



*Bombus Suckleyi*

# Fort Steilacoom

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Fort Steilacoom, Washington

Summer 2020

## Dr. George Suckley, Assistant Surgeon, U.S. Army, Naturalist, and Author

By Alan H. Archambault



*Photograph of Dr. George Suckley, circa 1862. For a man of his abilities and position, there are very few known photographs of Dr. Suckley. His shoulder straps indicate that he is a major or lieutenant colonel at the time photograph was taken.*

We are currently in a time where the importance of maintaining our health in the midst of a pandemic is very much on our minds. Since the mid-nineteenth century, when Fort Steilacoom was active, scientific and medical advances give most modern Americans much healthier and lengthier lives.

In early America, maintaining the health of its citizens was a much bigger challenge. This was particularly true for the United States Army. Soldiers were exposed to diseases, privations, and hazardous situations on a scale far beyond most civilians. As a result, Army medical personnel were an important element on most military posts, including Fort Steilacoom.

One remarkable Army physician that served the soldiers of the Washington Territory during the 1850s was George Suckley. Although his service at Fort Steilacoom was rather short, he made remarkable contributions to medicine and science that are still recognized today by many naturalists and scholars.

*Ground Squirrel. Engraving From Dr. Suckley's sketches.*



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### *President's Column*

What a Spring this has been, and now Summer has rapidly come upon us.

Fort Steilacoom's volunteers, and HFSA Board of Directors, each feel like some sort of a bear, awakening from hibernation, and waking up late! Everyone is anxious to get back to showing off the nineteenth century Puget Sound Army once again to our visiting guests.

As we move from Governor Inslee's re-opening Phase 1, transitioning into Phase 2, we are like kids on a Christmas morning, who are waiting desperately to open their presents. Fort Steilacoom will finally get it's presents in Phase 3, when museums and other cultural institutions finally are allowed to open back up. Just as there is always a hectic flurry of activity in getting ready for a holiday, your association Board of Directors has been busy as bees for the whole month of June.

We have been meeting virtually via Zoom, performing the myriad of tasks that it takes to keep us afloat, as well as partnering with other Washington Museum Association members. The WMA has linked up with an umbrella organization called "Inspire Washington" and are presently meeting with them in shaping policy supporting public outreach and collaborating together on both regional and state levels. Meetings began on June 3<sup>rd</sup> between Inspire Washington and the Peninsula counties of Clallam, Jefferson, Mason, and Kitsap, Pierce County organizations will meet virtually on July 8<sup>th</sup>. If you are interested in attending these statewide meetings, contact Manuel R. Cawaling, the executive director for Inspire Washington at: [mannie@inspirewashington.org](mailto:mannie@inspirewashington.org).

Historic Fort Steilacoom is presently planning on reopening to the public on Saturday, September 26<sup>th</sup>, with a Living History Open House in conjunction with our annual "Spring" Book Sale. The National Guard Army Band Concert, that was on the schedule for August 15<sup>th</sup>, has unfortunately been cancelled due to Covid-19 restrictions.

We may also be present at JBLM's "Freedom Fest," which is slated for August 21 and 22. Friday, the 21<sup>st</sup> is the day designated for all Living History displays depicting the Army's history. We will post this on our website if it is "good to go."

We are all looking forward to seeing each of you once again. In the meantime, be careful and stay safe.



September 26, 2020

Experience life at an Army fort in the Pacific Northwest! Living historians in period dress will demonstrate daily activities of soldiers at a 19th Century fort and host guided tours of the historic structures. Quarters 1, 2, 3, and 4 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Additionally, the book sale will begin at 10 a.m. and continue until 4 p.m. and be held in Quarters 2. See updated displays and get bargains on a wide variety of books. Complimentary admission, but donations are appreciated.

George Suckley was born in the City of New York in 1830. An unusually bright young man, he attended the College of Physicians and Surgeons, which is now part of Columbia University. He graduated in September 1851, and began a one year residency at the New York Hospital. However, young George, with interests in many areas of scientific study, was anxious to have some “adventures” prior to settling into a routine medical practice.

His opportunity for adventure began in April 1853, when he was appointed assistant surgeon and a naturalist to the Pacific Railroad Survey, commanded by Isaac I. Stevens. This expedition was responsible for surveying the proposed northern-most route of the 47<sup>th</sup> and 49<sup>th</sup> parallels between St. Paul Minnesota, and Fort Vancouver, Washington.

In order to navigate the rugged terrain, the survey personnel were divided into two parties. Dr. Suckley was assigned to the “eastern division” commanded by Isaac Stevens. This party undertook a 1,049 mile canoe trip down the Bitter Root, Clark’s Ford, and Columbia Rivers to Fort Vancouver. The journey lasted a grueling 53 days.

The “western division” was commanded by a young Engineer Lieutenant, named George B. McClellan. This party originated in the Washington Territory and searched for usable passes through the Cascade Mountains. The two parties met at the Columbia River Basin.

