

of the discovery had the effect of attracting many thousands of people.” Captain Balch was so pleased that he notified his partner J. B. Webber instructions to convey to Mr. Prosch two lots: one for a printing office and one for a residence “in grateful recognition” of services.

Several other events in Steilacoom that year provided copy for the waterfront community. They included the opening of the first jail in the territory, establishment of the first brewery, and founding of the first public library.

While celebration of America’s Independence Day always rated top billing in the July edition, the 1859 celebration was especially noteworthy. Prosch’s son, Thomas, who later founded the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, recalled that occasion:

It was not until 1859, however, that anything approaching the modern celebration was attempted, and even then it was not really of popular character. The U.S. ship *Massachusetts*, connected with the military service, arrived early, having on board Brigadier General W. S. Harney and his staff. A gun was fired from her at sunrise. The general and his officers landed at 10 o’clock and rode to Fort Steilacoom, quite a number of citizens accom-

panying them. At noon a salute of thirty-three guns were fired and the troops were mustered and drilled by direction of Col. Casey....

After the doings at the Fort, in the afternoon the townspeople celebrated at Steilacoom under the auspices of the Library Association. The Declaration of Independence was read by Frank S. Balch, and a patriotic address was made by Rev. George W. Sloan. These exercises were held in the Methodist-Episcopal Church, the first church built on Puget Sound, erected by Rev. J. F. DeVore in 1853-54. In the evening the Library Association also gave a grand ball and supper.

Mr. Prosch continued to promote Steilacoom until 1863.

Joseph L. Allison acquired the Steilacoom newspaper and changed the name to the *Western Star*. Allison issued his first four-page tabloid on July 17, 1869. Like many newspapers of the era, Mr. Allison relied heavily on news from around the country to fill his paper. Much of it came via ship, or was delivered overland through the mail. Without a staff of reporters to collect news from around the community, Mr. Allison, as was customary with his print predecessors, undoubtedly relied on community members to bring

him items of interest which he published in his weekly paper.

Allison’s *Western Star* didn’t last long. About a year later the printing plant was sold to Al Pettygrove who moved it to Port Townsend and published the *Puget Sound Argus*.

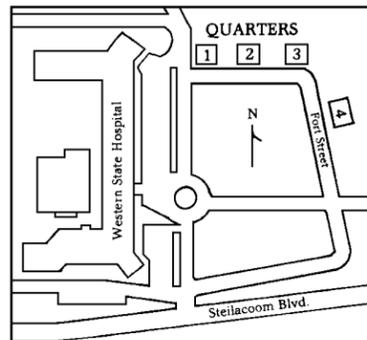
But the people of Steilacoom “bought back” the equipment and Julius Dickens began printing the *Puget Sound Express* in 1872. The *Express* lasted until 1879.

The *Steilacoom News* was the community’s next journalistic attempt in 1890. But Steilacoom seemed unable to support a privately operated local newspaper for long.

In the 1980s Mayor Lyle Dunkin established a monthly newsletter which was sent to town residents. Later, Mayor Janda Volkmer transformed the newsletter into a quarterly publication, *Town Talk*. That was replaced by a new eight-page monthly tabloid called *Around Town* in 1991, edited by the town’s Public Information officer Nancy Covert. Funding ran out for that in the year 2000, but Nancy has continued to write about and promote the town and surrounding area. Like Charles Prosch, her predecessor from Pennsylvania, she has enjoyed “booming” the town.

**Founders’ Day Picnic:** Fort volunteers will be honored at a potluck picnic on August 19, 2007, from 2 to 4 p.m. Bring a main dish, salad or dessert to Quarters 4 at Fort Steilacoom. Family and friends are welcome.

