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Fort Steilacoom

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Fort Steilacoom deserves a landlord!

A letter from the Historic Fort Steilacoom Association President, Walter Neary

This has been a historic year for Fort Steilacoom, as we make plans for a brighter future. I'm very proud of our current board, for recognizing the truth of a very famous quote, paraphrased this way: The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over, and expecting a different result.

This quote occurred to me a couple years ago, when I had the pleasure of returning after exactly 20 years as president of the board of Historic Fort Steilacoom.

What I saw is the challenges we faced in 2021 were the same challenges we faced in 2001. Too few volunteers. Too little public unawareness that the U.S. Army fort that claimed Seattle and the rest of Puget Sound for the United States is in Lakewood. Too little money for maintenance or educational programs. No paid staff. Buildings slowly or even quickly suffering water or other damage for lack of investment. No volunteer coordinator. Everyone looking at the president, or the secretary, or you name the person, like they're the one who should accomplish things.

I could go on. You get the idea. 2001 became 2021. When I joined the board in 2021, we had the same idea we had in 2001: That the problem was us, to paraphrase Taylor Swift. If only we could hold more tours, that would solve the problem! If only we spiffed up our newsletter, that would solve the problem!

Our current board has embraced a new way of thinking—the problem is Washington. Washington is the only state in the nation that has put its most historic buildings under the management of a mental hospital and social services agency. Washington is the only state in the nation that asks a band of volunteers to pay for, maintain, and interpret the complex stories of a first U.S. Army fort.

If you think history and education are important, those two truths are also the definition of insanity.

I suppose we should be glad Washington didn't put all the public school lands under the management of DSHS. That model could save a ton of money. Lay off all the school boards, administrators, and teachers. Let parents organize the classes that take place on those lands, without tax support. That would sure put some stress on parents.

And it's likely education would suffer. Maybe—education takes expertise and investment. The fact of the matter is, based on what we see in 49 other states, a first fort needs a parent organization that knows something about education.

We first articulated this perspective in a [guest column kindly shared by The News Tribune](#). Then, advocates for history and champions of clear thinking came to support us. Feliks Banel did a [thorough look at the subject for KIRO](#). Knute Berger wrote a [supportive note in his newsletter, Mossback](#).

At the same time, visionaries within Lakewood have recognized what you already know as a member: Fort Steilacoom is an amazing resource. Fort Steilacoom provides:

- Hands-on illustration of the daily life of a pioneer.
- Direct connection to Washington Territory's political history.
- Direct connection to one of the, if not the most, studied historical events in the history of this nation: the U.S. Civil War.

I remain hopeful the fort finds a landlord with expertise in telling these stories, whether that's Lakewood, or another parks or museum agency. Fort Steilacoom and its volunteers could do amazing things if we had the same governance found in the other 49 states.

Before concluding, I want to make a point about Western State and DSHS. In no way, shape, or form, is this initiative a rejection of the many ways they have supported Fort Steilacoom. We're just looking for an appropriate landlord.

In fact, I think we're the ones who respect DSHS. Let me explain.

The state of Washington thinks DSHS has nothing better to do than take care of four of the most historic buildings that stand together in Puget Sound. That's rather insulting.

That's like me coming to your workplace while you're on the job and saying, "Hey, you don't have anything better to do. Go to Safeway right now and grab me some things!"

I don't know about you, but I'd be insulted by such a request. My work must be unimportant to you.

To me, this is indicative of how we don't support mental health care. We, as a state, think so little of mental health care workers that we ask them to do something completely inappropriate: Care for and interpret a historic resource. Eh, whatever, all they're doing is mental health care.

As someone who has had family members with mental health issues, this makes me angry.

DSHS has enough to do, and Fort Steilacoom has stories to tell.

We are thrilled to be on that journey with the members who are supporting the buildings.

Thank you for your support. Onward!

Share your memories of Orville Stout

Everyone at Fort Steilacoom grieves the loss of Orville Stout, a longtime champion of Fort Steilacoom. Stout served on the board as officer and secretary for many years, and published this member newsletter for many more. [An obituary can be found here.](#)

Do you have a memory of Orville you'd like to share? We'd love to collect them. Write us a note at info@historicfortsteilacoom.org.

From 1984 through spring of 1988, the Fort Steilacoom newsletters were letters from the president and other officers; the messages largely focused on restoration work and updates on what it was taking to build an organization from the ground up. There was a lot to report on. Every other state in the nation asked educational institutions to govern their "first forts." Washington welcomed 7,000 hours of volunteer labor to restore the four buildings and left their management to the landowner, a mental hospital, and a dedicated band of volunteers with no tax support.

