAllister, posed for this photograph in the late 1800s. Photo courtesy of Washington State Digital Archives: State Library Photograph Collection, 1851-1990, AR-07809001-ph004256.

man, daughter of neighbors James Benton and Charlotte McAllister, remembered the great deal of hard work that it took to clear "the heaviest of woods," including their first home site, the cedar stumps, on their parcel. But the rewards were great, for the Valley contained such rich soils "that we raised the third crop of wheat without

plowing the ground. Potatoes from eight to ten pounds were not uncommon. It was not long until our orchard—planted from seed—bore fine wild fruit. Wild fruit was also in abundance in the nearby woods."³²

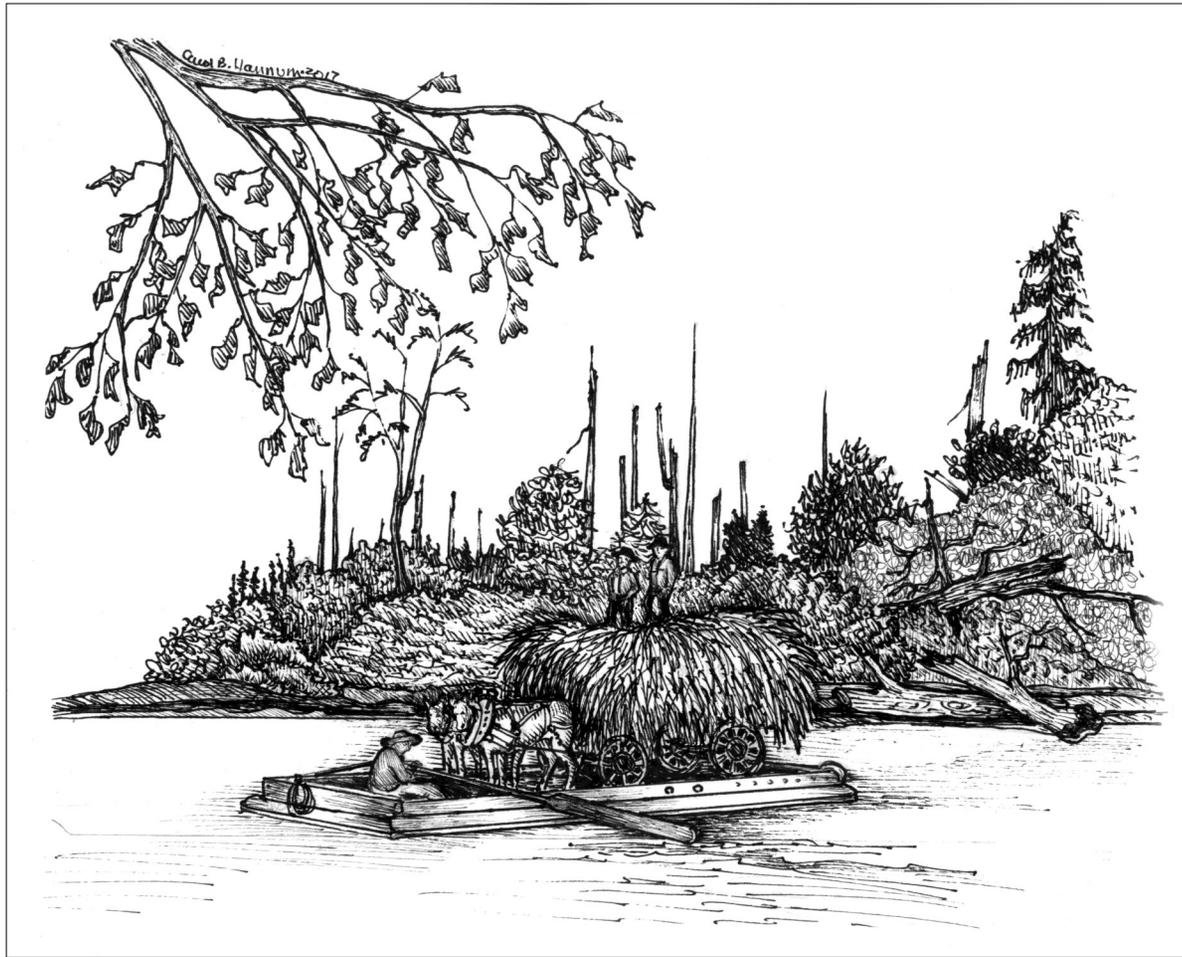
The presence of Native Americans among the pioneers, and the day-to-day interactions between them, rarely were recorded in the writings of the latter, especially if they were composed after the Indian War. However, the Indians played critical roles for the early settlers, ranging from the hospitality and support shown to newcomers like James McAllister by the Nisquallies, to providing labor in the field and household.