**Historic Fort Steilacoom**  
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# Fort Steilacoom

Vol. 24, No. 2

Fort Steilacoom, Washington

Summer, 2007

## Waiting for the Weekly News A look at Steilacoom’s Early Newspapers

by Nancy Covert

*This excerpt is from the forthcoming monograph about Steilacoom area newspapers. Nancy Covert, past editor of Steilacoom’s “Around Town,” has long been intrigued with local newspaper history. Once she realized that she was walking in the steps of former Steilacoom newspaper editor Charles Prosch, who came from her home state of Pennsylvania, she embarked on an on-going collection of state newspaper history.*

Imagine how the Port of Steilacoom might have looked on an early summer morning in the mid 1850s: Wispy clouds of gray fog drift over the Puget Sound shoreline. The distinctive creak of ropes tugging against the pilings echoes along the wharf. Three-masted sailing ships ride at anchor, casting their wavy shadows on the waters below. Rough-looking sailors ascend and descend the plank walkway, unloading cargo holds and trudging up the hill to store the goods in the warehouses. Meanwhile, a crowd has gathered outside the news office, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the news—“hot off the press.”

Today, Steilacoom’s once bustling business district, Commercial Street, is a quiet residential area. In the summer what was once filled with a variety of shops, saloons and stables has become Pioneer Orchard Park, a popular setting for weddings and the town’s outdoor summer concert season.

In the mid-1800s, though, crowds of shoppers in this area were likely

**PUGET SOUND COURIER**

A Weekly Journal --- Devoted to Agriculture, Literature, Useful Sciences, Arts, Politics, News, and General Intelligence

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By E. T. GUNN      STEILACOOM, W.T., SATURDAY, MAY 11, 1855      VOL. 1, NO. 1

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The following article was taken from the first issue of the PUGET SOUND COURIER the first newspaper published in Steilacoom. It is possibly the oldest history of Steilacoom.

STEILACOOM

As it is likely that the first number of our paper may be read by many, who are unacquainted with the geography of Puget Sound; its resources, its villages and embryo cities, we propose devoting a small space to a description of this place; its growing importance and future prospects—and shall here after lay before our readers such information of other portions of the Territory as may prove interesting.

Wilkes in his voyage of discovery, makes the American public first acquainted with the commercial advantages of the body of water known as Puget Sound, with its numerous bays and inlets, and he wisely predicted that that time would come, when it would be considered among the most valuable portions of the Pacific Coast.

It was not until the banks of the Columbia and the many fertile valleys of Oregon were well peopled, that immigration began to find its way hitherward. It is about five years since a few farmers left the Columbia River, and penetrated the region of country to the northward, until they reached the shores of the Sound.

Then the only whites in this section of the country were those employed by the Hudson’s Bay Company at Fort Nisqually. The Indians were numerous, but generally peaceable and friendly to the settlers. As California became peopled, and the city of San Francisco extended her borders, a brisk demand arose for what this country could well furnish—

square timber, piles and lumber. Ships found their way here, men came to labor, mills were erected, claims taken, and in a short time the log houses of the white settler could be seen on the shore from the Cape at the mouth of the Straits, to the head of navigation. Among the earliest of these was Capt. LAFAYETTE BALCH, and he at once saw that the time was not far distant, when the resources of the country, and its fine harbors, would attract here a large and busy population. Impressed with this idea, and determined to make this his home; he looked about for a claim, and after a close examination of the surrounding country, he selected one for farming purposes where now stands the town of Steilacoom. This was in the later part of ‘50, and for a long period his was the only house in the vicinity; but, as the broad fertile prairies in the immediate neighborhood became known, many claims were taken, and the accessible position of Capt. Balch’s claim, soon made it a trading post of some importance, on which he bestowed the Steilacoom, that being the Indian name of a creek near by.

Fort Steilacoom, at which are stationed two companies of the 4th Infantry, is distant one and a half miles from the town, and to this point in 1853, government constructed a military road from Fort Walla Walla, and in that year a small number of immigrants came over it, and settled upon the Sound. The immigration of the succeeding year was also light, but it added many good citizens to this country. If space permitted, we should be glad in this connection to speak of the farming lands of the Puget Sound region—its extent and fertility, but the importance of the subject demands a separate article. It is about two years since Steilacoom started into existence as

