

Fort Steilacoom

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HFSA past president Lawrence Bateman gives a tour to Scouts and their families during WashJam 2022.



A 2022 UPDATE AND LOOKING AHEAD FOR A BIG CHANGE

by Walter Neary



Friends, with our last newsletter I promised you a discussion of how we tell Fort Steilacoom's story. I have a more urgent update, so thank you for your patience.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to notice we've had fewer public programs in 2022. The main reason that we've not had more external activities is that some of us who would organize such things have been consumed in an ongoing discussion with our landlords, the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) and Western State Hospital. We've been discussing who should have responsibility for maintaining the state-owned fire alarm systems in our four state-owned buildings.

I've been involved with Fort Steilacoom, admittedly with big gaps, since 1995. This is the first time I know of that we've had a dispute like this. It has taken an enormous amount of time and energy for the board leadership. One reason that I wanted to share this news with you is that some of you might have seen [our public plea for expertise with fire alarm systems](#). I'm so happy to say we did hear from volunteers who know about such systems, including one person who remembers touring Fort Steilacoom as a child with her grandmother. I should tell you right now, the bottom line. Thanks to the fine people at West Pierce Fire and Rescue, there's no doubt in my mind we will resolve this yearlong dispute to the general satisfaction of all parties.

I'm sure you might wonder what it was that took so much time. There is a lot more to say about the alarm systems that I can't put in print, but be assured, our four buildings are protected in case of fire. However, there is a much, much bigger picture.

In the 1980s, DSHS and Western State Hospital would have been happy to let the then-dilapidated buildings of Fort Steilacoom cave in. The first military fort, also the first hospital, was of no direct use to mental patients in the 1980s. An amazing group of volunteer people and businesses united to save the buildings. DSHS stepped up and agreed to be the landlord. Frankly, that was heroic on DSHS's part, because I want to introduce a concept we've forgotten about four decades later: a bad idea has been normalized.

Here's the concept: *Maybe mental hospitals should not govern museums*. Radical, you think?

- Let's imagine a world where the Smithsonian Institution's 19 museums and zoo are governed by Walter Reed Army National Military Medical Center.
- Let's imagine a world where the landlord of the Seattle History Museum is Harborview Medical Center.
- Let's imagine a world where Fort Vancouver down south is governed by PeaceHealth or the Bonneville Power Administration, the two largest employers in Clark County.
- Let's imagine a world where the Gettysburg National Military Park's landlord is Mott's, which makes apple-based juices and other products and is one of the largest employers in the surrounding county. Wouldn't a Civil War battlefield look great covered in apple trees? They bloom!

Frankly, I don't think you can imagine such a world, because it makes no sense. It is ridiculous that people in the city, county, state, and nation allow a site of national significance to be owned by a mental hospital. That is NOT an insult to the mental hospital; I don't expect people at a mental hospital to know how to operate a Safeway, perform surgeries on household pets, or climb skyscrapers. I don't know how to do any of those things nor how to run a mental hospital. Maybe we should let people do what they can do.

So, here's the deal. If you think a historic site of national significance should be administered by a state social services agency, **I need you to get involved now**. We need you to come to our board meetings and advocate for an idea whose time has passed.

We need to find a landlord that cares for historic buildings. Because mental hospitals should be mental hospitals...and maybe sites of significance should be sites of significance and treated as such.



MILITARY UNIFORMS OF FORT STEILACOOM

by Alan Archambault

The previous issue of the Historic Fort Steilacoom Association's newsletter depicted Captain Bennett Hill in his full dress uniform. This painting represents how he would have looked in his everyday service uniform.

The Army called this his "undress uniform." This simple, yet attractive, uniform consists of a single-breasted frock coat of dark blue wool, fatigue cap, and light blue trousers. His rank is indicated by shoulder straps with the insignia of captain (two bars).

He wears his silk sash and a sword which signifies his position as a commissioned officer. This is the style of uniform that Bennett Hill would have worn during most of his duties at Fort Steilacoom.



