

Fort Steilacoom

www.HistoricFortSteilacoom.org



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CHARGING INTO THE DIGITAL AGE

by Erich R. Ebel

What's the old saying? It's never too late to start something new, I believe. That's the best way I could introduce you to the Historic Fort Steilacoom Association's new electronic newsletter. My name is Erich Ebel, and I've been handed the responsibility of creating a new, page-turning periodical for members. It's a task I do not take lightly, as the HFSA newsletter has been in publication since the late 1980s. After this first edition of 2021, however, the newsletter will cease to be printed and mailed to members. Instead, newsletters will be delivered via email, with printed copies available for purchase in the museum's gift shop. I encourage you to read the President's Message for more on the reasons for this positive change, and please contact Membership Vice President John McPherson with questions. 📧



THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Walter Neary



Every day that comes and goes forms the march of history. I don't know how you're feeling lately, but I feel like all the days during this pandemic have been extra historic.

What a year. There have been a lot of changes in the world, the nation, the state, and our community. Fort Steilacoom has mirrored that pace of change. The forced hiatus of tours and events has given us time to reflect and reconvene. And just as the world has changed as a result of the epidemic, Fort Steilacoom will change as well.

We have a renewed interest in telling all the stories of the fort, from its previous history as a farm to its legacy today. Since your board of directors was constituted in November, we've been busy. Here are some of the many things on which we've been working:

- Shaping up our membership list and welcoming a record number of new members.
- Improving how we communicate with members through email and setting the stage for regular, clear, and consistent email updates.
- Dramatically increasing engagement on our Facebook page.
- Hosting three online talks during March, Women's History Month, about women in Washington Territory.
- Planning other online events.
- Forming a vibrant Interpretive Center Committee that will seek to share the full story of Fort Steilacoom with all its layers and complexities.
- Sharpening our budget planning to give us a better picture of inflows and expenditures.
- Laying the foundation for a vibrant volunteer program.
- Staying on top of maintenance and repairs, including some expensive equipment replacements.
- Giving the four fort buildings—the equivalent of four houses—several cleaning sessions. (I smiled as I scrubbed out the toilets in the Interpretive Center, knowing that someday you will likely visit them...then I changed the subject in my head, as that was starting to feel a little weird. But we're cleaning up for you!)
- Boosting the newsletter by retaining Erich Ebel of Washington Our Home Communications Consulting to transform the newsletter. I'm sure you'll agree the newsletter is a great benefit of membership.

Now, you might have thought our top priority was reopening the buildings (which would have been great). But instead, we did what was right by giving the fort stronger legs as a nonprofit, all-volunteer organization.

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MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

by John McPherson,
Membership Vice President

It has been my privilege to work toward improving the membership experience for our association and adopting the best practices seen in other like-minded organizations. This newsletter fulfills one of the primary goals that your elected board has had for better reaching our members. It was time for a fresh, new look! But beyond that, we want you—the member—to feel that you are part of an important mission; a mission to preserve one of our state's greatest historical treasures. We also want you to feel like you belong to a special community.

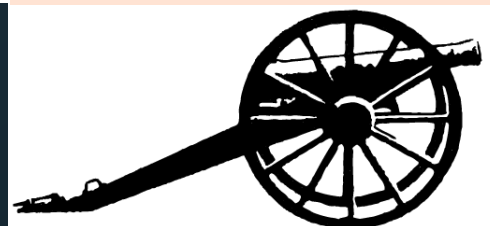
Your board has worked hard this past year to identify and establish new benefits for our members in keeping with the best historical societies out there. As a member, you've received this year a newly designed membership card, a fun vinyl decal, and the appreciation of a dynamic organization. Your membership entitles you to a 10% discount at the HFSA Museum Store, one free tour of the four buildings for a guest, free access to the Research Center, and exclusive access to our online archive of past newsletters. Our Patron and Lifetime members receive one additional guest pass and a 20% discount at the Museum Store!

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TRIVIA FROM THE FORT STEILACOOM ARCHIVES



Lieutenant William Slaughter was camped near the White River in 1855 when he was attacked and killed. His wife, Mary, returned to Michigan, after her husband's death. Which of Slaughter's fellow soldiers was prepared to propose to Mary but never mustered the courage to ask? Answer on page 5!



MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

(Continued from Page 2)

To access your membership privileges upon the fort's re-opening, be sure to bring your Membership Card with you. Show this card when making a purchase at the Museum Store to access your discount. If bringing a guest, show your card to include your guest on the tour. The guest pass can be used only once and your docent will mark your card to indicate use of this pass.

Above all, your membership is critical to the ongoing success and preservation efforts of this organization. Be sure to take careful note of the expiration of your paid membership. All memberships will now expire at the end of the calendar year (Dec. 31, 2021). Access to our member benefits in 2022 will be contingent on renewing your membership at year's end. 🌍

HISTORIC FORT STEILACOOM ASSOCIATION BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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THE IRISH AT FORT STEILACOOM, PART 1 OF 3

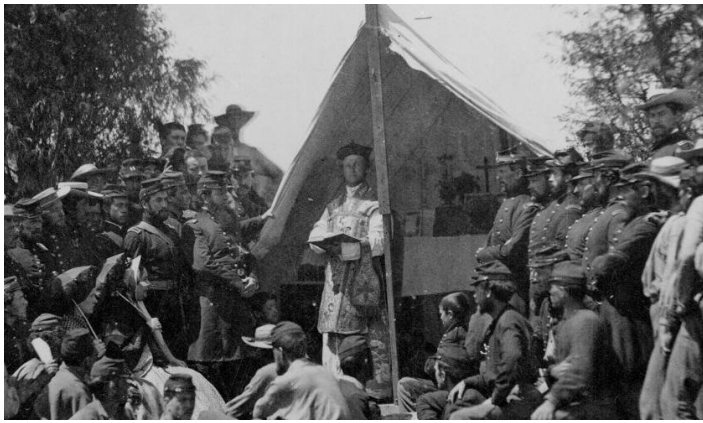
by Alan H. Archambault

Every March, millions of people around the world celebrate Saint Patrick's Day in recognition of Ireland's patron saint and the contributions of the sons and daughters of the "Emerald Isle."

Interestingly, Fort Steilacoom has a special place in the history of Irish immigrants during the years of Ireland's Great Famine and beyond. During the years that Fort Steilacoom existed as an active United States Army installation, two Federal census' were implemented in the years of 1850 and 1860. These historic documents provide us with a wonderful list of those individuals living at Fort Steilacoom when the census was conducted. Names, ages, military rank or status, and places of birth were all recorded for posterity. A search of these records reveal that Ireland was, by far, the single most common place of birth for the soldiers serving at Fort Steilacoom in both 1850 and 1860.

To understand why so many of the individuals living on Fort Steilacoom were born in Ireland we must look to the history of Ireland and the conditions that caused so many Irish to immigrate to the United States in the years before our Civil War. The roots of the story lie deep in the history of Ireland. The Irish people had been under the control of England for centuries. In 1801, England ratified the "Acts of Union" which made Ireland a governed colony of Great Britain. The executive heads of state were appointed by the Crown and almost all the representatives sent to the House of Commons and the House of Lords were English born or their sons. As a result, the majority of the native Irish Catholics had no power or representation. For years, a series of penal laws enacted by Britain prohibited Irish citizens of the Catholic faith from holding public office, voting, or leasing land. Although these discriminating laws were gradually repealed, the Irish Catholics remained second class citizens in their native land.

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Irish American soldiers at a Catholic Mass on June 1, 1861

THE IRISH AT FORT STEILACOOM

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During this period, the large population of Anglo-Irish estate owners preferred to live in England and left the running of their properties to agents. These middlemen, in turn, rented small plots of land (usually less than five acres) to poor Irish farmers. The farmers lived in small cottages and grew corn or other crops to pay their rent to the owners of the estate. A smaller portion of the land was used to grow potatoes, which was the staple diet of poor families. The “lumper” or “horse potato” was the variety most widely grown by the Irish during the 1800s. Unfortunately, this type of potato was also one of the least resistant to blight.

In 1841, there were an estimated seven million people living in Ireland, the vast majority in poverty and insecurity. They could be evicted by the absent landowners at any time and their crops were dependent on the potato for survival. In the summer of 1845, a fungus called “*phytophthora infestans*” came to Ireland. This blight rapidly devastated over one-half of the potato crop that provided sustenance to so many Irish families. It was the beginning of the Irish Potato Famine, known to the Irish people as “the Great Hunger.” 🌿

Look for Part Two in the HFSA Summer Newsletter!

Pick up a 15 oz. souvenir coffee mug for only 11.95 plus tax...



...only in the Historic Fort Steilacoom Gift Shop!