*This Photograph of Dr. Suckley is from the files of the Smithsonian Institution.*

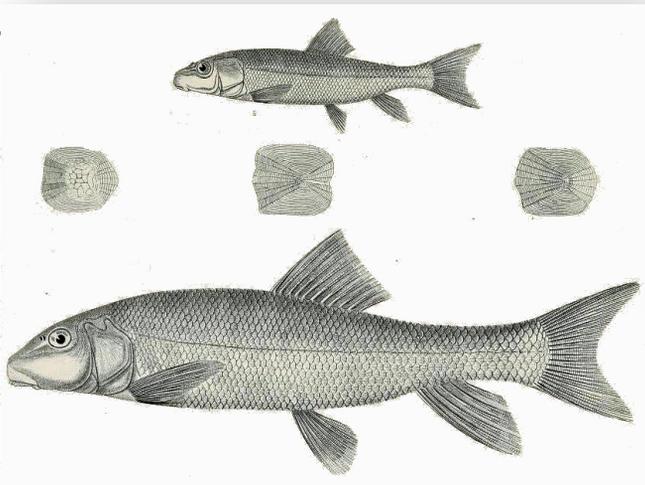


Throughout the expedition, Dr. Suckley provided medical care for the survey’s personnel. Among the ailments were a case of syphilis for a mule packer and “severe articular rheumatism” for a thoughtfully wet and intoxicated Dragoon soldier.

Dr. Suckley also made many scientific observations and dutifully gathered numerous specimens of biota for his natural history collections. They included flora, as well as birds, mammals, and fish.

On December 2, 1853, Dr. Suckley received a commission as an Assistant Surgeon in the United States Army. His first assignment was Fort Steilacoom. He served on post until June 12, 1854, when he received orders to report to Fort Dalles. However, in July 1854, Dr. Suckley requested, and received, a leave of absence in order to visit Panama to collect natural history specimens. Dr. Suckley finally resigned his Army commission on October 3, 1856 in order to work on natural history projects. These included reports on mammals and fish collected during the Pacific Railroad Survey. A number of his specimens were sent to the Smithsonian Institution, although some were evidently lost in transit.

In 1859, he completed work on a book he co-authored with James Cooper, who had been with the “western division” of the survey, entitled, *The Natural History of the Washington Territory and Oregon*.



*Catostomus sucklii.*

*A sucker fish named after Dr. George Suckley.*

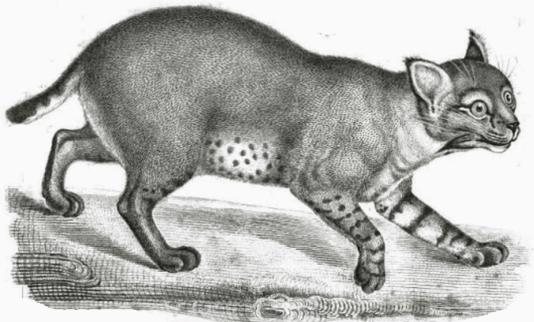
*Plate reproduced his from his 1859 book.*

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Dr. Suckley's work on fish species resulted in two being named in his honor: a shark, *Squalus suckli* (1855) and a sucker, *Catostomus suckli* (1856). A bumblebee, *Bombus suckleyi*, was also named for Dr. Suckley.

He worked happily on his natural history studies until the beginning of the Civil War in 1861. In August 1861, Suckley was commissioned as a Surgeon of United States Volunteers and served as a brigade and staff surgeon. Ironically, a former friend from his service in the Pacific Northwest, George Pickett, served as a Confederate leader in some of the campaigns in which Suckley served. There is a legend that Dr. Suckley, and other Union officers sent a baby's silver service through the lines to Pickett on the birth of his son, in 1864. However, this story appears to have been the invention of Pickett's widow, who wrote a book on her husband after the war.

By the time of his discharge at the end of the war, Dr. Suckley held the rank of colonel. He returned to New York and resumed his regular medical practice. Unfortunately, Dr. Suckley died on July 30, 1869. The cause of death was not recorded, but he was only 39 years old. His contributions to the Army and the natural history of the Pacific Northwest was immense and worthy of our recognition.



Lynx observed by Dr. Stuckley

**Dr. GEO. SUCKLEY, U. S. A.,** who had been assigned for duty at Fort Steilacoom, has been relieved at that post by **Dr. RICHARD POTTS, U. S. A.**

Dr. SUCKLEY passed through this place on Saturday last for the Dalles—being assigned for duty at Fort Drum, Oregon.

Dr. SUCKLEY is a gentleman of pleasing manners and polished education, and both soldiers and citizens at the Dalles will find him to be prompt and generous in the discharge of his official and citizen duties.— He was chief of a party under Gov. Stevens, in the exploration of the Northern Pacific Railroad route, and filled his position with much credit and commendation.

Fort Steilacoom has been peculiarly fortunate in the selections thus far of its post surgeons, and we doubt not that Dr. Potts will be parted with, with as much regret by all acquainted, as was Drs. Haden and Suckley, when he shall have been relieved by the proper authorities, and assigned to a new trust.

(Above) An article about Dr. Suckley from the *Pioneer and Democrat*, September 2, 1854.

(Below) An engraving from Dr. Suckley's book on the *Natural History of Washington*. A number of the specimens were collected or observed at Fort Steilacoom.