Plate No. 2: Captain, Company M.
1st United States Artillery Regiment,
Undress Uniform, c. 1849

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TRIVIA FROM THE FORT STEILACOOM ARCHIVES

In June of 1857, Lieutenant August V. Kautz began the long and arduous task of constructing Fort Steilacoom. However, he ran into a number of issues along the way, such as disagreements with his commanding officer, delays by the War Department, bad weather, and difficulty obtaining materials and laborers. Kautz actually wrote in his journal that Captain (later Major) Maurice Maloney had heard of Kautz's plans for a water ram but waited until the last moment to inform Kautz of his decision not to approve it. Kautz actually wanted to begin work earlier in the year to take advantage of the summer weather.

What prevented him from beginning the project earlier in the year?
Answer on Page 5!



FORT STEILACOOM AND THE STEAMSHIP USS MASSACHUSETTS

by Michael "Tug" Buse

On August 23, 1849, the *Journal of Occurrences* kept at the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Nisqually recorded that Major Hathaway, Captain Hill, and other parties arrived in the area. These were the troops who were to establish Fort Steilacoom, the U.S. military's first permanent post on Puget Sound. Although they arrived overland from Vancouver to the south, it was the steam vessel USS *Massachusetts* that brought those troops from the East Coast to their new home in what is now Washington state—and she had a long relationship with Fort Steilacoom thereafter.

Considering the many roles the *Massachusetts* played in U.S. territorial expansion, it is strange that she began her career in a very mundane way transporting passengers and cargo between the United States and the United Kingdom. During the Mexican American War,

the United States government purchased the *Massachusetts* for use as an Army transport, and in 1847 General Winfield Scott used her as his flagship, as he later recalled in his 1864 memoirs.

After the Mexican American War, the *Massachusetts* loaded the artillerymen under Hathaway and Hill who would establish Fort Steilacoom and headed down the laborious route around Cape Horn. The Fort Nisqually *Journal of Occurrences* notes the arrival of the *Massachusetts* at Fort Vancouver on May 18, 1849.

On April 22 the following year, in the hands of the Navy, the *Massachusetts* anchored off the not-quite-a-year-old Fort Steilacoom. The ship carried a joint commission of Navy and Army officers whose job it was to survey the West Coast in search of locations for forts and naval yards. Ship's Clerk Theodore Brooks Trevett kept a personal diary, now in the care of the Oregon Historical Society, in which he recorded that Hill and Dr. Hayden of Fort Steilacoom came aboard to give the officers information about the surrounding countryside.

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*Lithograph by Lane & Scott of Boston, 1845.
Copied by the Naval Historical Center
from Photo No. 21249-F at the
Smithsonian Institution.*



HELLO
MY NAME IS

*Laurel
Lemke*



Laurel on a trip to see The Alamo in 2022.

by Erich R. Ebel

The Historic Fort Steilacoom Association has welcomed several new board members in recent months and would like to introduce readers to them in the newsletter. Laurel Lemke may be a familiar name to some, as she has long been the public face of the Grave Concerns Association, a nonprofit dedicated to restoring the historic Western State Hospital cemetery located within Fort Steilacoom Park.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE KEY THINGS THAT PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT YOU?

"I served 32 years as a state employee in roles related to recreation, vocational rehabilitation, group therapy, volunteer management, and advocacy. After a start in Toastmasters, I trained and performed with *Stand Up for Mental Health* and have presented at numerous

MEET THE BOARD!

conferences. I served on the Peer Kent Washington Listens support line answering calls and co-facilitating support groups for 23 months until this COVID-19 project ended in June. I continue to contract to provide training related to mental health, recovery, and support."

HOW DID THE GRAVE CONCERNS ASSOCIATION START AND HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN WITH IT?

"The Grave Concerns organization grew out of John Lucas's concern for the patient cemetery in Fort Steilacoom Park, which was unrecognizable and overgrown. He came to me to seek my support in holding a rededication ceremony. We spent six months planning a successful event with community support in October 2000, which led to continued interest in establishing an organization to make improvements to the cemetery. In 2004, Sherry Storms worked with then-28th District State Representative Mike Carrell to change the law and allow for named markers to be installed in state psychiatric cemeteries. Since March 2004, we have focused our efforts on fundraising and work parties in the historic cemetery."