WHAT A RESEARCH CENTER CAN DO FOR YOU

By Loran Bures, Librarian

The purpose of the research center is to collect, preserve, and make available information resources to support the Association. It also makes these resources available to researchers and learners.

The research center’s collection consists of items which provide information about Fort Steilacoom, along with the people and groups associated with the Fort. The collection also provides information about the regional, national, and international historical and cultural context while the Fort was under the jurisdiction of the War Department.

Some of the focuses of the collection include Pacific Northwest history to 1871, the Second Seminole War (1835–1842), the Mexican War, the Puget Sound Indian War, the Pig War, and the U.S. Civil War. As an example, let’s take a look at what books you might find on the Pig War:

- *San Juan, the Powder-Keg Island: The Settlers' Own Stories* by Jo Bailey (US)
- *The Pig War: The United States, Britain, and the Balance of Power in the Pacific Northwest, 1846-72* by Scott Kaufman (US)
- *The Pig War* by Keith A. Murray (US)
- *The Pig War and Other Experiences of William Peck: Soldier 1858-1862, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: The Journal of William A. Peck, Jr.* by William A. Peck (US)
- *Pig War Islands* by David Richardson (US)
- *The San Juan Story* by C. T. Morgan (US)
- *The Pig War: Standoff at Griffin Bay* by Michael Vouri (US)
- *Outpost of Empire: The Royal Marines and the Joint Occupation of San Juan Island* by Michael Vouri (US)
- *The Pig War* by Michael Vouri (US)
- *The Pig War: The Most Perfect War in History* by E. C. Coleman (Canada/UK)
- *The Pig War: The Last Canada-US Border Conflict* by Rosemary Neering (Canada/UK)

The country of publication is listed to show we are striving to have materials that reflect all points of view on a topic. In addition to the 11 books listed above, we have another 38 volumes that include information about the Pig War, plus a number of periodicals. To learn more about our holdings, visit historicfortsteilacoom.org/about and use our LibraryThing search widget. 🌿

HOW DEMOREST'S DIORAMA EXPERIENCE COMPELS VISITORS

by Joe Lewis

When a visitor enters the Interpretive Center (Quarters 4 at Historic Fort Steilacoom), the first stop is the diorama showing what the fort looked like in 1858. This scale model of the fort was created by the late Robert Demorest in 1996 and continues to introduce the visitor to the historical experience they're about to undertake. As their guide, I use a laser pointer to draw their attention to the four existing historic buildings to provide situational awareness.

I like to direct the visitor's attention to all the chimneys sprouting from every roof. Everyone living at the fort depended upon firewood for both heat and cooking. Then I show the location of the wood wagon delivering this precious fuel to every building.

The other necessity for life was water, obtained from a natural spring near Chambers Bay, then pumped up to the fort and stored until distribution to each building by the water wagon. Each of the building's occupants would bring containers outside and fill them when the water wagon made its rounds.

The wide parade ground provided lots of space for the soldiers to drill, hold formal ceremonies, and collect nearby settlers during periods of tension with tribes.

On the south side of the parade ground is the guardhouse where misbehaving soldiers and others were confined. When you look at the diorama closely, you can see Leschi being escorted by two guards. This scene reminds me of the injustices inflicted upon indigenous peoples by the arrival of American settlers in Washington Territory. Leschi refused to relocate his Nisqually people and incurred the enmity of territorial officials. Following the Puget Sound Indian War/Treaty War, he was arrested and convicted of murder despite efforts by Army officers, the Hudson's Bay Company, and Ezra Meeker to protect him. Leschi was hanged in 1858, a martyr to liberty, honor, and the rights of his native land. In 2004, an Historical Court of Inquiry exonerated Leschi of all charges after a new trial in absentia.

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The late Robert Demorest



TRIVIA FROM THE FORT STEILACOOM ARCHIVES

In the fall of 1857, Lieutenant August Kautz was managing the affairs of Lieutenant John Nugen after Nugen's death from consumption. Among his papers, Kautz found a letter to Mary Slaughter in which he proposed marriage. That letter was never sent. Lieutenants Slaughter and Nugen are buried side-by-side at the Military Cemetery at the Presidio of San Francisco. [Read the full article in the Winter 2009 edition of the Historic Fort Steilacoom newsletter.](#)



Lt. John Nugen



BOOK REVIEW — THE PIG WAR: THE JOURNAL OF WILLIAM A. PECK, JR.

