



The History of Fort Steilacoom

by John McPherson

Origins (1849–53)

In the aftermath of the U.S.-Mexican War and facing the rapid settlement of the Pacific Coast in the wake of the California Gold Rush, the U.S. Army established Fort Steilacoom to both project American power and secure American interest in the Puget Sound Region of what was then, the Oregon Territory. Fort Steilacoom was a key element in America's new Pacific Defense system.

First manned by soldiers of Company M, 1st Artillery Regiment beginning in August 1849, the fort's first buildings were built on land leased from the Hudson's Bay Company. Upon this site, the artillerymen erected simple log structures. By 1853, Fort Steilacoom was now a part of the new Department of the Pacific and the embryonic Washington Territory.

Expansion of the Fort (1853–55)

Fort Steilacoom grew in size and importance with the arrival of two companies of the 4th Infantry Regiment in 1853. In 1854, soldiers from these companies were detached to assist in survey and road-building work throughout the Puget Sound Region and across the Cascades through Naches Pass. These troops also aided in protecting the property and personal safety of recently-arrived American settlers.

The autumn of 1855 saw significant activity for the post. Recently signed treaties gave rise to an Indian insurgency on both sides of the Cascades. Following a series of murders in the White River Valley (located north of the fort), Fort Steilacoom served as a temporary refuge for settlers fleeing the carnage and threat of violence.

Steilacoom was seriously undermanned at this time; most of its troop complement had taken the field. Skirmishing and patrols of both Regulars and Volunteer troops took place during the autumn of 1855. Ft. Steilacoom took on the appearance of a fort under siege. It was in December 1855 that Ft. Steilacoom lost one of its favorite officers, Lt. William Alloway Slaughter in an ambush along the Green River. Lt. Slaughter, and two of his enlisted soldiers, were brought back to the post for burial in the midst of a full-scale insurgency.



Arrival of the 9th Infantry Regiment (1855)

General John Wool dispatched the first Regular Army reinforcements to Ft. Steilacoom in November 1855 with the deployment of one company of soldiers from the 3rd Artillery Regiment commanded by Capt. Erasmus Darwin Keyes. They were followed shortly by the arrival of a new post commander, Lt. Colonel Silas Casey of the 9th Infantry Regiment.

Several companies of the 9th, with Keyes's artillery troops, and troops of the 4th Infantry marched out of Ft. Steilacoom in February 1856 to confront Indian insurgents along the Naches Pass Road. In conjunction with soldiers of the Washington Territorial Volunteers and allied Native Americans, the American forces engaged in aggressive patrolling and occupation of key trails and traditional food-gathering sites of the Native American insurgents.

Several sharp firefights occurred near the White River, particularly in the area of Connell's Prairie in today's community of Bonney Lake. A successful raid on the insurgent camp near the Mashel River by Indians under the leadership of Patkanim effectively crushed the Native American resistance in the area. Later raids by volunteer "rangers" and the failed attempt to wipe out the fledgling settlement of Seattle undoubtedly weakened the resistance movement.

By late March of 1856, the Puget Sound phase of the wider Yakama War had concluded. Continued murders and fighting occurred, but none involved the Federal troops of Ft. Steilacoom.

Incarceration of Leschi & New Construction at the Fort (1856–58)

The betrayal of lead insurgent, Leschi of the Nisqually, by his former allies and his ensuing two trials strained relations between the officers of the fort and local civilian authorities. Leschi remained incarcerated at Ft. Steilacoom after a failed attempt on his life in the office of none other than Washington Territorial Governor, Isaac Stevens.

Although Lt. August Kautz presented convincing evidence at trial proving Leschi's innocence regarding the murder charges levied against the chief, Leschi was declared guilty based on "new" evidence provided in the form of eyewitness testimony newly-discovered in the second trial. A legal controversy ensued between Territorial government officials and the fort's officers as to how to proceed with carrying out Leschi's death sentence. Lt. Kautz vigorously defended the innocence of Leschi in a series of print articles under the title of "The Truth Teller." In the end, Leschi was hung by civil authorities, not Regular Army troops. Lt. Col. Casey demanded that Leschi be executed at least 300 yards off post and that his men not be involved in the affair.

In 1857, Casey secured Federal funds to expand and modernize Ft. Steilacoom as befitting its status as district headquarters and its expanding role in local affairs. The fort now served as the central hub for military operations in the Puget Sound region, operations that included local security, road building, and frontier constabulary. Lt. August Kautz supervised the removal of the original log buildings and the construction



of new stick-frame and brick structures. Kautz utilized the labor of both soldiers and civilian contract laborers in the raising of new fort buildings. Foundation bricks were fired on site, finish lumber was purchased from local mills, and Kautz employed an innovative water ram to increase the speed of construction.

San Juan Island “Pig War” & the Military Road (1859–60)

Fort Steilacoom was nearly emptied of all of its troops as a result of the so-called "Pig War" of the summer and autumn of 1859. This boundary dispute involving the San Juan Islands gave rise to a massive build-up of American troops on the southern tip of San Juan Island.

Initially, only one company of 9th Infantry troops under the command of Capt. George Pickett had been ordered to establish a presence on the island. When confronted with the overwhelming superiority of firepower and numbers of the British Navy in the vicinity, Pickett hastily called for reinforcements. His request was granted in the form of nearly 500 artillery, infantry, and engineer troops under the command of Lt. Col. Silas Casey.