For Sarah Hartman, the Indians in her early life were like family. When the Packwoods and Shasers joined the McAllisters in the Valley, the three families “became fast friends, sharing with each other and helping in our daily pursuits and caring for each other in times of sickness.” The children had Indian nurses and playmates, and from them learned their language. “It was not long before we children spoke the Indian language, and would mix our languages, much to the mortification of our elders, but to the great delight of our Indian servants.” The Indian nurses were especially proud of their charges’ hair, and took great care to fix it properly. Other women and young Indian girls “would gather to admire our flaxen braids, and auburn curls. The Indians had tried to buy our curls, much to the distress of our parents.” For Sarah for awhile, at

least, the Indians in her life were more than servants, or even employees: “Our nurse and playmates gave us Indian names and I loved my nurse next to my mother, as she was so gentle and considerate.”³³

Among the adults, self-sufficiency, a great deal of energy and a jack-of-all-trades skill set seem to have been required characteristics for residents of the Nisqually Valley back then, and William Packwood certainly fit the bill. Whether flush from the gold fields or another source, in 1851 he quickly petitioned the territorial legislative assembly to establish his own ferry—a scow—across the river, charging “10 cents for a man, 30 cents for a man and a horse, 10 cents a head for cattle and horses, 5 cents a head for sheep, hogs and goats, and \$1.50 for a man, wagon and two horses or two oxen,” according to Dr. Gregg. The Olympia newspaper, *The Pioneer and Democrat*, said that Packwood’s ferry, which he ran until heavy rains and a change in the course of the river put it out of business in 1855, was an asset to the community: “Packwood’s ferry across the Nisqually River is very favorably spoken of by persons passing between Steilacoom and Olympia. Mr. Packwood’s arrangements are ample, his attendance prompt, his demeanor gentlemanly and hospitable, and his charges moderate.”³⁴

In the same year, Packwood was appointed supervisor for a new road from Olympia to Steilacoom, opened a small store by his ferry, and petitioned the county commissioners to establish a



William Packwood's ferry across the Nisqually River might have looked much like this. Artist's concept by Carol B. Hannum, 2017.

school district. When the latter was approved, the Packwoods housed the first teacher, Miss Ann Elizabeth White, in their home. In the summer of 1853, Packwood joined Edmund Sylvester and 38 other men, under the leadership of Edward Jay Allen, to build a road through the Naches Pass from the east.³⁵ That August the first large party of settlers to cross the Cascades to get to Puget Sound, a wagon

train led by James Longmire, hacked its way through the partially-finished route on the east side and struggled to get its wagons down the rough and thickly treed western slopes to reach Fort Steilacoom in October. Packwood was soon scouting with Longmire for a better way to cross the mountains, apparently becoming an explorer and mountain man in his own right. Accompanied by his Nisqually Valley

neighbor, James McAllister, Packwood discovered Cowlitz Pass, perhaps as part of his attempt to find a way through to the gold mines of the Upper Columbia River basin. During the Indian War he served in the ferry guard, keeping open the lines of communication (and escape) between Steilacoom and Olympia.

After the war, Packwood continued exploring the mountains and laying out roads, but was always tethered to Nisqually. In 1860 he successfully petitioned the Territorial Legislature to establish another ferry across the river, fed by a wagon road he would build from the connector between McAllister's mill and Yelm Prairie.³⁶ Finally, in 1869 he sold his claim to Isaac P. Hawk. Thereafter, while moving his family to homesteads, first near Tenino and then near Centralia, William continued to enhance his reputation as an explorer and mountain man until his death at Mima Prairie in 1897. Rhoda followed him a scant two years later, and they are both buried in the Mima Pioneer Cemetery. Like so many others who were in the forefront of the American invasion of the territory, Packwood's name rests in perpetuity on its features: a town, a junction, a creek, a lake, a saddle across the mountains, a glacier, and a coal field.

THE PIONEER LEGACY

On the scale of world history, these pioneers of the Nisqually area came and went in barely a blink of the eye, leaving little more than their names and some descendants, most of whom

know them only by what can be discovered on Ancestry.com. By and large they also left a legacy of jumbled relationships with each other, the Native peoples, and the immigrants that preceded and followed them, some of which would only be straightened out decades later by changes in social mores, public policy and legal action. The reasons they came to the Valley were as many as we can imagine, or more: to tame the wilderness, follow their own version of "the American dream," establish an empire, escape personal tragedy, or just make a buck. Each of them, singly, may have accomplished relatively little, but together they built communities that, through self-support and bodies politic, made life more than just a matter of survival. And the communities survived, even after the pioneers were gone.

NOTES

¹ George Dickey, editor, *The Journal of Occurrences at Fort Nisqually*. Tacoma: Fort Nisqually Historic Site, 1989, entry for November 17, 1849.

² This account is cobbled together from: Roberta Frye Watt, *Four Wagons West: The Story of Seattle*. Portland: Binfords & Mort, 1931; F. J. Grant, editor, *History of Seattle, Washington, with illustrations and biographical sketches of some of its prominent men and pioneers*. New York: American Publishing and Engraving Co., 1891; and Elwood Evans, *History of the Pacific Northwest: Oregon and Washington: embracing an account of the origi-*

nal discoveries on the Pacific coast of North America; and a description of the conquest, settlement and subjugation of the vast country included in the original territory of Oregon; also interesting biographies of the earliest settlers and more prominent men and women of the Pacific Northwest. Compiled and published by the North Pacific History Company. San Francisco: Press of H.S. Crocker & Co., 1889.

³ While Ms. Watt's writings were based on those of a number of pioneers and early historians, including the diary of her grandfather, she may have sacrificed historical accuracy in favor of literacy, writing, as she said, "of the romance and of the heart throbs that mingle with the sterner facts."

⁴ Evans. Evans was Collector of Customs at Nisqually in 1851 and first mayor of Olympia from 1859-1861.

⁵ Duwamish Tribe, culture and history; <http://www.duwamishtribe.org/culture.html> (accessed December 13, 2015).