by John McPherson

For the casual reader of history and events related to Fort Steilacoom, you cannot go wrong reading one of the little-known pieces of literature that comprise the canon of antebellum military history. In my preparations for a living history event on San Juan Island some years back, I stumbled across the published diary of

“The garrison here is about two miles from the town of Steilacoom. It is in the form of a perfect triangle on the end of a prairie of several miles in extent. There are a number of small lakes or ponds near, and one ought [to] enjoy himself here as well as in any place in the territory.” –9/7/1859”

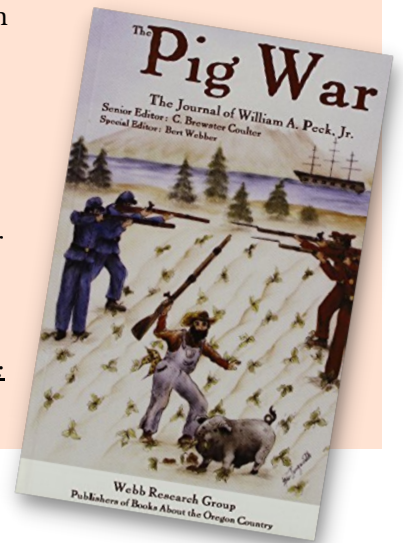
Private William Peck. Edited by C. Brewster Coulter, *The Pig War: The Journal of William A. Peck, Jr.* (published 1993 by the Webb Research Group) is a delightful volume that will please all who thumb its pages.

Peck served in a small detachment of U.S. Army engineers that in 1859 had been pulled from duty on the Columbia River to serve on San Juan Island beginning that August. This was during the military buildup that many locals know today as the “Pig War.” Peck maintained a diary while serving in the Army, a diary that later found its way to the University of Puget Sound archives via donation. Naturally, the diary focuses primarily on the places that Peck visited and his experiences along the way.

Despite the Pig War-focus of the published work’s title, only about a third of the book centers on Peck’s service on San Juan Island. Most of his service was on the Columbia River – but for this reader, the best part of the diary can be found at his last duty station in the Pacific Northwest: Fort Steilacoom. And, of interest to members of the HFSA, Peck served under the command of Lt. Thomas Lincoln Casey. The assigning of Casey’s sapper detachment to Fort Steilacoom in late 1859 was a fortuitous arrangement for Casey and for Fort Steilacoom historians alike!

Peck’s travels took him from West Point on the Hudson to Panama, to well-known posts on the Columbia River, San Juan Island, and familiar sites on the Cowlitz Trail. His diary entries are fresh, honest, and humorous takes on the antebellum U.S. Army. He had a dry wit and a keen eye for human behavior and frailties. Peck had an engineer’s precision for efficiently recording exactly what needed to be saved. You can feel his elation, his disgust, and his embarrassment at numerous times in the work.

I recommend bringing this volume with you on tours of places such as Vancouver Barracks, American Camp, Fort Dalles, and even Alcatraz Island. Pull it from your bag and read Peck’s entries while standing where he stood (I have). Peck’s descriptions transcend the distance of time; there is an immediacy and relatability to his writing that is refreshing. You can pick up a paperback edition of *The Pig War: The Journal of William A. Peck, Jr.* on Amazon for just over \$20. 🌐



DEMOREST’S DIORAMA EXPERIENCE

(Continued from Page 5)

Near the northwest corner of the parade ground is a chapel built by Irish soldiers for Catholic services. At the time, the Army provided only Protestant services at the fort. Many natives of Ireland came to America after the potato famine. Some joined the Army and ended up at Fort Steilacoom. This building was moved to Main Street in Steilacoom in the 1860s where it is still used today as part of the St. John Bosco parish. Personnel assigned to the fort felt very isolated from family and friends living in the eastern United States due to the state of national communications at the time. In November 1860, when Lincoln was elected President, the news took almost two weeks to reach Fort Steilacoom. At that time, the telegraph only went to Missouri, where—for a few months in 1860—all the mail and newspapers were transferred to the saddle bags of the Pony Express and young boys on horseback carried it to Sacramento. Once there, carriers placed all the mail and papers on ships that eventually came to Puget Sound. The telegraph finally reached Puget Sound in 1864, and the residents of Washington Territory could learn what was happening in the Civil War within 24 hours as local newspapers printed the telegraph dispatches in the next day’s editions.