WHY WERE YOU DRAWN TO SERVE ON THE HISTORIC FORT STEILACOOM ASSOCIATION'S BOARD?

"I am very grateful to HFSA board members who have allowed Grave Concerns to utilize Quarters 2 as the primary meeting place for the organization. I also helped make some connections with the hospital while I was working there. When Walter Neary asked if I could serve on the board, I believed I could help develop more connections with community partners."

WHAT UNIQUE ASPECTS DO YOU LOOK FORWARD TO BRINGING TO THE STORY OF FORT STEILACOOM?

"My interests are in preserving historic sites and sharing stories that connect us to this area. My experiences as a Pierce County Heritage League member, volunteer work with other historic organizations, and touring historic properties while traveling have provided ideas for 'after hours' activities and educational events that can serve various ages and interests. I am interested in being at the table for negotiations with state and local governments on how to best protect the historic buildings and artifacts."

TRIVIA ANSWER FROM THE FORT STEILACOOM ARCHIVES

According to the Spring 2001 edition of the Historic Fort Steilacoom Association's newsletter (Vol. 18, No. 1), in the article, *Reconstruction of Fort Steilacoom-1857-1858*, by Carol E. Neufeld, Lieutenant Kautz couldn't get an earlier start on his construction work at Fort Steilacoom because he had climbed Mt. Rainier earlier that year and was still recovering from the effort.

Learn more in the HFSA Archives at
<https://historicfortsteilacoom.org/newsletters/>

MCNEIL ISLAND'S CONNECTION TO FORT STEILACOOM

by Steve Dunkelberger

Native American tribes along the Puget Sound—mainly the Steilacoom, Nisqually, and Puyallup—camped on the island during their fishing and trading journeys around the waterway for 15,000 years. It was a popular stopping point for tribes until white explorers arrived to “discover” the island and name it.

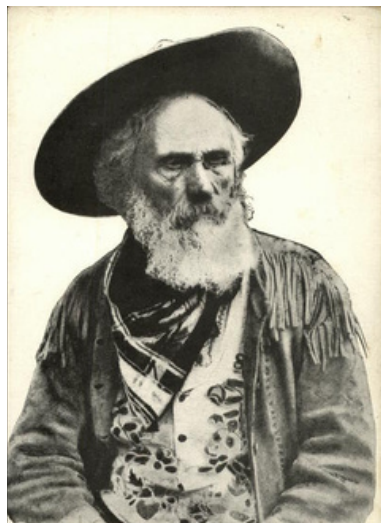
Of course, I do have to point out that Native Americans lived along the Salish Sea and Puget Sound longer than those bodies of water existed, by about 2,000 years. So “the island” was a stopping point along the waterway longer than there was a waterway...but that is a story for another time.

The island gained its current name in 1841. It was named after boat captain William Henry McNeill who worked for the Hudson's Bay Company in what is now present-day DuPont (he's the guy in the bowtie). You may know it as Fort Nisqually, which was moved to its home on Point Defiance during the Great Depression. Pretty Gritty Tours has a virtual video of it on their page if you want to see the site during its closure. The island was named by Lieutenant Charles Wilkes during his expedition of 1841 that gave names to Puget Sound landmarks like Commencement Bay. The island's name dropped the second “L” with the passage of time and was standardized to simply McNeil around 1910.

Now a bit about Wilkes for a minute. Upon arrival in Puget Sound, Wilkes first made peace with his British counterparts at Fort Nisqually. He held the first American Independence Day celebration west of the Mississippi River on July 5, 1841 (the fourth was a Sunday, so they couldn't throw a party on the Lord's Day back then). They celebrated on the banks of what is now American Lake, although the location is in dispute since many aged participants visited the site to lay markers, but they couldn't agree on the exact spot. Wilkes then left the bridge to explore the route south of the Sound, while his fleet stayed with the British there. He crossed the portage to the Cowlitz River, rented a canoe, and paddled down the river, then up the Columbia to pay his respects to the Hudson's Bay Chief Factor, Dr. John McLoughlin. Wilkes also visited Astoria and several Columbia River mission stations. He was gone from his main fleet for about a month and was not a happy camper when he returned.