⁶ Arthur Denny placed the number at 24—twelve adults and twelve children. Arthur A. Denny, *Pioneer Days on Puget Sound*. Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1998.

⁷ Denny, pages 42-43, and David Wilma, "Lynch mob hangs two Snohomish Indians in Seattle's Pioneer Square on April 12, 1854." HistoryLink.org Essay 3521, August 28, 2001.

⁸ Mrs. James Hartman, 1893, in *A Small World of Our Own*, Robert A Bennett, editor. Walla Walla, WA: Pioneer Press Books, 1985, pages 10-11.

⁹ Gordon Newell, *Rogues, Buffoons & Statesmen*. Seattle: Hangman Press, 1975. See also Mrs. James Hartman, in Bennett.

¹⁰ Drew Crooks, "Shipwreck & Captivity." *COLUMBIA*: Summer 1994, Vol. 8.

¹¹ See in particular, J. A. Eckrom, *Remembered Drums: A History of the Puget Sound Indian War*. Walla Walla: Pioneer Press Books, 1989; and Richard Kluger, *The Bitter Waters of Medicine Creek: A Tragic Clash Between White and Native America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.

¹² For a thorough recounting of the events of this complex and seminal time, see Eckrom. For an analysis from the perspective of Native American society, see Alexandra Harmon, *Indians in the Making: Ethnic Relations and Indian Identities around Puget Sound*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1998; and Cecilia Svinth Carpenter, *The Nisqually, My People*. Tacoma: Tahoma Research Publication, 2002.

¹³ 146 years after Leschi was hung for the murder of militiaman Colonel Abram Moses at the start of the Indian War, despite compelling evidence of his innocence, an Historical Court of Inquiry and Justice, led by Washington State Chief Justice Gerry Alexander, exonerated the Native leader of

the act, citing his status as an “enemy combatant.”

¹⁴ Olympia Masonic Cemetery, now in Tumwater.

¹⁵ Kelly Robert McAllister, personal communication, July 22, 2005.

¹⁶ W. P. Bonney, *History of Pierce County Washington*. Chicago: Pioneer Historical Publishing Company, 1927. Reprinted by the Heritage League of Pierce County, 1990. 3 Volumes.

¹⁷ For a recounting of the end of McDaniel’s and Gibson’s lives, see J. Curtis, A. Watson and B. Bradley, editors, *Town on the Sound: Stories of Steilacoom*. Steilacoom, WA: Steilacoom Historical Museum Association, 1988, pages 95-97.

¹⁸ Kelly Robert McAllister, personal communication.

¹⁹ Washington State Library, Thurston County Pioneers. <http://content.statelib.wa.gov/pioneers/index.htm>.

²⁰ Shaser's tombstone bears the letters "IWV," presumably standing for "Indian War Veteran," and the years 1832, 1855 and 1856.

²¹ Dickey, entry for 1851.

²² A letter from a scrapbook of clippings published from 1852 to 1855 in the *Pittsburg Daily Dispatch*; scrapbook currently in the collection of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven,

Connecticut. Allen's time in the Puget Sound region has been well documented in transcriptions of his letters in Karen L. Johnson and Dennis M. Larsen, *A Yankee on Puget Sound: Pioneer Dispatches of Edward Jay Allen, 1852-1855*. Pullman: Washington State University Press, 2013.

²³ Evans, Volume 1, page 341; and Johnson and Larsen.

²⁴ See H. K. Hines, *An Illustrated History of the State of Washington: containing a history of the State of Washington from the earliest period of its discovery to the present time, together with glimpses of its auspicious future, illustrations and full-page portraits of some of its eminent men and biographical mention of many of its pioneers and prominent citizens of to-day*. Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1893, page 811 for a short biography of Shannon.

²⁵ A. J. Splawn, *Ka-mi-akin, the Last Hero of the Yakimas*. Portland, Oregon: Press of Kilham Stationary & Printing Co., 1917; and Anonymous, *An Illustrated History of Klickitat, Yakima and Kittitas Counties, with an outline of the early history of the state of Washington*. Chicago: Interstate Publishing Co., 1904.

²⁶ Thurston County Pioneers before 1870, Washington State Library.

²⁷ “Rhody” Packwood’s maiden name appears as both Prothero and Prothers in the historical record.

²⁸ According to H. H. Bancroft, *History of the Pacific States of North America, Vol. XXVI*. San Francisco: The History Company, 1890, this land was later owned by David J. Chambers.

²⁹ There are significant contradictions among historical accounts of the Packwoods' early times in the territory. File 0-97 of the Donation Land Claims records states that they settled on the Nisqually land in *either* 1847 or 1851, and that William was in California from March 1849 to about April 1, 1851. Only Bancroft mentions the Packwoods' ownership of the land near Steilacoom which, he says, they abandoned in August 1847 to return to the Willamette. Kate L. Gregg, "The Saga of Lo-Lo Stick, Part I: William Packwood—Pioneer." *The Seattle Times*, October 4, 1951 has the Packwoods moving directly from the Willamette to the Nisqually Land in 1847, and has William going off to the gold fields from there in 1849, from whence he "returned to Nisqually to find his cabin, crops and stock as he had left them two years before," and "with a cigar box full of California gold." I choose to accept the timing offered by the DLC file and Bancroft, for no other reason than historical proximity of the records to the event.

³⁰ Johnson and Larsen.