Orville became editor of this newsletter in September 1988. Through his editorial vision and leadership, the newsletter changed – it matured – much like our association had to change its mission to education after restoration was complete. The newsletter began to feature articles about the history of the fort and its community. The Washington Museum Association presented its "Award of Publication Excellence" to Historic Fort Steilacoom for its quarterly newsletter in 1995. Orville published his last issue for us in 2020—after 32 years.

Yes, you read that right. He was dedicated to this newsletter for 32 years. Everyone who researches the history of this area will benefit from that legacy.

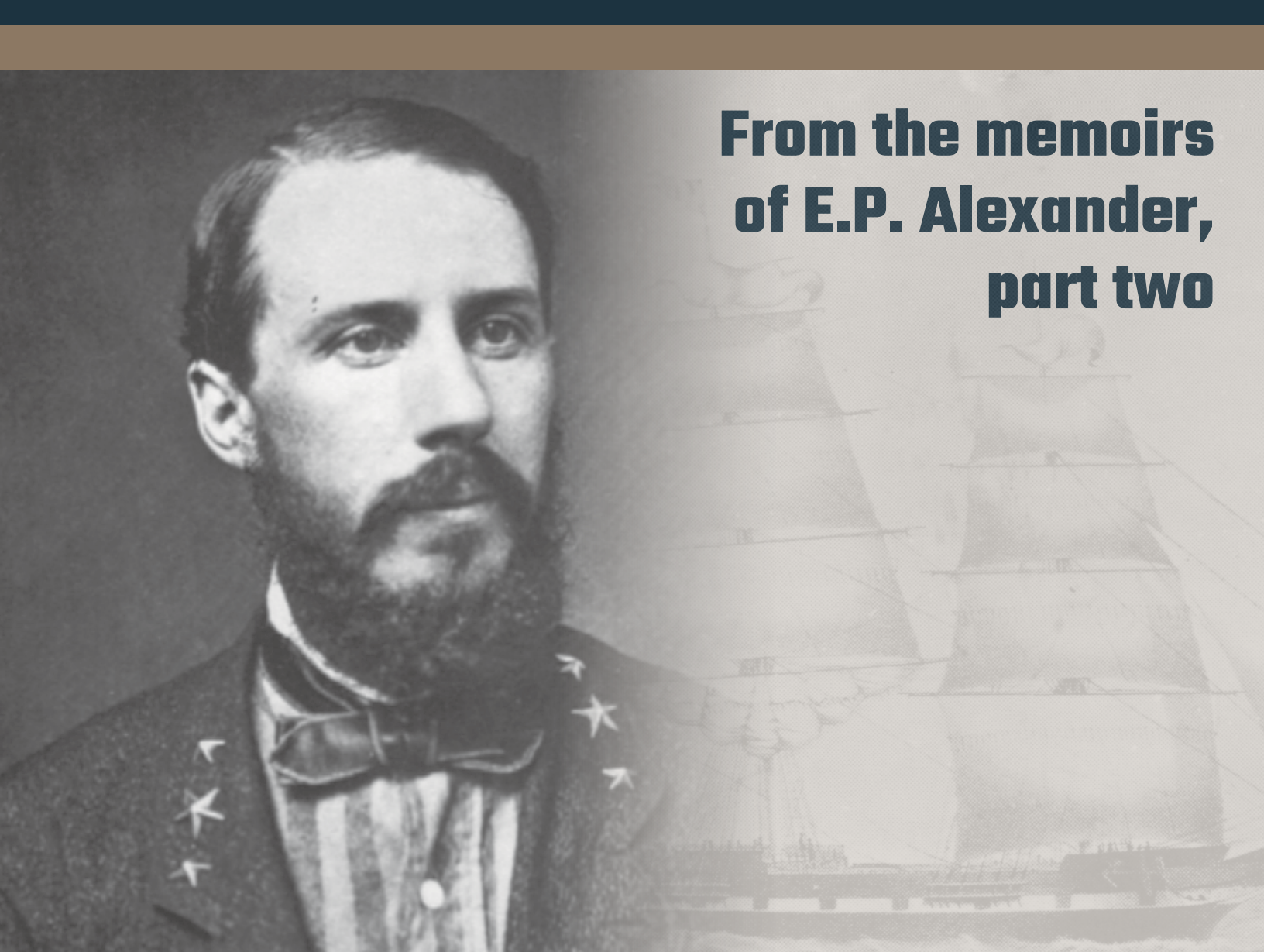
Orville printed and published books from his home near Lake Louise in Lakewood; the fort benefited from his skills with crafts and communications. Many volunteers remember the sturdy wood booth that Orville hand-crafted for our presence at the Steilacoom Fourth of July celebrations. That booth eventually retired, but much of Orville's legacy remains. We still show the video that Orville created to tell the story of the fort to visitors before their tours. We all smile when Orville's steady narrator voice changes into crackling chaos as he reads Ezra Meeker's quote about refugees scrambling for shelter during conflict.

