

Christopher also served the territorial community. He is listed in W.P. Bonney's *History of Pierce County* as a Justice of the Peace from September 9, 1856, to October 1, 1857, and as a Petite and Grand juror. He attended democratic conventions and took part in the proceedings.

Survival on the Farm and the Next Generations

Mary Ristvet, interviewed for an August 1, 1965, *Tacoma News Tribune* article, recalled that "Grandmother (Elizabeth) made all the family clothing. She had to spin the wool from sheep into yarn, and then sew the clothing together by hand." Everything that was grown or raised—the wheat, fruit, vegetables, the cattle, sheep—was necessary for the family's existence.

The first family dwelling was a log cabin. In 1860 a two-story English colonial house was built facing Mount Rainier. When Christopher died in 1884, Elizabeth gave 90 acres each to her sons, John and William, and grandson Matthew. Matthew and Lena moved into the colonial building, cultivating hops on their acreage. A little house by the creek was built for Grand

mother Elizabeth, who spent her last years regaling her grandchildren with stories of pioneer days. A year after the colonial house burned to the ground in 1930, Matthew Mahon was buried in the family cemetery. Lena lived until she was 94. She spent retirement years visiting with family, reminiscing about the hardships of life on the farm, traveling around the Northwest, and painting scenes of the Territory, some from childhood memories. Matthew and Lena's daughter, Mary, and her husband, Charles Ristvet, built a house on 40 acres of the original land claim. They liked living in seclusion next to the Mahon cemetery, surrounded by trees and rolling golf greens. When Karen Vialle was a child, she enjoyed going to the country and playing at Grandmother Mary Ristvet's farm. There were cows, chickens to see, and woods to explore. Farms covered the Brookdale area. That property is now filled with family housing.

The presence of Christopher and Elizabeth through their descendants continues. The legacy of helping others has been passed down through the family. Of those from the Parkland, Spanaway, Tacoma areas, C. Frank Mahon and

Leo Ristvet were architects; Lena Mahon was a teacher. The current generation includes a doctor, a minister, a nuclear scientist, and a former mayor.

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Fort Steilacoom

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Summer, 2001

Christopher and Elizabeth Mahon Washington Pioneers

by Carol E. Neufeld

History surrounds us. A careful observer may discover signs of the past in the present—an old foundation, a crumbling rock wall, a hidden cemetery. Such a place exists near the Brookdale Golf Course. The golf course covers almost the entire 640 acre Mahon donation land claim of 1852. The nearby private two-acre family cemetery of twelve graves, where their earthly journey ended, is evidence of their existence.

Five markers record the vital statistics of the family. The oldest are of the pioneer settlers.



The Christopher Mahon house was close to the Brookdale Golf Course near Parkland, on his 1852 donation land claim.

Christopher Mahon
Born
In County Westmeath, Ireland
June 1, 1820
Died March 29, 1884

Elizabeth Mahon
Born
December 23, 1820
Died
September 29, 1909

Two are of the children: William, October 5, 1849–May 7, 1901, and Thomas, June 3, 1852–February 22, 1919. Family members not buried there are John F. Mahon, 1853-1931, named as the first white child born in Steilacoom, Pierce County,

and the Mahon daughters Ellen, Mary, and Margaret. There are stones for grandson Matthew Mahon and his wife Lena, who cultivated hops on the property. Three graves are those of Elizabeth's two brothers and sister-in-law who lived with them on the farm—Michael and Mary and Patrick Eustace.

Christopher, an Irish immigrant, declared his intention in the Marine Court, New York, on September 11, 1845, to become a U.S. citizen. He then joined the army, receiving a medal for bravery when he fought

under Captain U.S. Grant in the First Artillery, Company M, during the Mexican War. After the war Christopher, with Company M, proceeded to the harbor at New York. They were then ordered to Fort Vancouver, Washington Territory.

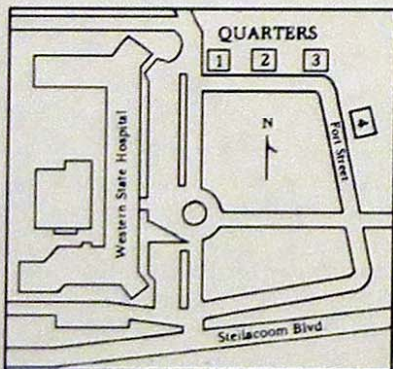
Voyage around the Horn to Fort Steilacoom

According to George Dickey's "Company M, 1st Artillery in Oregon Territory, 1849-1853, to meet the need for military forces in Oregon, Companies L and M of the 1st"

(Continued on page 3)

Special program August 26, 2 p.m.: "Life of the Enlisted Men at Fort Steilacoom" and dedication of new barracks exhibit in Quarters 2.