³¹ Gregg, page 2. Gregg was the first woman to receive a Ph.D. from the University of Washington.

³² Sarah McAllister Hartman, reproduced as "The Surrounding Area,"

Chapter VII in *Du Pont—The Story of a Company Town*, May G. Munyan, editor. Puyallup: The Valley Press, Inc., 1972, pages 83-95.

³³ Hartman, *ibid.*, page 86.

³⁴ *Pioneer and Democrat*, May 7, 1853.

³⁵ Edward Jay Allen records meeting Packwood that year (1853) on his "fine farm" in Nisqually and described the view north of a "singular prairie here which goes right to the bay [the Nisqually delta], and in June tides (the highest of the year) it is partly covered with water." Johnson and Larsen.

³⁶ Laws of Washington, Vol. 3. Acts of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Washington, passed at the seventh regular session, begun and held at Olympia, December, 1858. Olympia: Edward Furste, Public Printer, 1859.

Timothy Ransom has been learning and writing about and photographing primates, the human variety and otherwise, for 50 years. In the 1970s he initiated the Orcas Elders Project, an oral history program for the Orcas Island Historical Society and Museum that continues to this day. At the turn of the 21st Century, he began a study of the Nisqually Valley, focusing on a 410-acre dairy farm on the delta and the life and times of the family, the Bragets, that owned it for over 100 years. He hopes to complete a book on this subject in 2017. He lives in Olympia.

METAMORPHOSIS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF OLYMPIA FROM FRONTIER VILLAGE TO MODERN TOWN, 1889—1912

Drew W. Crooks

INTRODUCTION

Washington became a state in 1889. The next 23 years proved to be a time of dramatic change for Olympia, the capital city. Many important technological and social developments occurred during this era of transformation when Olympia changed from frontier village to modern town. Indeed, one way to look at this metamorphosis is to view it as a changing of worlds: the frontier world dying away and the modern world being born.

STATEHOOD

An era of change started with Washington's admission to the Union in November 1889 as the 42nd state. The inaugural ceremonies for the first state governor, Elisha Ferry, occurred on November 18. The elaborate event, full of pomp and circumstance, was the high political point of pioneer Olympia, as recounted in the local *Washington Standard* newspaper:

"The procession passed up Adams street to Thirteenth and thence to

Capitol Avenue, thence to the grounds prepared for the ceremonies. Large crowds of people in attendance followed the parade on each side and it was simply three living streams of humanity one as long as the other marching toward the capitol.

"The Capitol building had been beautifully decorated for the occasion. Flags, bunting and evergreens covered the whole portico, and the stage erected in front. . . . The platform as the hour approached, began to fill with members of the Legislature and those holding official positions, and promptly as the hour hand approached 12 the Tacoma band, by direction of the Master of Ceremonies [Mayor] Gowey, struck up "America," that grand old anthem which always sends such a thrill through the hearts of all true Americans. The Mayor then [spoke]. . . .

"After a brief and impressive prayer by Rev. Dr. Lee, Gov. Moore [the last Territorial Governor] was introduced and delivered an address . . .

"After the rendition of 'Hail to the Chief' by the band, Gov. Ferry stepped



The 1889 inauguration of first Washington State Governor Elisha Ferry at the Capitol in Olympia was an elaborate ceremony that culminated a long political fight for statehood. Photo courtesy of Washington State Archives, Inauguration of Governor Ferry Photographs, 1889.

forward accompanied by Mayor Govey, and was received with hearty cheers by the 3,000 people assembled on the Avenue. When these had subsided, Mayor Govey turned to the crowds and simply said: 'Behold your Governor.'

"The Governor then delivered his inaugural address . . . After its delivery the oath of office was administered by Judge Hoyt, who afterwards administered the same obligation to [other officials]. . . .

"The booming of canon closed the

ceremonies on the hill, and the tide of humanity slowly wended its way back to the city intent upon 'comfort for the inner man,' and every hotel and restaurant was soon tested [to] its utmost capacity to accommodate the hungry throng."¹

AGING PIONEERS

While a new world began with achievement of statehood, the old pioneer way of life slowly faded away. This was not a quick process. Indeed, the pioneers of Olympia proved to be a tough group of individuals who tenaciously hung

on to work and life. Daniel Bigelow, who with his wife Ann built the still-standing Bigelow House, was one such determined character. In 1901 he survived a potentially terrible accident when 77 years old. The *Morning Olympian* newspaper reported on the dramatic incident:



Daniel R. Bigelow, who played an important role in the early history of Washington Territory, nearly died in a 1901 accident. In fact, the hardy pioneer lived until 1905. The Olympia home of Daniel and Ann Elizabeth White Bigelow survives today as the Bigelow House Museum. Photo courtesy of Washington State Archives: State Library Photograph Collection, 1851-1990.

“D. R. Bigelow, the well known pioneer, had a narrow escape from serious injury yesterday afternoon. While driving along Fourth street about 3 o’clock his horse became frightened at a moving car. The horse began backing and cramped the wagon-bed so that it struck the car notwithstanding all Mr. Bigelow could do to prevent it. The result was that the wagon was completely overturned and Mr. Bigelow was buried beneath the bed.