Orville researched, printed, and assembled a large series of photographs on panels that could travel from place to place to help tell the fort's story; those panels have since been mounted to the walls of the interpretive center. The panels are popular with visitors who study photo after photo and read caption after caption.



Orville Stout, who died July 3, 2023, helped set up tables and decorations for a tea in 2018.

But you can't really list everything Orville did for this fort. His fingerprints are on countless programs, events, and other activities. He was and always will be part of the fort's bones and part of the fort's spirit. He and his wife, Carole Neufeld-Stout, who survives Orville, are forever members of this community—whether physically present or not. You don't have to see August Kautz or Silas Casey to know their stories live with us, that their stories are entrusted to us. Every event at our fort was or is going to have Orville lovingly recording the proceedings with his camera—whether operated by machine or the angels.



From the memoirs of E.P. Alexander, part two

If you missed it, go check out “From the memoirs of E.P. Alexander, part one” in the [spring newsletter](#)!

Once every five or six days, I was on duty as officer of the day. Our guard had charge of a few very hard cases, deserters, etc. serving long terms. One day one of these fellows mutinied and getting an iron bar cleared the upstairs room in which they were confined and threatened to kill anyone who came up. The sergeant of the guard ran over to my house for me, and I went over and advanced on the fellow with my sword. Then he retreated into his cell where he gave up and submitted to hand cuffs.

But the excitement of the winter was caused by the going crazy of my intimate associate, John Ector, who lived with the Ragans in the cottage adjoining us on the right. Ector

and I used to be together a great deal, especially to play chess a great deal. Sometime early in February of 1861, his conduct began to be a little peculiar at times. He got excited upon religious subjects and began to show that exaggerated self-appreciation which is so often a sign of incipient insanity. At last, it became necessary to have him watched constantly. One night they sent for me about 4:00 a.m. to come over, for he had a violent fit and had driven two soldiers, who were nursing him, and Major Ragan out of the house with a poker, breaking the bones of one man's hand.

I went over hurriedly in dressing gown and slippers and got him in his room and disarmed him, but had to stay

continued on next page

From the memoirs of E.P. Alexander, part two (cont'd):

with him 'till breakfast time, at 8:30 a.m. when he insisted on going over to my house to get my guns and pistol to kill all the people on the post whom he thought were plotting against him.

I got him out on the porch and there a half dozen soldiers brought up behind a fence made a dash on him and after a hard fight tied him. After that he had to be kept in an outhouse in a straitjacket and his feet fastened to a staple in the floor.

When we all came home in April and May, Ector was brought along, always with his arms in a straitjacket and his feet tied together and fastened to the floor of a cabin on the steamers or a room in hotels and transferred by main force when necessary, generally making his vicinity known by howling and yelling, crying fire or murder or both, and vituperating every person he saw with a most extensive vocabulary of billingsgate and profanity.

Poor Major Ragan! Mrs. Ragan, Ector's half-sister, was not very far from being crazy herself, even before Ector became so. His affliction made her very excited and unreasonable and hard to do anything with.... Mrs. Ragan also had a miserable pet poodle dog named Annette which she cared for as much as for her adopted boys, Frank and Wyley. And the poor Major had to make that trip from Fort Steilacoom to Georgia with that menagerie, Mrs. Ragan, Ector, the major's brother, Frank, Wyley and Annette....

After getting to New York, he took Ector to an asylum in Philadelphia where he was cured within a year and came down to Georgia. And in 1874 he visited us in Opelika, Alabama, and scared Miss Teen awfully, for she had no confidence in his recovery and when I, maneuvering to bring a long, tedious, and trying visit to a termination, said I must go down to my office for a while, Miss Teen nearly fainted at the idea of being left alone with him.

She believes to this day that I put her in great danger in making the suggestion. But fortunately, it worked, and Ector went off with me and did not come back.

