

Fort Steilacoom

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The Catholic Connection to Fort Steilacoom

by Carol and Orville Stout

The town of Steilacoom was first served by Catholic priests from Olympia and Cowlitz County. The first recorded is **Reverend J. F. Jayel** in 1851 and 1852, followed by **Reverend William Leclaire** in 1853. The next priest in July 1854 was **Reverend Michael King** from Dublin, Ireland. He stayed only a short time and Steilacoom was again cared for by priests from Olympia and Cowlitz County.

Catholic soldiers from Fort Steilacoom may have gone into town for services until they built their own wooden church on the grounds of Fort Steilacoom sometime in 1855 or 1856, though the church was not officially recognized by the U. S. Army.

Father **Louis Rossi** arrived in Vancouver, W. T., by ship from San Francisco in 1856. He traveled overland from Vancouver to Fort Steilacoom and describes his impressions and experiences while in the area.

This fort, like all the others built in this region protect the Whites from the Indians—but one ought to think about protecting the later from the Whites—consisted of several wooden buildings arranged in the shape of a 200-meter square, more or less, and surrounded by fences. The soldiers guarding them are almost all Catholic, and mostly Irish. With the help of civilians, they had built a little chapel for the celebration of the holy mysteries whenever a priest would come to visit them. The latter had no quarters in the fort, but he lodged



Father Rossi greets woman at the door of the Catholic church at Fort Steilacoom, as portrayed by the fort diorama in the Interpretive Center.

with a regimental sergeant major who, since he didn't belong to any company in the garrison, had a separate cabin with his old wife.

This man [Sergeant Archbold], who claimed to be a Catholic but who wasn't even a Christian (since there is no Christianity without a sense of charity), had given himself airs and thought himself important enough to be able to judge the bishop and the priests...on all matters pertaining to religion. As far as the use of the chapel was concerned, he exerted an absolute despotism. And that's not all. There was something infernal in his way of

speaking and of interpreting things. He had succeeded in gaining such influence over the garrison's soldiers that they took everything he said as the revealed truth.

When he wasn't busy at his work, you'd see him at home seated in an armchair, the *Lives of the Saints* in his hand, his spectacles perched on his nose as if he were in deep contemplation before the throne of the Lord. It was one of the methods he used to maintain the influence he had over the soldiers, who were usually uneducated. When they went to see him, he would take off his spectacles [and] gravely give them

(Continued on page 3)

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*Ladies enjoying Mrs. Casey's Valentine Tea in February. Many thanks to all who made it a great success!**

President's Message



The Board and members of Historic Fort Steilacoom have been busy with completing projects, presenting programs and guiding tours

and individual guests through the fort buildings. Tours were given to Army personnel last December and in January of the current year. There were 100 visitors attending the Christmas at Fort Steilacoom event.

The forty-two ladies at the February 13 Valentine Tea were greeted by Mrs. Silas Casey (Carol Stout), the commanding officer's wife, entertained with a bag pipe solo and escorted to their places by fort soldiers. Reenactors playing the parts of Lettitia Work Huggins and Ruby Foster Crosby engaged the guests with conversation as they were served tea and refreshments by young ladies from the kitchen, followed by entertainments, a Fancy Fair and displays in the parlor.

Using state funding obtained by the efforts of the late Senator Mike Carrell, and the efforts of Kenneth Morgan, Joseph Lewis and Bernie

Bateman, the 1858 foundation of Quarters 3 has been repaired with new concrete footers replacing the ancient tree stumps and covered by red bricks that match the appearance of the originals. Architects planned the project. Skilled workers performed the tasks underneath the buildings. Archaeologists monitored the disturbed earth for possible artifacts. Our landlord, DSHS, provided overall coordination of this complex endeavor. The next step in our preservation will be painting the exterior of Quarters 3.

The media room in Quarters 4 has been refurbished as the fort Protestant Chapel and a new HD television has been installed for showing the introductory history of the fort, as well as other programs.

Emma Lou Lyle, a fort docent who also distributed fort publicity, passed away in February. A donation given by interpreters at Arcadia National Park in Maine, where her daughter Betty Lyle works, will provide for a garden of native plants in front of Quarters 2.

The following events are coming up in the months between now and the summer newsletter:

April 16 – Opening of the **Fort Steilacoom Research Center** beginning at 11 a.m. in Quarters 2 fol-

lowed by an open house with building tours and a book sale that will continue until 4 p.m.

May 15 – “Casey’s sons” Kenneth Morgan will present a discussion of the lives and military careers of the sons of Abby and Silas Casey—Thomas Lincoln Casey, Edward Wanton Casey, and Silas Casey III.