“A heavy plow that was in the wagon was found very close to Mr. Bigelow’s head when the wagon was lifted by people who observed the accident, and it was considered almost miraculous it had not killed him. Mr. Bigelow was stunned by the fall, but rapidly recovered consciousness when water was thrown upon his face. Beyond a sprained shoulder and back he is uninjured and he walked home shortly after the accident. The horse ran away as soon as the wagon overturned, tearing the forward wheels loose from the wagon bed, but was shortly afterwards captured.”²

No matter how tough they were, the aging pioneers of Olympia steadily perished during the period of 1889 to 1912. Daniel Bigelow himself died in 1905.

LOST LANDMARKS

In addition, a number of pioneer landmarks were destroyed at this time, including the Gold Bar Restaurant. In its early days, this structure was known as the Parker & Colter build-



The Gold Bar Restaurant in Olympia was torn down in 1909. Known as the Parker & Colter building in 1854, this historic structure served as the home of the first Washington Territorial Assembly. Photo courtesy of Washington State Archives.

ing. It served as the home of Washington's first territorial assembly in February 1854. By 1900 the building had fallen into disrepair. Many surviving pioneers recognized the Gold Bar Restaurant's historical importance. They led successful efforts to move the structure in 1903 from its original site at the corner of Main and Third Streets to the bottom of Washington Street. However, nothing else was done to preserve the building.

A newspaper article from an April 1909 issue of the *Morning Olympian* described the final sad results:

“Street Commissioner Claude Weston has started the work of tearing down the old territorial legislative hall and within a day or two the structure will be in ruins. The best of the lumber is being saved and will be used for the making of a miniature hall, on the scale of one inch to the foot and the

remainder will be sold to the general public. The discarded planks will be used as firewood by Chinese Sam who has already put in an application for them.

“The tearing down of the hall will bring to a close the long scrap that has been waged over its disposal. The building has been a bone of contention between the pioneers and the city officials for some time past. At last an agreement has been reached that is satisfactory to both and the old building, which typifies nothing and has been an eyesore and a fire trap for years [will] now be reduced to a pile of old lumber.”³

Another historic landmark lost around this time was the first Masonic Temple. The building stood at Eighth and Main (now Capitol Way). Built in 1854, it hosted the second Washington Territorial assembly in December 1854. The structure was torn down in 1911 and replaced by another Masonic Temple.

In addition, the Territorial and early State Capitol Building, site of the inauguration of Governor Ferry in 1889, met its end during this time period. Constructed in 1855-56, the structure was located on a site close to the present-day Legislative Building. This pioneer landmark was demolished by 1903 despite its importance in local and Washington history.

PIONEER ASSOCIATION

The years 1889-1912 saw a steady decrease in both living pioneers and

preservation of their buildings. Naturally the pioneers felt like an endangered species. They responded with efforts to keep their heritage alive. This culminated with the formation of the Thurston County Pioneer and Historical Association on March 2, 1910, which was the 57th anniversary of Washington becoming a Territory. The *Morning Olympian* recorded:

“The Thurston County Pioneer and Historical Association was organized yesterday morning in the house of representatives chamber at the state house, when about 100 pioneers of Thurston county assembled. . . .

“Governor M. E. Hay presided at the afternoon session and spoke on ‘The Creation of Washington Territory.’ A quartet sang ‘The Old Settler,’ and several letters from people unable to attend were read. R. L. McCormick of Tacoma, president of the State Historical Society, in a neat speech presented the association with the miniature of the first territorial hall, and John Miller Murphy responded with a stirring address.”⁴

MODERN WORLD

As the pioneer world was fading away in Olympia, a new modern world was rising as depicted in photographs and in illustrations drawn by artists such as Edward Lange. This transformation partially took the form of technological changes. They included improvements in such things as waterworks and electrical lights.

One technological milestone in Olympia occurred with the coming of aviation to the community. On May 20, 1911, the “Birdman,” Fred Wiseman, flew three times above the town. Wiseman’s flights respectively lasted five minutes, three minutes and three minutes. They were vividly described in the *Morning Olympian*:

“From the roofs of business houses, distant hills, residences and all imaginable perches, the Olympia populace and visitors for miles around, witnessed the first aviation meet of the history of the city, when Aviator Fred J. Wiseman of California, the holder of the American speed record, made

three successful ascents from the Carlyon waterfront fill yesterday afternoon in his big Curtiss-Farman Wright biplane. The meet, despite the fact that it has been postponed two times and was originally to have been held from the Carlyon race track, was a complete success.

“Ropes were stretched around the fill for admission, but as the performance could be witnessed from the outside easily, very little in actual money was realized. The birdman was enthusiastically cheered upon ascending and descending, and it was a much less skeptical crowd that went away than saw the first flight, when the daring



Aviator Fred Wiseman, known as the “Birdman,” excited the people of Olympia on May 20, 1911 with the first airplane flights in the area. This picture shows him landing on the Carlyon Fill. Photo courtesy of University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections: Asahel Curtis Photo Co. Collection, A. Curtis 20901.

aviator penetrated the aerial heights and gave an exhibition never before witnessed in Olympia, showing the greatest scientific achievement of the age.”⁵

Another major technological development in Olympia was the introduction of streetcars.