Upon arriving on the island, Casey wisely moved the camp started by Pickett to a less-exposed position, he began the construction of a redoubt intended for large guns, and he engaged in friendly, diplomatic conversation with his British counterparts anchored offshore.

The American encampment and redoubt project lasted only a short time. By November 1860, negotiations involving General Winfield Scott and British Governor James Douglas settled on the placement of a company-sized element from both countries on either end of the island. The first American company to be stationed on the island at the conclusion of negotiations was Company C of the 4th Infantry from Ft. Steilacoom. This company was commanded by Captain Lewis Cass Hunt and Lt. Arthur Schaaf while on the island until it was withdrawn and replaced in April 1860 by Captain Pickett's company of the 9th Infantry. In 1861, Ft. Steilacoom would provide another company to the island's defense; Capt. Thomas English of Company H/9th Infantry would replace Pickett's company.

Concerns over the supply of, communications with, and reinforcement of military posts from Vancouver Barracks to the Cowlitz River to Ft. Steilacoom and northward to Ft. Bellingham led to plans for construction of a military road between these points. Survey work was completed by soldiers of the 9th Infantry assigned to Ft. Steilacoom and contracts were awarded to various speculators for the construction and maintenance of this new road. While a rough-hewn, east-west freight road had been initiated between Ft. Steilacoom and Walla Walla using the Naches Pass route, this new north-south route would never be completed. Events back east would dry up Federal funds for the project.



American Civil War Period (1861–65)

News of the presidential victory of Abraham Lincoln reached Ft. Steilacoom in early December 1860. Southern states almost immediately began to secede from the United States in response to Lincoln's election. Federal arsenals across the South were seized and their contents redistributed to rapidly mobilizing rebel forces. In response to this threat, Lincoln called for the concentration of Federal troops in the East. Ft. Steilacoom was a flurry of activity as its companies packed and prepared to assemble with their respective regiments in ports in California.

Upon redeployment to the East, the Regular soldiers of Ft. Steilacoom would be a part of the Federal Division, the trained, professional nucleus within what would become a primarily volunteer force formed for the purpose of putting down the rebellion of Southern states. Soldiers of the 4th Regiment assembled with their fellow companies in Southern California for transport to the East Coast. Soldiers of the 9th Regiment expected to do the same. Threats of Confederate sympathizers and the potential for both foreign and Native-American attack convinced President Lincoln to keep the 9th Infantry on the West Coast for the duration of the Civil War.

The draining of Federal troops from Ft. Steilacoom necessitated the recruitment of volunteer troops to take their place. Washington Territory was never able to recruit enough men to fill the ranks of an entire regiment. Instead, the territory supplied two companies of troops and filled the rest of its allotted regiment with California Volunteers. During the American Civil War, Ft. Steilacoom was manned by companies G and K of the 1st Washington Infantry Regiment as well as by soldiers from the 1st Oregon Infantry Regiment and Company E of the 4th California Infantry Regiment. These volunteer troops were a part of a much larger organization of West Coast regiments called the Army of the Pacific.

In the absence of Regular Army soldiers, these citizen-soldiers took on the task of maintaining the peace between Native peoples and often hostile whites. They also improved and protected established communication and transportation routes.

Post-Civil War Period & Transfer to the Territory (1865–68)

By the middle of April 1865, citizens of the town of Steilacoom and volunteer troops at Ft. Steilacoom had received the news of the Confederate surrender at Appomattox.

Even before the end of war, volunteer officers had tendered their resignations and the companies of volunteer troops had begun to dwindle in size. After the war, soldiers of the 14th Infantry Regiment were stationed briefly at Fort Steilacoom. But, by 1868, new Indian insurgencies east of the Cascades prompted General Halleck to reallocate U.S. Army resources.

Many of the posts established on the West Coast during the 1850s were closed, including Ft. Steilacoom. The 640 acre fort and farm site was turned over to the Washington Territory.



In 1871, Territorial officials used the fort's buildings and property as the "Insane Asylum of Washington Territory." This asylum would continue to grow over the years. Many of the post's original 1857 buildings would be torn down and replaced by newer, more modern facilities to support the needs of the asylum. Later, the asylum replaced its territorial name with the moniker, "Western State Hospital."

Modern Period (1983–Present)

Today, four of the fort's original buildings remain on site, open to visitors and school groups alike. The post's Catholic chapel was moved in 1864 and currently serves an active congregational gathering place in downtown Steilacoom, not far from the fort.

Beginning in 1983, local volunteers raised funds and donated generously of their time and skills to renovate and restore the original officer's homes that had been left in disrepair. This dedicated group formed the Historic Fort Steilacoom Association to not only restore the buildings, but also interpret the site for future generations.

The association currently sponsors monthly events and activities promoting the history and personalities associated with Ft. Steilacoom. The HFSA is a non-profit organization run by volunteers whose Board meets each month to determine the direction of the fort's interpretation. These volunteers host various work parties, living history demonstrations, guided tours of the fort buildings, & lecture programs. The HFSA also operates an on-site museum and gift store that is open to the public throughout the year.