May 30 – **Memorial Day** – The fort will open for Sunday tours each Sunday from 1 to 4 p.m. until Labor Day in September.

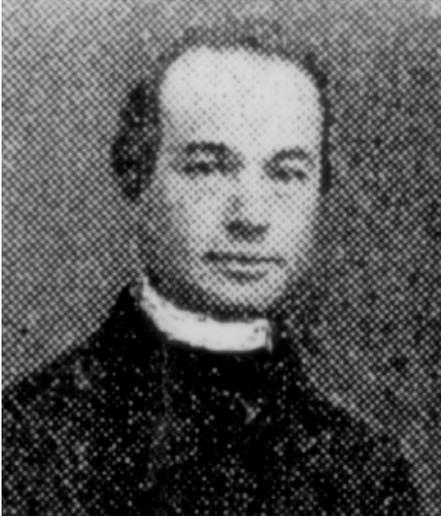
June 8 – **United States Flag** ceremony at 11 a.m. followed by the I Corps band at 1 p.m.

We look forward to seeing you when you visit Historic Fort Steilacoom!

Reminder: If you haven’t already done so, please send in your 2016 dues. A packet with self-addressed envelope was sent out in late February. Your contributions help support the operation of the museum.

Tea Thank You

**Carol Stout, Chris Colyar, Margit Bateman, Quin Hinricks, Anna Young, Hannah and Grace Pollock, Pat Camp, Maria Burdett, Bev York, Elizabeth Korsmo, Lori Gibson, Orville Stout, Bernie Bateman, John McPherson, Gideon Pete and Kenneth Morgan.*



Father Louis Rossi

Catholic Connection (from p. 1)

a sermon about the life of the Saint he happened to be reading, or on controversial points regarding non-Catholics....

The only goal of all this was to exploit the pocket books of these poor devils....Since the soldiers only received their pay every three months, they often had need of money in the interim, and it was this fellow that they had to appeal in order to tide themselves over...for a consideration never less than fifty or sixty percent interest rate....

So, immediately after Christmas, I went on my first round of visits to the lumber mills and ports, determined to lodge elsewhere on my return to the fort. I had different reasons for having chosen this place as my principal abode. First, there were more Catholics there than in any other part of my district—about sixty faithful, soldiers as well as civilians. Then, there was a chapel there where I could gather my flock together.... [Louis Rossi, *Six Years on the West Coast of America 1856-1862*, Ye Galleon Press, Fairfield, WA, pp. 129-131]

Rossi complains of his suffering from rheumatism as he travels back



Monument to Leschi of the Nisquallies was placed near the place where he was hanged on February 19, 1858, near what is now Oakbrook Center.

to Fort Steilacoom in deep snow to see Dr. Horace Wirtz.

I go immediately to the doctor at the fort, and he very charitably offers me his care and his hospitality. Rubbing, and the use of cupped glasses, put me on my feet after a few days, and I was able to take care of my ministry again.

While there he talked to the condemned Chief Leschi and arranged for his conversion to Christianity before being hanged.

The Indian chief condemned to death, with his feet and hands well chained, was closely watched in a hut made from wooden beams placed horizontally one on top of the other. It was used as prison and guardhouse at the same time....The unfortunate man wasn't baptized, and he was polygamous.

Father Chirouse succeeded in converting him, after having persuaded him to renounce all of his wives, save the one whom he was married by that same missionary.

He was hanged, and he underwent his punishment with heroic courage. In his last moment, he cried out: "I pardon everyone!"

and that is truly Christian...but, unfortunately, he added one exception...it was the only witness [A. B. Rabbeson] who had [given false] evidence against him....

Dr. Wirtz and some of the officers of the fort constructed a make-shift hut behind the chapel for Rossi to live in.

In three days my new abode—measuring twenty feet by ten—was ready. It was divided into two rooms; an entry, used as sitting-room, study, dining-room, etc, and another smaller room for my bed. They put a window at each end, windows I could have done without because light came into my dwelling place on every side and from every direction due to the innumerable cracks between the roughly-joined boards. I was never alone there. Cats, dogs, disease-carrying animals... would invade my humble lodging....

Col. Silas Casey and Father Rossi had different religious philosophies, but were respectful and friendly toward one another.