Horse-drawn trolleys appeared in 1890, while two years later came the more sophisticated electric streetcars. The *Washington Standard* cheerfully welcomed the electric form of mass transportation in a July 1892 article:

“The inauguration of the electric street railway system of Olympia marks another epoch in the progress of the capital city. . . . The first car passed over the track of the Olympia Light & Power Co., yesterday afternoon, at 4:30 o’clock, with Superintendent Shock at the electric lever. . . . The car soon as the current was turned on, moved like a thing of life, smoothly and without friction or jar, and responded as readily to the will of its master as if endowed with reason. People appeared on the street and at doors and windows, all along the route, and waved hats and handkerchiefs, in greeting of this new and tangible evidence, of progress.”⁶

Most of the first local trolleys were all enclosed, but some were open to the air. The latter group proved to be trouble. In September 1892 the *Washington Standard* announced:

“The open street cars have been doing

a ‘shocking’ business this week. When the interior woodworks became wet, the electric current played like the aurora borealis among the passengers, and converted the whole vehicles into immense Leyden jars, ready to discharge a current whenever a proper connection was made. They were, of necessity, promptly withdrawn from service.”⁷

“Olympia was learning,” as historian Gordon Newell noted in his book *So Fair a Dwelling Place*, “that progress is not without its painful side.”⁸

CHANGING STREETScape

The birth of the modern world in Olympia can also be visualized in the community’s changing streetscape from 1889 to 1912. As pioneer buildings came down, new structures arose.

Several notable buildings were constructed at this time.

One was the 1890 Olympia Theater, sometimes known as the Olympia Opera House. John Miller Murphy owned this structure at Fourth Avenue and Cherry Street near the Swantown Slough (which was later filled in).

Many acts, including John Philip Sousa and Mark Twain, performed in this theater before it was torn down in 1925. Another interesting show, especially in hindsight, was the so-called Cinematographe program of August 1897. It proved to be one of the first moving picture attractions to appear



In this image the owner of the Olympia Theater, newspaperman John Miller Murphy, sits with his pet parrot on the stage of his building. Established in 1890, the theater was demolished in 1925. Photo courtesy of Washington State Archives: State Library Photograph Collection, 1851-1990.

in the town. *The Daily Olympian* described this entertainment event:

“The living pictures as exhibited last night at the Olympia theater by Lumiere’s cinematographe, was an enjoyable spectacle for the audience, which although not so large as it should have been, seemed to thoroughly appreciate the foreign and domestic scenes depicted upon the canvas. . . .

“Among the notably good scenes might

be cited the ‘Dancing circus horse;’ a Florentine view entitled ‘Maximilion square,’ in which a curious individual appears to think it necessary for him to watch the audience and Tyrolese dance by peasants in native costume. Among the most realistic noted is the New York elevated railroad train rounding a curve, Grand canal in Venice, and lastly the baths at Milan, where one could hear the splash as

the diver, jumping from the springboard, flashed through the air and struck the water.

“There are about thirty of these scenes, every one of which is good and

will be pleasing to the audience.”⁹

Another major building of the era was the Hotel Olympia. Constructed in 1890 between Seventh and Eighth Avenues on Main Street (later Capitol



The Thurston County Courthouse as drawn by an unknown artist, circa 1892. In 1901 the cash-strapped county sold their courthouse to the state. With the addition of another wing, the building became the State Capitol in 1905, a role it served until 1928. Image courtesy of Washington State Archives: General Subjects Photograph Collection, 1845-2005.

Way), the elaborate structure burned down only fourteen years later. The Northern Pacific Railroad station stood behind the Hotel Olympia close to what is now Capitol Lake. The station was built in 1891 and demolished in 1966. Trains were crucial to the economic health of turn of the 20th Century capital city, transporting both people and goods.

A key landmark in Olympia during this time was a structure built near Sylvester Park. Originally opened in 1892 as the Thurston County Courthouse, economic hard times forced the county to sell the building to state government in 1901. After adding another wing, it became the State Capitol four years later. This building served as the capitol until 1928. Still standing, the structure currently houses the Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction office.

In 1912 the city of Olympia built a new city hall and fire station. The structure was located at the corner of Main and Third streets, or as presently called Capitol Way and State Avenue. The city administrative offices moved out of this building in 1967, while the fire department left for a new central fire station in 1992. Today the old building serves as the home of the Family Support Center.

REFORMS

Another way to see the rise of modernism in Olympia is to consider the social reforms that swept through the town during the Progressive era. These

reforms included temperance, suffrage for women, and improved community health. For example, in 1910 the Olympia school board decided to replace shared class drinking cups with, as the *Morning Olympian* reported, “bubbling sanitary fountains.”¹⁰

Many of the reforms reflected the growing involvement of women in the political and social issues of the age. Indeed, women achieved the right to vote in Washington State on a permanent basis in 1910. Also in 1910 political and social pressures ended the so-called tenderloin district or restricted district of Olympia. It was an area notorious for gambling, drinking, and prostitution. In December 1910 the *Morning Olympian* stated:

“For the first time in many years Olympia is without a restricted district and the denizens of the lower end of Main street have quietly gathered up their belongings and slipped away, leaving that end of the town with a few exceptions, vacant. The word was passed around the town early Wednesday afternoon that the tenderloin district of Olympia was a thing of the past. . . .”¹¹

NO SMOOTH PROGRESS

The years 1889 to 1912 did not see one smooth upward curve of progress in Olympia. Many local inhabitants opposed at least some of the changes that were occurring. Oftentimes they were called “mossbacks” by town promoters. This meant the anti-change individuals were considered so slow in