a town, and it certainly promises to be second to none on the Sound. It owes much to the liberality and enterprise of Capt. Balch, and we think the energy of her citizens, will keep it even with the times; depending chiefly, heretofore upon the exportation of lumber for business, and upon San Francisco for a market. With the depression in that article of trade, it has suffered much; but as new markets are being opened, and many of our people are directing their attention to other pursuits — business must revive among us. In the immediate vicinity of town, as well as for mile back, many claims have recently been taken, and judging from the labor of the farmer, and the well known fertility of our soil, the coming harvest will find Pierce County among the first in growing wheat, and other grains. The town site now embraces a portion of the claim of Mr. John M. Chapman, one of our most spirited citizens, and upon it are seventy dwelling-houses, six stores, two blacksmith shops, one tailor, one cabinet maker, and three hotels. Within a short distance of town are three sawmills, and a gristmill of first class in process of erection. We have a church, a daily school a public press, and a billiard saloon, two bowling alleys, and a wharf (Webber has just been completed that affords berths for large vessels at all stages of the tide; and we hope ere many days as Congress has also appropriated thirty thousand dollars for constructing a military road from Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River to Puget Sound—which will give us a large portion of the Oregon travel.

At a later date, we shall give some statistics in relation to the exportation during the past year, from this place of salmon, timber, piles, lumber and country produce.

heavier on publication day when residents headed to the news office to purchase and read the latest issue. With residents eager for the latest news, that must have been a big day in the town on the sound.

Until the first issue of Steilacoom’s first paper, *Puget Sound Courier*, was published in May 1855, what news the town’s citizens got

most likely came via mail from Olympia. Washington’s first weekly paper, *The Columbian*, was published there by James W. Wiley and Thomas McElroy beginning on September 11, 1852, about a year after Lafayette Balch filed his donation claim for the town he named Port of Steilacoom.

*(Continued on page 3)*

### HISTORIC FORT STEILACOOM ASSOCIATION

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### President's Message



Hello All. My Gracious! It has been one eventful spring here at Fort Steilacoom. About every three months or so our management has tried to move things around a

bit in an attempt to give those who visit us on a regular basis an ever new experience. Unfortunately, this means that for those of us who seldom get down this way, we may very well have missed out on something we otherwise would have really enjoyed.

Such is the case, I am sure, with our last couple of presentations which concerned the Army sutler and also the evolution of the McClellan cavalry saddle. Besides hosting such talks as these, we have completed the two exhibits in Quarters 3 and one new exhibit in the Interpretive Center. Fort Steilacoom now boasts the most historically accurate representation of a Post Sutler Store on the West Coast as well as a newly revamped senior officer's work space and living area.

While we are busy on the inside, great things were also happening on the outside of the buildings here in Lakewood. After close to seven years of struggle by your Board of Directors, we finally hit on the right combination to see new wood on the roofs of Quarters 1 and 2. Everyone really ought to come on down and



*David Scroggins, master leather worker, illustrates the various stages in the development of the McClellan army saddle.*

take a look. Nothing is quite so beautiful as a brand new cedar shingle roof. Well, actually, there is something more beautiful—TWO brand new cedar shingle roofs!

I am assured by the Washington State senior architect, Richard Christian, that bidding will be opened for the replacement of the roofs of Quarters 3 and the Interpretive Center by mid July. With any luck at all, we will have all four roofs completed well before the weather breaks this fall.

These are fifty-year roofs that are being installed through the State. This means that we will not have to worry about roofs again on our watch!

In addition to all the work that is going on, we are now also enjoying watching two separate local reenactment groups take advantage of the authentic parade field and ambiance that Historic Fort Steilacoom provides. Both the Twentieth Maine (of Gettysburg fame) and the Fourth U.S. Regular Infantry (whose original members were at one time stationed in these very buildings) regularly drill and hold their

monthly meetings here. So you see the "Old Place" is really coming alive. Come on down and see for yourself all that is happening here!

Finally, a reminder about membership. We continue to send out these newsletters each year to everyone who was a member in good standing of the Association the year before. I am asking those of you who may have accidentally overlooked renewing their membership this year to please check and do so now. As with many non-profit corporations, the Historic Fort Steilacoom Association counts, no needs, your generous contributions to stay solvent. For the sake of our men in uniform who pass through nearby Fort Lewis on their way to Iraq, won't you please take the time now to renew your membership. They really enjoy visiting the slice of the Army's not so distant past that HFSA provides.