The colonel at Fort Steilacoom was a very religious man, in his own way, and consequently not

(Continued on page 4)



Col. Silas Casey

very well disposed toward Catholicism. He was Presbyterian or Calvinist. Still, he was not only polite toward me, he was respectful. If he gave a dinner, or a social evening, he always sent me an invitation. One evening, when the officers were giving a ball at the fort, he wanted me to go in the company of his old wife, about the morality of dances. He strongly insisted on having my opinion on this point because he had two children whom he wanted to raise according to the requirements of the time—as much as his conscience permitted him.

Another violent attack of my sickness came to torment me. It made any position extremely painful. Thanks be to God, it wasn't very long before a steamer bound for Steilacoom arrived, and I availed myself of it. I immediately went to see the fort's doctor who, with rare devotion, put me in his own bed so as to be able to look after me more attentively....

The good doctor had a very deep affection for me. More than once he put me up in his house for weeks on end and, at the



Contemporary image of Catholic church at Fort Steilacoom before it was moved to the town of Steilacoom. The church was not Army property.

time of my long sickness, he treated me—as you'll soon see—like his own brother....

For three days the doctor tried to combat the terrible pains I had been suffering without respite. I underwent a host of operations of scarifications, of ligatures, of who knows what? Fortunately I was under the influence of chloroform, and that spared me the pain of some of these tortures....

My nurses were soldiers. They were satisfied with going to the doctor's for food, placing it on a chair, and going away....

I recovered from this harsh blow only by degrees, and very slowly. I spent all of Lent, and even the Easter season, in Steilacoom, and then I left to make my spring round of visits in my district....

I also had to go to Vancouver to discuss my future with Monsignor. My attacks were becoming too frequent. Several doctors—among them my friend Wirtz—had declared that the operations I had undergone couldn't be repeated with impunity, and that my missionary life made me too

vulnerable to the seizures caused by my sickness.

In the end, Rossi's doctors advised him to return to his home in Europe. An article in the *Puget Sound Herald*, November 25, 1859, speaks of his pending departure.

We are sorry to learn that the Rev. Father Rossi has been advised by his physicians to seek a change of climate....Last spring he had a severe surgical operation performed upon him, but on account of the exposure and constant travel demanded by the great extent of the country embraced in his mission—extending from Vancouver on the Columbia river to the lowest settlement on the Sound—the relief he experienced has proved only temporary. His destination, we understand, will probably be Europe. His amiable manners, his kindness of heart, and his zealous endeavors to promote the moral and spiritual welfare of the people have gained him esteem and confidence of all...he has exerted an influence on our community that will be felt long after he has left us....

The Sisters of Providence at Steilacoom



The Catholic church was moved in 5 or 6 pieces from Fort Steilacoom and resurrected in the town of Steilacoom next to the Sisters' nunnery and school.



The Sisters built Saint Joseph Providence School in Steilacoom, later adding to it. Pupils and their teachers are on the porch.

On October 12, 1860, **Father Charles Vary** was appointed pastor with residence in Steilacoom. In 1863 the Providence Sisters, who were already established in Steilacoom,

asked that the chapel on the grounds of Fort Steilacoom be moved into town adjacent to their home.

The modest chapel, which harbored the King of kings, was in

the center of the garrison one and one half miles from their (the sisters') house. Nevertheless, at the solicitation of the Sisters, a Canadian sergeant and his confreres interested themselves in the situation and decided in favor of the Sisters, that the said chapel should be immediately divided into five or six parts and transported to the land next to the residence of the Sisters....

On April 23, 1864, the *Puget Sound Herald* carried the following notice:

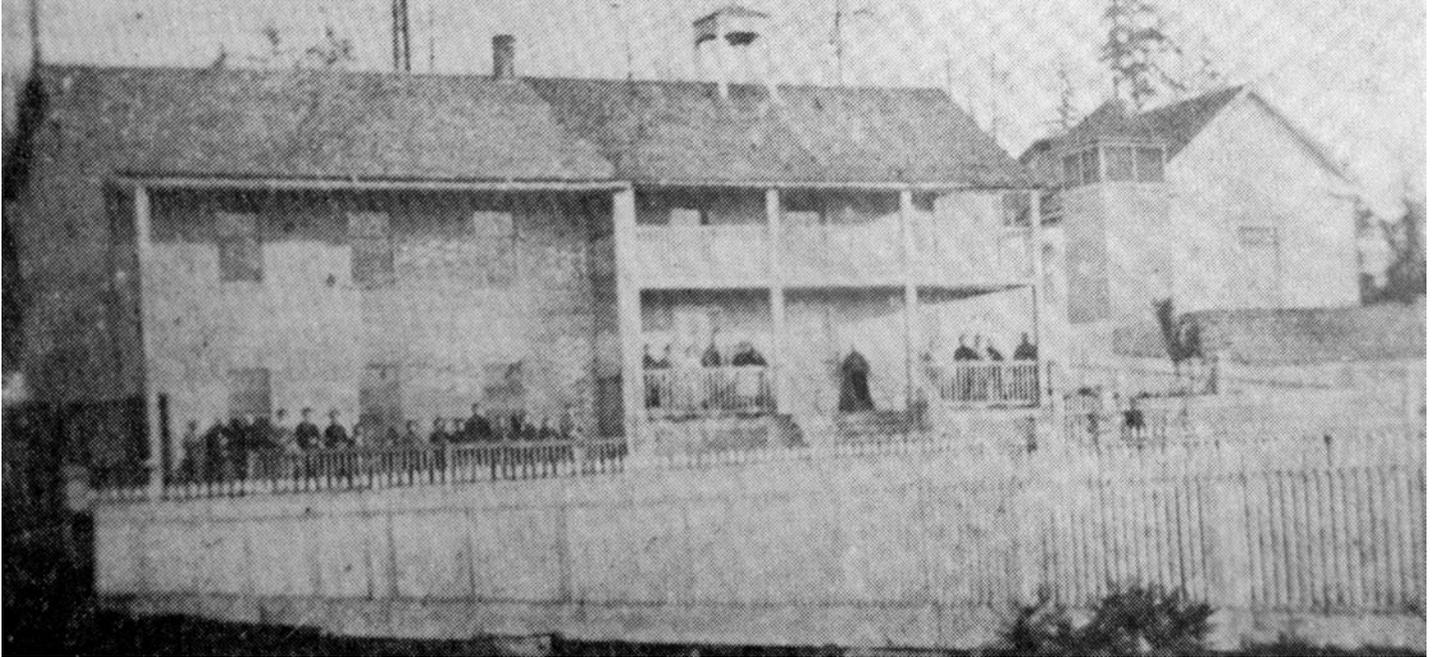
Under the direction of Reverend Father Vary, the work on the new Catholic church is steadily progressing. It will probably be finished in two months from this date.

The reconstructed church was blessed on June 26, 1864, by the Most Reverend Augustine M. A. Blanchet, Bishop of Nisqually.

Father Vary remained in Steilacoom until leaving for an assignment in Canada in 1867. He was replaced on August 31 of that year by **Father John Baptist Brondel**, who remained for eleven years until taking an assignment in Walla Walla and two years later, in December 1879, was consecrated Bishop of Vancouver Island. [Rev. Cornelius M. Power, Chancellor, letter to Mrs. Clyde V. Davidson, April 6, 1953, Archdiocese of Seattle Archives.]

The Sisters and their school

The Sisters of Providence built a convent and school in Steilacoom. Two sisters of Providence, a lay helper and an orphan, left Vancouver, Washington, for Steilacoom, going by way of Victoria, arriving at Steilacoom on November 25, 1863. They purchased for the nominal sum of one dollar a piece of land two hundred feet square, on which shortly thereafter was constructed a two-story frame building 24' X 32'. The Sisters' Chronicles describe the



A new wing was added to Providence school in about 1865 or 1866 to accommodate an increased enrollment of 54 students. The Immaculate Conception Church, moved from Fort Steilacoom, is seen at the right. The school closed shortly after the fort closed in 1868.

site as “at the east of the little city on a high hill; the site is picturesque and enchanting, all at the same time, because the view loses itself on a bay about forty-five miles wide.” [Letter from Rev. Cornelius M. Power]

The school the Sisters built at Main and Nisqually streets had wide porches. It opened in January 1864 with 15 students, and by April had increased to 23. But despite an optimistic beginning, income was insufficient to maintain the convent and Father Vary was gone from the area for long periods in which the Sisters had to forego mass and the Sacraments. At first they had to walk to Fort Steilacoom to go to church, until it was moved next to the convent and school. The school closed in June 1864 and the Sisters returned to Vancouver. But by November, three more Sisters were assigned to restart the school and Father Vary had an assistant.

Conditions had improved by 1865-66 with a much larger enrollment of 54. Then a new wing was added to accommodate the increase. In 1868, with the closure of Fort Steilacoom,



The Immaculate Conception Church is still in use today with Sunday services.

enrollments dwindled and the school closed in October 1875. Some prominent Steilacoom families had attended the Catholic school, including Harmon, Gove, Keach, and Rigney.

Today the school and convent are gone, but **the Immaculate Conception Church**, which was originally at Fort Steilacoom, is still there with an active congregation.