Edward Lange was a talented artist who created detailed pictures of Olympia (and other Washington communities) from 1889 to his death in 1912. This birds-eye view of Olympia, originally drawn by Lange in the 1890s, illustrated letterhead stationery. Photo courtesy of Southwest Regional Branch, Washington State Archives: City Clerk, Miscellaneous Historical Records, Box 1, Southwest Regional Branch.

moving forward that moss would grow on their backs. Yet many real factors held back the development of Olympia during this era. One key factor was an economy that often swung wildly between prosperity and recession. The Panic of 1893 proved to be the worst recession of the period. For much of the 1890s it brought an economic depression across the United States from which Olympia was not excluded. According to historian Gordon Newell, “Times were bad, and it is said of that period that many of the citizens consumed clams until the town’s stomachs rose and fell with the tide.”¹²

A January 1894 editorial dramatically portrayed the economic difficulties of the '90s:

“Capitalists and laborers will look back upon 1893 as a year of blackness and despair. There were months when the most courageous heart quailed, when men accustomed to dealing with hard situations lost faith in themselves; it was an accursed year. The toiler worked, but could not get his pay. The business man sold, but could not make collections. Railroads could not meet interest obligations. Banks could not pay depositors. . . Confidence, the sun which gives life to the world of business, had gone behind a cloud. Darkness



Built in 1907, the first William Winlock Miller High School stood near the current site of the sunken garden on the State Capitol Campus in Olympia. The school burned eleven years after its construction. Photo courtesy of Washington State Archives: State Library Photograph Collection, 1851-1990.

was upon the earth. . . . Some cursed God and others lifted up sobbing voices in prayer. May such a year never, never come again.”¹³

Olympia’s population figures also reflected the economic turmoil of the 1890s. In 1890 Olympia had 4,698 inhabitants. By 1900 the population dropped to 3,863. By 1910 it grew to 6,000. Olympia and the nation pulled out of the ’93 Panic by 1900. More waves of recession and prosperity would follow in the early 20th Century.

Some things stayed constant. While tolerance, knowledge, and selflessness certainly existed in turn-of-the-20th-Century Olympia, much racism, ignorance, and selfishness still remained. A quick glance at the newspapers of the time, for example, reveals widespread prejudice against various ethnic groups.

LEGACY

The 1889-1912 changes in Olympia left a mixed legacy. First on the positive side, this era saw a definite

growth of schools in Olympia. A brick Washington School, for example, was built in 1891 on Eastside Street between Fifth Avenue and Sixth Avenue (now Legion Way). The Olympia Armory stands there now. Two other similar schools were also constructed in the 1890s: Central and Westside, later known as Lincoln and Garfield.

Also, the first building in Olympia intended to be a high school, William Winlock Miller High School, was constructed during this period. Completed in 1907 near what is now the sunken garden on the State Capital campus, the structure represented the community's strong support of public education. The high school lasted a little more than a decade, burning down in 1918.

All these school buildings from the 1890s and early 1900s are gone now, replaced in turn by several generations of school buildings. Still the strong support of public education found in turn-of-the 20th-Century Olympia has continued to the present day. It is a good legacy from the past.

Another positive characteristic of the 1889-1912 period was the growing interest in parks for the public. This was clearly revealed by the creation of Priest Point Park in 1905. The early 20th Century witnessed volunteer work parties that made the park into a showplace for the community. A focal point of Priest Point Park was a Swiss chalet originally built by the Olympia Brewing Company for the 1905 Lewis & Clark Exposition in Portland, Ore-

gon. Leopold Schmidt, president of the brewery, gave the chalet to the people of Olympia after the close of the exposition. He had the pavilion moved to the park where it became a local social center. Sadly, the chalet deteriorated over time and was torn down in the early 1960s.

However, the legacy of public concern for parks in Olympia has remained strong. Many groups and individuals still visit Priest Point Park. In addition, the acquisition of new parks and their recreational development are generally greeted by local rejoicing.

The enormous growth of state government is yet one more part of the legacy of 20th Century Olympia. This growth can be seen in the sequence of capitol buildings. The small wooden Territorial/Early State Capitol was replaced in 1905 by the much larger stone State Capitol near Sylvester Park (now called the Old State Capitol). Then in 1912 the architects Wilder and White designed an entire group of capitol buildings to serve as the seat of government. This dream of modern state facilities became reality later in the 20th Century with the construction of the Legislative Building (completed in 1928) and other structures. State government continues to expand to the present day with the use of facilities in Olympia, Lacey, and Tumwater.

CHANGES WITH CONSEQUENCES

Automobiles were introduced to Olympia in the early decades of the 20th Century. A *Morning Olympian* article



Priest Point Park was developed in 1905. One of its special features was the Swiss chalet, built for the Lewis & Clark Exposition, and brought to the park after the expo was closed. Photo courtesy of Olympia Tumwater Foundation.