I thank you for all that you do and look forward to meeting you in the near future. Yours as always,

*Gideon Pete.*

### Newspapers *(from page 1)*

Meanwhile, Captain Balch hired Mr. Affleck and Mr. Gunn to publish Steilacoom's first paper. The paper's mast head proclaimed it to be "A weekly Journal—devoted to agriculture, literature, useful sciences, arts, politics, news and general intelligence." In its first issue the editors gave a general description of the Steilacoom area, including a bit about Fort Steilacoom:

Fort Steilacoom, at which are stationed two companies of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry, is distant one and a half miles from the town, and to this point in 1853, government constructed a military road from Fort Walla Walla, and in that year a small number of immigrants came over it and settled upon the Sound....

Like many early newspapers, the Courier was short-lived. Lack of advertisers and poor sales were the main reason why many publications went under.

*The Washington Republican*, published in 1857, was the next Steilacoom newspaper. Francis S. Balch was its editor. Certainly a relative of Captain Balch, perhaps a cousin, Francis was also a teacher, orator and editor. His paper's lofty motto read: "Here May the Sun ever as now cast its rays on American Soil and Freeman's Homes." Subscriptions cost \$1 for four months. The paper was published every Friday.

Francis also printed the two issues of the *Truth Teller*, a small sheet devoted to the vindication of certain military and civil officials who were charged with undue sympathy for Indians, notably Leschi who was on trial for the alleged murder of couriers Miles and Moses during the Indian War.

Perhaps Francis Balch's other duties interfered with editing a weekly newspaper—as anyone who's done the work can attest, producing a newspaper is a full time job, not one to be taken on lightly.

While Captain Lafayette Balch was in San Francisco, he met and persuaded a Pennsylvanian, Charles



**Charles Prosch**

Prosch, to move north and publish a paper to promote Balch's settlement. By now Steilacoom had become the first incorporated town in Pierce County, and Captain Balch had grand plans for his waterfront community.

In his book *Reminiscences of Washington Territory*, Mr. Prosch tells about that momentous encounter with the captain:

It was not my purpose to come to Washington Territory when I left New York; [Prosch, born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, had apprenticed in New York] nor did I expect to remain on this coast longer than one or two years. A residence of 60 days in San Francisco, however, reconciled me to a permanent home on the Pacific Coast. In the winter of 1857-58 I made the acquaintance of Capt. Lafayette Balch, the town proprietor of Steilacoom. He had a small water-powered sawmill on Nisqually Bay, a lumber yard in San Francisco, and three or four vessels plying between the two places, carrying lumber down and returning with merchandise.

Steilacoom and Olympia were then rival towns: one had the territorial capital and the other wanted it. To boom his town and aid in obtaining the capital, Balch purchased and shipped to Steilacoom in 1855 a press and type with which to publish a newspaper.

Several printers had tried and failed to make the paper before I met him.

He gave me a glowing description of the Puget Sound country and climate; its dense forests and majestic trees; its snow-clad mountains and grand bodies of water: in short, painted all in such rosy colors that when he asked me to come and publish a paper in Steilacoom I readily consented, though doing as well in San Francisco. The captain assured me that every want would be supplied, whether the paper paid or not.

After obtaining quarters for my family and a suitable place for a printing office [said to have been located across Commercial Street from the Dyer house], I went earnestly to work on the first issue of the Puget Sound Herald, the name chosen for my paper. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of March, 1858, the first issue of the paper appeared. It was received with satisfaction and flattering commendations by the citizens of Steilacoom, all of whom cheerfully paid \$5 for the first year, and several subscribed for four copies, paying \$20 therefore, three of which they sent to friends in eastern states.

There was but one other paper then published in the [Puget Sound] region at that time: *The Pioneer and Democrat*, which had alienated many members of the party of which it claimed to be the organ. These disaffected Democrats proved to be the warmest friends and supporters of the Puget Sound Herald, which was independent in politics, and they availed themselves of every occasion and means to aid and encourage it. As a result, by the end of the first year, I had nearly 700 subscriptions and a very fair advertising patronage.

The Puget Sound Herald prospered and proved a worthy rival for the Olympia paper. Fortune was at first favorable. The Fraser River gold discoveries brought thousands of people from Oregon and California in the spring, summer and fall of 1858. Mr. Prosch wrote about the impact of that gold rush, enabling him to boom Steilacoom and the entire Sound as well. "Sending abroad through my paper the news