For social amusements we had a very occasional hop at some sort of a semi-public room or hall, I can't now recall exactly what, and once some wretched travelling minstrels gave a show to which Miss Teen and I took Bessie Casey. I remember Joseph Bowers sang to the grinding of a coffee mill used in imitation of a hand organ. Once or twice, we had attempts at sleigh rides with dry goods boxes on makeshift runners when we had a few inches of snow, but it usually melted in a day and we had to come back through the mud.

Once the little pond we used to walk to froze over so hard that Colonel Casey thought he might cut some ice and he walked out there with Miss Teen, Bessie Casey and an orderly. The orderly thought the ice was strong enough and walked far out where the water was very deep when he broke through and would have drowned had not Miss Teen taken an oar and walked out near enough to give it to him while Bessie Casey ran back to the barracks nearly a half a mile and brought help. The oar enabled the soldier to hold up until ropes were brought and he was hauled out.

Sometimes we had riding or walking excursions or picnics with some of the ladies and sometimes pistol practice for them and Miss Teen generally beat them all.

As the spring approached, she and I used to take long walks just to pick the beautiful yellow violets of which the woods were full. Bless the memories of old Fort Steilacoom! Though possibly they are seeming peculiarly dear today as I write them, June 9, 1897, way down in Greytown, Nicaragua, where lonesomeness has its own abode and homesickness its everlasting habitation.



Soldiers' barracks, Fort Steilacoom.



Commander's quarters, Fort Steilacoom.

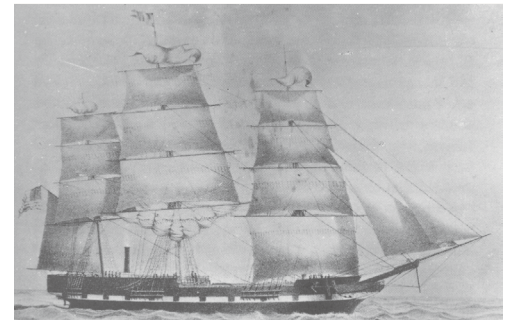


Illustration of USS Massachusetts.

Military uniforms of Fort Steilacoom

by Alan Archambault

Private, Company M. 1st United States Artillery Regiment

Prior to departing Governor's Island, New York in November 1848, Companies L and M of the 1st U.S. Artillery were issued both fatigue and full-dress uniforms. Surviving documents in the National Archives list all the clothing issued, down to the last plume and eagle insignia. Although the two companies were going to a remote territory, it was important they look like proper soldiers upholding the honor of the United States.

The companies traveled on the Army transport ship, *Massachusetts*, stopping at Buenos Aires, Argentina; Santiago, Chile; and Honolulu, Hawaii.

In May 1849, the *Massachusetts* reached Fort Vancouver, a Hudson's Bay Company Post. A site was selected and work began on building a U.S. Army post named Columbia Barracks—now Vancouver Barracks. In August, Company M was sent to the Puget Sound area to protect American citizens and interests. Company M became the first U.S. soldiers to serve in the Puget Sound region, building and garrisoning Fort Steilacoom until 1853.

This painting represents a Private of Company M in his full-dress uniform. These elaborate uniforms were generally reserved for official military ceremonies and Sunday dress parade. Local Indians and settlers, used to less formal attire, were no doubt impressed by the colorful uniforms and the soldiers' drill.

The uniform depicted is typical of the full-dress uniform worn during this period. It consists of a blue wool broadcloth garment called a "coatee." It is adorned with red and yellow trim and features fringeless epaulettes designated for privates. His headgear is called a shako and is made of felt, bound with leather, with a leather brim. It features a



Plate No. 3: Private, Company M. 1st United States Artillery Regiment, full dress uniform, c. 1849. Painted by Alan Archambault.

brass eagle, crossed cannons, and the numeral "1." It also has a red plume, held in place by a metal "tulip." His belting is made of white buff leather which supports an artillery short sword, his bayonet, and cartridge box. His trousers are made of light blue wool kersey material. His shoes are black leather and known as Jefferson booties. He is armed with a U.S. Model 1842 musket.

This style of uniform was worn throughout Company M's time at Fort Steilacoom. In 1851, the Army revised their uniform regulations, but it is unlikely the troops of Company M received the new uniforms prior to their 1853 departure.

What's in a name: History of Pierce County locations

by Steve Dunkelberger

Puget Sound is home to a variety of location names that provide us with a tapestry of events, cultures, and people that left their stamps on the region.

Of course, local places were named by the first people on this land—Native American tribes gave monikers to their territories, hills, prairies, and waterways during the approximately 20,000 years they lived along Puget Sound before Europeans “discovered” the region. Many of those names remain today, with a growing roster of places with British or American names reverting to their traditional names.