The pride of automobile ownership can be seen in this 1920s image of a man with his vehicle near Olympia. Automobiles had a major impact on American transportation and society in the 20th Century. Photo courtesy of a private collection.

in July 1904 recorded the first locally-owned cars in the capital city:

“The advent of the first automobile owned in Olympia, that of Dr. G.W. Ingham, which has been flying about the streets for several days, was followed yesterday by another, the property of Hewitt & Ashley, of Tumwater. Dr. Ingham has a Rambler, a pretty well finished car chosen as best adapted to the roads of this locality after examining numerous makes. The doctor and his friends have enjoyed the new prize very much. Hewitt &

Ashley have one of the famous Oldsmobiles and last night Wilbur Ashley toured about the city like a veteran chauffeur. Several other machines are expected in the city very soon.”¹⁴

The use of automobiles has greatly expanded since the turn of the 20th Century. Historian Gordon Newell in his book *So Fair a Dwelling Place* commented on the significance of this situation:

“The impact of the automobile on the

way of living by our people was a gradual but tremendously powerful one. It has been fully as influential to the development of our state . . . as was the coming of the railroads in the second quarter of the century. It has so completely changed social as well as commercial and industrial concepts of our existence that the removal of the automobiles from general use . . . would completely throttle our day-to-day activities.”¹⁵

Finally, changes to Olympia’s shoreline in the first years of the 20th Century have left their mark on the city’s development. From the early days of settlement people were concerned about the mudflats that naturally surrounded Olympia at low tide. A first attempt at dredging occurred in 1885. From 1893 to 1894 there were efforts to clear the shipping channel to the Percival Dock. A so-called long wharf, which tried to bypass the mudflats, was abandoned by 1895.

Then from 1909 to 1911 the Carlyon Fill, named after promoter P. H. Carlyon, extensively changed the shoreline of downtown Olympia. Massive dredging and filling added 29 blocks to the town. The consequences of these changes have been of immense importance to the history of our community. For example, the transformation of the Deschutes River estuary into Capitol Lake in 1951 can be seen as a later development of earlier shoreline manipulations.

Now in the 21st Century we are facing many issues connected to our shore-

line. They include the potential earthquake damage to buildings on fill dirt, rising sea levels affected by global warming, questions concerning the future of the Olympia isthmus, and debate on the management of Capitol Lake. What happened to Olympia’s shoreline in the past still affects the community today, and will continue in the future.

CONCLUSION

History is fun to study. It is also important because the past helps to explain the present situation and sheds light on current issues. Many of the decisions made in Olympia from 1889 to 1912 continue to influence residents today. Just think of automobiles. History’s impact can still be seen around us, to quote a Beatles’ song, “here, there and everywhere.”¹⁶

NOTES

¹ “The Inaugural Ceremonies.” *Washington Standard* (Olympia, WA), November 22, 1889, page 2.

² “D.R. Bigelow’s Narrow Escape.” *Morning Olympian* (Olympia, WA), April 12, 1901, page 3.

³ “Hall Is Doomed.” *Morning Olympian* (Olympia, WA), April 22, 1909, page 1.

⁴ “Pioneers Organize.” *Morning Olympian* (Olympia, WA), March 3, 1910, page 1.

⁵ “Birdman Flies Over The Harbor

Three Times.” *Morning Olympian* (Olympia, WA), May 21, 1911, page 1.

⁶ “Mere Mention.” *Washington Standard* (Olympia, WA), July 22, 1892, page 3.

⁷ “Mere Mention.” *Washington Standard* (Olympia, WA), September 23, 1892, page 3.

⁸ Gordon R. Newell, *So Fair A Dwelling Place: A History of Olympia and Thurston County, Washington*. Updated Edition (Olympia, WA: Warren’s Printing & Graphic Arts Co., [1985?]), page 70.

⁹ “Only Once More.” *The Daily Olympian* (Olympia, WA), August 7, 1897, page 3.

¹⁰ “Drinking Cups To Be Banished.” *Morning Olympian* (Olympia, WA), April 23, 1910, page 1.

¹¹ “District Passes Away.” *Morning Olympian* (Olympia, WA), December 2, 1910, page 1.

¹² Newell, *So Fair A Dwelling Place*, page 68.

¹³ “A Hated Year.” *Tacoma Daily News* (Tacoma, WA), January 1, 1894, page 2.

¹⁴ “News Of City In Brief.” *Morning Olympian* (Olympia, WA), July 20, 1904, page 4.

¹⁵ Newell, *So Fair A Dwelling Place*,

page 109.

¹⁶ The Beatles. “Here, There And Everywhere.” *Revolver*. Parlophone, 1966.

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The knitting machine is in the collection of the Bigelow House Museum.

The **Bigelow House Museum** is located at 918 Glass Avenue NE, and is Olympia's oldest surviving residence. Built for and occupied by the Daniel R. and Ann Elizabeth White Bigelow family, today the house serves as a fascinating glimpse into Northwest history, and features historic family furnishings, documents and artifacts representing over 150 years of the family's participation in important local, state and national causes.

The Bigelow House is open for guided tours (which last around 45 minutes). Regular tours are scheduled for many Sundays throughout the year; group and school tours are available by special appointment. See website below for a current schedule and admission fees.

www.olympiahistory.org/bigelow-house-museum-2/

bigelowhousemuseum@gmail.com

WHAT IS IT?

A ROTATING FEATURE SHOWCASING ARTIFACTS FROM THURSTON COUNTY HERITAGE GROUPS



In 1871, *Harper's Weekly* magazine published an advertisement for this item. The Bigelow family of Olympia saw the ad and promptly sent away for this gadget for their own use. Made of sturdy metal, the item clamps to a table and features a rotating handle, two wooden spools, and an insert a few inches in diameter, with metal hooks around the edge. But what is it? **Turn to the inside back cover for the answer.**

Thanks to Ed Echtle from the Bigelow House Museum for this issue's "What Is It?" feature.