Wilkes went on a rampage, enforcing harsh discipline such as lashes with the cat-o'-nine-tails (a whip consisting of nine knotted cords fastened to a handle that leaves marks like a cat scratch) on the bare backs of his disobedient men...but again, that is a story for another time. I will just mention that he was such a brute that he was memorialized as a crazy captain when Herman Melville used him as the character sketch in a little bit of writing called *Moby Dick*.

Anyway, that's the guy who gave the island its current name. There had been others. McNeil Island was named Pigeon Island by Lieutenant Peter Puget in his journal because of the pigeons he found there during George Vancouver's explorations of the lower Puget Sound in 1792. Vancouver also named the small island between Anderson and McNeil, Eagle Island, so one bird name stuck, and the other didn't. Puget didn't win them all, but he did get the whole waterway named after him, so that's a big entry on his win column.

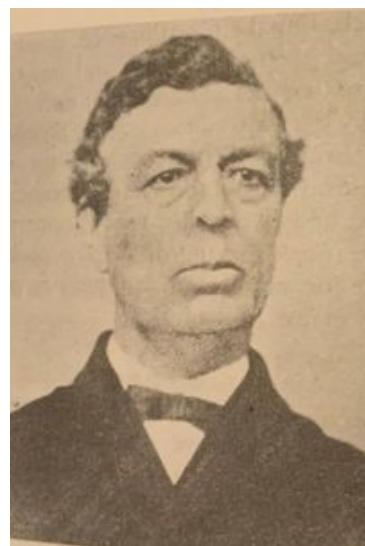


Ezra Meeker

Noted pioneer Ezra Meeker was one of the first settlers to homestead on the island in 1853 (he's the dapper cat in the buckskin shirt). His proportion from the Donation Land Claim Act of 1850—which he never formalized—later became the territorial cell house, and then the federal penitentiary before being transferred to state use. After building a log cabin for his wife and child to live in, he and his brother Oliver left to guide their parents and their party across the Cascade mountain range. They didn't return and Meeker opted to settle to Puyallup to become the “Hops King of the Northwest.” It is a bit funny that he made his millions growing the key ingredient for beer, but he never drank the beverage during his lifetime.

Far from being an isolated island, residents found being located on the water a great advantage in getting from here to there since there were no roads between settlements on the mainland. They could log and mill the timber in their back yards and load boards onto ships bound for California from their front yard. Homesteads lined the coast, leaving the interior forest ripe for harvest.

On January 22, 1867, Congress authorized the establishment of a jail in the Washington Territory. Fort Steilacoom closed the following year. Then, on September 17, 1870, the federal government purchased 27.27 acres on McNeil Island for just that purpose.



William Henry McNeill—with two “Ls”

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MCNEIL ISLAND'S CONNECTION TO FORT STEILACOOM

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The original McNeil Island cellhouse was built in 1873. In November 1874, the penitentiary was placed under the direction of the United States Marshals Service. It was during Charles Hopkins' tenure that the McNeil Island territorial prison formally opened on May 28, 1875. By the end of that year, the total prison population was nine.

The island's first inmate was Abraham Gervais, who was sentenced to 20 months for selling alcohol to Native Americans. According to the log, he was escorted by U.S. Marshal Edward Kearney, issued a black and white uniform, and immediately put to work grading the prison yard. It should be noted that the prison in those days took a photo of every inmate as they arrived for security reasons. Some were photographed in groups to control costs, however. Most of those images remain in the National Archives.

It was during these days that prisoners lived in wooden blockhouses rather than full, steel-and-mortar cells. They were on an island after all. They had to build and maintain their own cells as well as construct the administrative buildings. Life was hard and strict because they had to raise, harvest, and cook their own food, both as a way to control costs as well as to keep them from escaping. Exhausted inmates rarely had the energy to even think about fleeing. They harvested lumber, raised chickens, and planted vegetables. Their laundry was a pot over an open fire for the first 10 years of the prison's operations. Visitors had to row boats to visit them on Sundays. They later had to pay for an inmate ferry to carry them.