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From the President

This is the time of year when things really get busy around the fort. Spring and summer weather lends itself to such activities as annual Civil War reenactment, which, as always, was a blast this year (I can never resist that pun...sorry). We're open on Sundays from 1 to 4. And this is also the time of year when we ask you to renew your membership, and I thank those of you who have done so. We appreciate your support.

Two quick things to tell you about. One, we will be dedicating our new barracks exhibit during a Founder's Day event on August 26 at 2 p.m. Be sure to note that on your calendar. We will cut the ribbon on the new exhibit and hear a talk about the life of the everyday soldier at Fort Steilacoom. We will also honor board member and treasurer Ken Morgan for creating a marvelous exhibit. We've traditionally only featured exhibits about the lives of the officers. This new, elaborate and richly arrayed barracks area will pay tribute to the enlisted men—and on August 26 we will all learn a lot more about their very interesting and rough lives.

Also, be sure to note 2 p.m., October 14, on your calendar. On that day we'll have our annual meeting. The program is still being finalized, but I can pretty much guarantee it will be interesting.

Let's change the subject a bit. This will be one of the last letters I have the pleasure of writing you. By our annual meeting this fall, I will have been president of the association for three years. I've already told the board that I look forward to having another role next year. I've told them this not only for my sake, but for their sake and for yours. I don't think this organization should have the same president or chairman for too long. And I don't believe anyone can be a good president if their day job requires a commute to and from Seattle during the week, as my job does. I look forward to remaining active, and I hope you will consider volunteering if you have not. For one thing, we will need a new sutler—or store manager—in the fall. Anyone who is interested can contact any board member.

There is little question that the Historic Fort Steilacoom Association will survive—but there is a very open question as to whether it will thrive. The answer to that question will depend entirely on present and future members of the association.

My hope in 1998 was to create an atmosphere in which people could see their good ideas come to life. We have done some great stuff. The history monographs, the education program for schools, the large sesqui-centennial celebration and the cannon monument, the new barracks exhibit, the Inquiring Mind talks, last year's Christmas at the Fort...and, well, the problem with starting a list like this is that you always leave something out. Let's just say that I have enjoyed watching our museum these three years. Fort Steilacoom is a unique place in the Northwest. It offers a huge historic resource—a large physical place where you truly can return to life 150 years ago. With this foundation, we could teach countless people lessons about their region's history—and their own history. All of us who love history believe that there are important lessons to be learned from our past.

What's even more unique is that we have such a rich historic resource

where one person can make a huge difference. There's no bureaucracy here. It is easy for anyone to show up at a board meeting and have plenty of time to talk and share ideas. It is very easy to get good ideas approved. You don't have to worry about building consensus across broad bureaucracies, sitting on implementation task forces, or crafting win-win initiatives.

But therein is the problem. All of us get heavily involved in aspects of the fort that we feel passionate about. And in such an environment, where there is nothing to slow you down but your own limitations and other obligations, it is easy to tire.

My vow in 1998 was that I did not want the fort to be a place where volunteers burned out anymore. And I think we've done a pretty good job of adjusting expectations and staying realistic about what we can and cannot do. I think you can volunteer and not be burned out—although some people cut it pretty close, and at times we've been open to the public or taken on particular projects without enough volunteers.

I don't mean to sound discouraging. I have had a blast, and I think our other volunteers do, too. But we have to acknowledge our challenges before we move forward. In my next letter, I intend to acknowledge some of our very fine volunteers. In this letter, I pose the questions that somebody asks when he's been "pres" for three years. Now what? How do we get more volunteers? How do we stay open more often so more people can enjoy the resource? How do we attract more school children and others through our doors? These are all questions that board members considered at a recent retreat. It is my hope that we will make progress in the months and years ahead with some concrete answers.

And so, will Fort Steilacoom thrive? The answer to that question will depend entirely on the present and future members of the association.

Walter Neary

Christopher and Elizabeth Mahon (continued from page 1)

Artillery were ordered to the Territory. They left Fort Hamilton on the Army Transport ship *Massachusetts*, sailing to Governors Island, New York. They left there on Friday, November 10, 1848, under the command of Brevet Major Samuel Hatheway, the captain of L Company. Capt. Bennett H. Hill commanded M Company.