The biggest renaming hill, so to speak, is the possibility of [renaming Mount Rainier](#) to its traditional name of “Tacoma” or “Tahoma” the same way Alaska’s Mount McKinley became Denali.

English explorer Capt. George Vancouver saw it and named it after his friend, Peter Rainier, when Vancouver mapped the region in 1792. The “Rainier” and “Tahoma” names were used interchangeably for more than 100 years, when the United States Board of Geographic Names officially endorsed “Rainier” as the name.

Decisions made can always be undone, so there is a smoldering effort to bring back the original name for the state’s highest peak.

“I think it is going to be tough, but it needs to be done,” said notable historian [Michael Sullivan](#).

The effort to return the Denali name took Alaskans 40 years even with the strong evidence that locals around that mountain had used the Denali name all along.

American explorers then took their turn at naming places, particularly [Lt. Charles Wilkes](#). He visited and mapped the area in 1841. He named local geographic sites including Commencement Bay, named for where he began mapping Puget Sound; McNeil Island, after a captain of a local steamship; and Fox Island, after his ship’s surgeon. He came up with the name [Gig Harbor](#) for the simple reason that its bay was deep enough for a small vessel, known as a gig.

What is interesting about Wilkes’ naming system is that he would get new maps from his cartographers and just write in names that came to him, never seeing the island or waterway himself. He rarely left his cabin because he was so hated by his crew. They were so fed up with his heavy handed and egotistical personality that they drew geographic features that didn’t exist just to taint his legacy.

“There are islands on the Wilkes maps that don’t exist,” Sullivan said. For example, [Gordon Island and Adolphus Island](#) appear on Wilkes’ 1848 map just north of Orcas Island. Anyone who has traveled to the San Juan Islands knows those islands don’t, and never did exist. They remained on maps for 10 years.

Accurate or not, American settlers used the Wilkes names to set the area in increasing numbers through subsequent years, adding their own names to places they settled or farmed. Tacoma’s [Browns Point](#), for example, was named Point Harris during the Wilkes expedition only to be renamed Point Brown in honor of an early settler, or Brown’s Point. The apostrophe officially dropped off in 1901. A similar story came for the name of Point Defiance’s [Owen Beach](#). It was titled after a longtime superintendent of Metro Parks.

Whatever a name is now, it might not last forever. Pretty much every area or geographic landmark has at least a Native American, British, and settler name somewhere in its lineage. Names change all the time. For example, [Lakewood](#) and [University Place](#) weren’t cities until the mid-1990s, although those areas went by those, or similar names, for generations before they were official. University Place got its name back in 1895, when it was on the short list for what is now the University of Puget Sound. Lakewood was first simply called the Prairie by 1850s settlers. It was more commonly known as the Lakes District of Tacoma because of its recreational lakes as it developed after the turn of the last century. The name “Lakewood” became more popular in the 1920s.

For the record, the state was named after George Washington, the nation’s first president, as a compromise of sorts back when it started out as a breakaway territory from Oregon in 1853, after the name “[Columbia Territory](#)” was rejected. Even then, there was an effort in 1885 to change the name upon statehood to “Tacoma,” but that name didn’t stick, so “Washington” became the name of the area in 1889, when it entered the union as the 42nd state.

To learn why an area has its particular name, the late historian and Tacoma Public Library’s Northwest Room Director Gary Reese crafted “[Origins of Pierce County Place Names](#)” to answer all of those questions.

Washington State Archives 101

Historical researchers in Washington are fortunate to have a wealth of resources residing close to home. [Washington State Archives](#), a division of the Office of the Secretary of State, holds hundreds of millions of records in their five branches across the state, and on [Washington State Archives – Digital Archives](#). Among the myriad documents at the Archives, you can find:

- Birth and death records
- Land records
- Governors’ collections
- Censuses
- Legislation
- Photographs
- Naturalizations
- Criminal and court files
- And much more

Just about every researcher – on any level – can find a use for the Archives. If you’re a genealogist, historian, teacher, student, lawyer, land-owner—you name it, there’s something there for you.

Contact Washington State Archives at research@sos.wa.gov or (360) 586-1492.

[Watch this video for an overview of the Archives:](#)



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Fort Steilacoom welcomes visitors!

Come see Fort Steilacoom on a Sunday afternoon! Let us show the buildings to you. We’d love to hear what interests you about history.

[Book your visit now!](#)

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