The original cell house was standard for the "Old West." It had 48 cells with no running water, plumbing, electricity, or heating. Inmates built it as part of their incarceration, but island residents still lived and thrived on the island, working in the lumber mills or operating farms—separate from the prison operations.

All that changed when statehood came in 1889. The government made McNeil a federal prison two years later, the first in the system since the more famous federal prisons in Leavenworth and Georgia were still being built.

McNeil is void of inmates these days, just like when Fort Steilacoom operated. The prison closed in 2011. Only about 300 patients live at the Special Commitment Center, a Department of Social and Health Services installation for civilly committed sex offenders. These patients have already served full prison sentences for violent sex offenses and were deemed too likely to reoffend, therefore they've been involuntarily committed to the mental health facility.

The next chapter of McNeil has yet to be written.



Inmates spent their days engaged in manual labor (top) such as clearing brush and trees (bottom) on McNeil Island in its early years. National Archives, Bureau of Prisons



FORT STEILACOOM AND THE STEAMSHIP USS MASSACHUSETTS

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Massachusetts left Puget Sound but returned in 1856. The log of the *Massachusetts* kept during this time (which can be found in Record Group 24, Logs of U.S. Ships and Stations, 1801-1947, at the National Archives in Washington, D.C.) reveals that she visited Fort Steilacoom frequently, transporting troops and supplies. Several times, she gave a lift to Lt. Colonel Silas Casey, stationed at Fort Steilacoom.

Although Casey had occasion to use the *Massachusetts* many times, his opinion of her was not very high. In a letter dated November 22, 1859 (also in the National Archives, Record Group 92, Office of The Quartermaster General, Subfile Water Transportation, 1834-1900, Box 61), Casey wrote that the *Massachusetts* was not practicable, that she cost a lot to run, that she was underpowered, and should be sold. Casey related an incident that while transporting troops from Fort Townsend, the *Massachusetts* was almost driven ashore in a strong wind. She did, however, transport Captain George Pickett (later famous for Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg) and his soldiers to San Juan Island where her guns were used to defend the American position during the Pig War. These facts have been documented in the *Pioneer & Democrat*, on August 5 and 19, 1859, respectively. The same newspaper reported on October 28, 1859, that Winfield Scott boarded his old flagship again, intent on settling the issue of the disputed San Juan Islands.

In the early years of the Civil War, the *Massachusetts* patrolled the waters of Puget Sound and visited Fort

Steilacoom often, as is clear in several newspaper articles, including one in the Puget Sound Herald of Steilacoom on September 12, 1861.

The designer of the *Massachusetts*, R.B. Forbes, wrote in his personal reminiscences, published in 1878, that the *Massachusetts* had her name changed to the USS *Farallones*, then reentered merchant service as the *Alaska*, and finally wrecked off the coast of South America in the 1870s.

Over the course of her spectacular career, the *Massachusetts* had an intimate and longstanding connection with Fort Steilacoom. She was instrumental in transporting the first troops to Fort Steilacoom from the East Coast to the West Coast and continued to check in at Fort Steilacoom over the course of the mid-19th century. If one enters the surviving buildings of Fort Steilacoom, one could easily imagine the officers of the Fort entertaining the officers of the *Massachusetts* around the tables of the parlors and dining rooms.



The Massachusetts as a merchant ship, Mechanics' Magazine and Journal of Science, Arts, and Manufactures, October 18, 1845.

ANNUAL BOOK SALE A RESOUNDING SUCCESS

Our recent book sale raised considerable funds to help with some unexpected expenses to care for our four 165-year-old buildings. Thank you all for your support. But the biggest joy of the book sale came from seeing a dear friend of the fort, Steilacoom resident Lou Dunkin, who is 106 years young.

Lou helped restore these buildings in the 1980s when the State of Washington and the Department of Social and Health Services were ready to let the first U.S. fort in Puget Sound fall down. Lou not only donated books for sale, but she bought some others.

Thank you, Lou, for inspiring us to stand by these buildings and the stories of everyone around them. Lou poses here with our board secretary, Joe Lewis. Look closely and you might spy Claire Keller-Scholz, who chaired our interpretive committee which helped organize this fundraising sale.

Great job, everyone!