There are other features of the diorama that space does not allow me to fully describe, and I hope readers will visit the fort to see it for themselves. I’m sure they’ll enjoy looking at the diorama and imagining life at Fort Steilacoom in the mid-19th century as much as I do. 🌐

THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

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We need to do more than swing open a door; we need to make this organization sustainable. For me personally, my top question for the last part of 2020 and for 2021 is not, "When can we do tours?" or "What events can we hold in which month?" My priority is, "What can I/we do on this day so that Historic Fort Steilacoom is a vibrant part of the community in 2030, 2040, and beyond?"

Along the way, we've had comings and goings that I can only touch on briefly. Longtime board members have shifted from the board to volunteer in other ways, or have moved on to new phases in their lives. People who have shifted from board member to current or prospective volunteer include Bernard Bateman, Loran Bures (still our valued Librarian), Jessica Kidder, John McCarthy, Josiah Pollock, and John Roten. Some wonderful members had moved on even earlier. For example, every day I miss the presence of Carol and Orville Stout. But we're fortunate to welcome a vibrant new contingent of board members, including Charlotte Basch, Karin Crelling, Caitlin O'Connell, and Austin Rice. Their ideas and energy are infectious, as are the contributions of veteran board members whose names you see on page 3. I enjoy working with each one of them and will tell you more about what they're doing later this summer.

Oh, and then I guess there's also me—sort of new, sort of not. I served as president of this board from 1998 to 2001. I'm back for a second tour, thrilled to be with you again and determined to help tell the story of Fort Steilacoom and everyone connected to it. And that's what we will do, with your support. Please know you can always reach out to me at walter.neary@gmail.com. Thank you for enjoying our journal today. 🌐



UPCOMING EVENTS AT THE FORT

APRIL 25: MOUNTAIN ARTILLERY IN THE WEST

Join us for a member's speaker series at 2 p.m. on **Sunday, April 25, 2021**, as retired Colonel Paul R. Rosewitz, a military historian, discusses the artillery used by the regular Army stationed at Fort Steilacoom and around the American West. Members will receive the Zoom link to the presentation prior to the event.

MAY 16: U.S. ARMY CLOTHING AND EQUIPAGE

Join us for a member's speaker series at 2 p.m. on **Sunday, May 16, 2021**, as Ephriam D. Dickson III talks about Schuykill Arsenal clothing and the logistical challenges of equipping the soldiers of Fort Steilacoom in Washington Territory. Members will receive the Zoom link to the presentation prior to the event.

JULY 18: WEAPONS OF THE COEUR D'ALENE WAR OF 1858

Join us for a member's speaker series at 2 p.m. on **Sunday, July 18, 2021**, as Chris Fischer, a public historian who has spent years researching the antebellum period of history, talks about the weapons of the 1858 Coeur d'Alene War in Washington Territory. Members will receive the Zoom link to the presentation prior to the event.

VISIT THE FORT STEILACOOM HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION'S WEBSITE AT HISTORICFORTSTEILACOOM.ORG/EVENTS

EDITOR'S PILOGUE

When I was a young boy, my father would spend nearly every weekend shepherding our family from historical site to Indian reservation to scenic viewpoint all across Washington. At the time, I thought it was just his way of finding respite from his 9 to 5 job at Seafirst National Bank. And I'm sure it was, however it had an unintended and fortunate consequence. It instilled in me a lifelong love of Washington's history, heritage, and culture. And while I don't remember visiting Historic Fort Steilacoom, we did spend a good deal of time in the town of Steilacoom.

All that travel kindled a passion for discovering and sharing the stories collected by historical organizations like the Historic Fort Steilacoom Association. After working in media and communications for over 25 years, I decided to put my skillset to use promoting the good work being done all over Washington by humble volunteer organizations like this. It is an exciting partnership that we now have, and I'm very much looking forward to providing you with quality content in an engaging and entertaining way for at least the next several issues. Please reach out to me via email at erich@washingtonourhome.com with any questions, comments, or suggestions for future articles. 🌐

HISTORIC FORT STEILACOOM
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LAKEWOOD WA 98498



GOT HISTORIC STUFF?

Hello members! In an effort to better serve those of you who have generously loaned your personal items to our museum exhibits, the Board of Directors would like to complete an inventory of these personal items.

If you have any personal items currently on loan to the museum, please email us at info@historicfortsteilacoom.org and notify us of what those items are and where they are located.

Our interpretive center committee will be in touch with you if additional information is needed.