The *Massachusetts*, an auxiliary steam packet of 76 tons, was equipped with screw propellers instead of paddle wheels. She was one of the largest and most modern vessels in the American fleet.

The ship went around Cape Horn, then north along the coast of South America to Buenos Aires, Santiago Chile, and Honolulu. She arrived at Fort Vancouver on Sunday, May 13, 1849. Because of the May 1st Indian attack at Fort Nisqually and death of an American, Leander Wallace, Companies L and M left as soon as possible for Fort Nisqually. They sailed on the ship *Harpooner*, arriving August 23, 1849.

Occupying Fort Steilacoom

On the 24th Major Hatheway and Captain Hill decided to locate the fort above Steilacoom on a Hudson Bay farm vacated by the death of Joseph Heath, the farmer. The *Harpooner* moved to the mouth of the creek and the soldiers began unloading.

Eleven officers and 153 soldiers occupied the fort. Each company was composed of one captain, one 1st lieutenant, two 2nd lieutenants, four sergeants, four corporals, two musicians (a fifer and a drummer), two artificers (a carpenter and blacksmith), and 63 privates.

In addition to the officers and soldiers, a score of non-commissioned officers' wives accompanied the expedition to work as laundresses. Mahon family history says that though Elizabeth swore she would never be an Irish washerwoman, she became just that.

The Heath farm, that was renamed Fort Steilacoom, was chosen because of the existing buildings. More facilities were needed so the enlisted men and a few local settlers began the construction under the direction of Quartermaster Brevet 2nd Lt. Greer Talmadge. In December when Talmadge left the fort, a commissary storehouse, company storehouse, two officers' quarters, a hospital, a guardhouse, and a bakery had been erected.

Settling the Donation Land Claim

Christopher continued at the fort until his discharge, then he began to develop the donation land claim at Township 12, 3 East, Sections 14, 15, 22 and 23 in Brookdale, two miles east of Parkland.

The land that the Mahons saw was covered with tall grass and clover. Elk, deer, and fowl were plentiful, and the creek swarmed with trout and salmon. Indians camped on the banks of Clover Creek. The men hunted for game while the women cared for the children and gathered food. They picked wild strawberries and dug lacamas roots that were cooked into a mealy food, made into bread, or eaten as a sweet potato.

A great, great granddaughter of the Mahons, Karen Vialle, recalls family oral history. She has heard that Christopher, Elizabeth and the Indians helped each other. It is a tribal record that the Indians, who assisted in clearing the land and planting the seed, received half of the profit. Elizabeth taught the woman how to bake bread and sew with a metal needle. They showed her how to fashion a needle from salmon bones. When the Indian children had measles, their mothers put them in the creek to wash off the red rash. Elizabeth explained that the children must be kept dry, quiet, and away from others. Sometimes the Indians would take young Tom with them to fish in the Sound.

Chris' friendship with the local tribe kept him safe during the hostilities of the mid-1850s. He sent

his family to Fort Steilacoom, but he stayed to plow for spring crops. The Indians warned him of any problems.

Hospitality to Biles-Longmire Wagon Train

Christopher and Elizabeth were always hospitable to travelers. In October of 1853 the Biles-Longmire wagon train, the first to come over the Cascade Mountains through Naches Pass, made their last camp at Clover Creek near the Mahon place. *The Narrative of James Longmire* records this event.

(We) camped on Clover Creek some three hundred yards from the home of Mrs. Mahan, who I believe, still lives there, and whose kindness the ladies of our party will never forget. On the 9th of October the day after we camped at Clover Creek, the men all went to Fort Steilacoom to see Puget Sound, leaving the women to keep camp; but during their absence Mrs. Mahan took the ladies to her house, where she had prepared dinner which to these tired sisters, after their toilsome journey, was like a royal banquet. After months of camp life to sit once more at a table presided over by a friend in this faraway land where we thought to meet only strangers, was truly an event never to be forgotten, and one which my wife often refers to as a bright spot on memory's page.

A monument at the gate of Brookdale Golf Course commemorates this event with the words:

OREGON TRAIL MONUMENT 1853-1919

Commemorating the 60th Anniversary of the arrival of the first emigrant train coming directly to the Puget Sound via Naches Pass. They made their last camp October 8, 1853, on the banks of Clover Creek three-fourths of a mile South of this monument erected by the Washington State Historical Society, members, descendants and friends of the Naches Emigrant Train.