

Fort Steilacoom

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An all-volunteer organization was a great idea... until it wasn't.

A letter from the HFSA President, Walter Neary

It was a gift to be president of this museum board in the early 2000s and to return in the early 2020s. One can see, very clearly, how some things change, and some things stay the same. Please allow me to reflect as someone who came, went, and then returned for a period roughly half of the museum's life.

I imagine, in the 1980s, a volunteer organization sounded really good. One hears all the time about the government and the problems it can bring. One hears that state and local park services are full of bureaucracy. They make inefficient decisions, and decisions from bureaucrats, not the community. This wasn't just an issue in the 80s. For example, I was at a Seattle forum just this fall of the Pacific Northwest Historians Guild where someone talked about how it was taking several years for a park agency to change one sign. One sign.

So, in the 1980s, I am sure an all-volunteer organization sounded great. After all, our board is not beholden to any government. No one tells our board what to do. You can come on the Fort Steilacoom board and do things you could only dream of at a museum which is enmeshed in government bureaucracy. There are no words for how free we are to do what we want related to Washington history. We only answer to ourselves. I would think many professional museum workers would think that sounds like paradise.

So, what has Fort Steilacoom done with this seeming advantage? As it was years ago, our budget is about \$20,000 a year. That's a fraction of the budget of comparable sites of national significance. It's 1.3 percent of the budget of at least one other museum I know of. If Fort Steilacoom was a family in Pierce County, we would be living \$9,800 below the poverty line. Indeed, the fort community is a kind of family. But we're not feeding mouths, we're maintaining four 165-year-old buildings and trying to tell stories of the period from 1849 to 1868. So, maybe the poverty line is a poor comparison. At least it's a comparison.

Of our annual budget, the Lakewood lodging tax grant of \$12,000 goes to marketing, which of course does not maintain buildings or buy insurance. If you remove the marketing budget, then Fort Steilacoom's remaining budget is \$8,000, which would be about \$16,000 below the poverty line. And this is after 40 years of momentum as an all-volunteer organization. There is no question we punch above our weight. Hundreds of people tour the buildings through regular tours and special events.

But still. The one mistake we can make here is to blame ourselves. I know board members and other volunteers who take the fort very seriously. But it's not us. There has been a complete turnover of board volunteers over 40 years, sometimes many times over. The issues remain the same. It's ridiculous to think that's coincidence or accident.

Can we blame ourselves? I don't buy that. I think we're like people who get into a car in the middle of a river, try to drive it, and blame ourselves when it's not working.

Maybe it's not us. Maybe it's the fact that the circumstances are wrong. Now, I know what you're thinking: "Walter, there are all-volunteer organizations that thrive."

But most of the organizations I know like that are called to a mission that involves very popular themes with the public. We're more like an elementary school than a museum with a sexy purpose. Fort Steilacoom has many important stories, but it doesn't appeal to people the way a community museum calls on the spirit of that community. If you're in Lakewood, you surely go first to the Lakewood museum. If you're in Steilacoom, you go to the Steilacoom museum.

Who goes first to Fort Steilacoom? Which of the fort's stories drives you to place it first among the museums you treasure? We don't have Ulysses S. Grant, and we are not the site of some big dramatic battle that gets mentioned in all the history books. Fort Steilacoom may have prevented large battles from happening. No good deed goes unpunished. For its role in working to avoid bloody conflicts, Fort Steilacoom does not provide a dramatic story that gets attention in 2023.

I think the other challenge is the very nature of an all-volunteer group. You would think freedom is wonderful. But freedom is not as easy as it sounds. With freedom, we have the choice to do so many things. Or we have the choice to do nothing. We have the choice to do busy work or stand by and watch others work in seeming action without being driven to greater accomplishment.

One way of describing this situation is called "paradox of choice." This concept was coined by psychologist Barry Schwartz in 2004, and it describes the way in which having too many options can actually lead to decreased satisfaction and wellbeing. Schwartz argues that when we have too many choices, we become overwhelmed and stressed. We start to worry about making the wrong decision, and we may end up making no decision at all.

Imagine a world where Fort Steilacoom did have professional management. That would mean the government I spoke of, with rules and bureaucracy and employees who bring their own possibilities and limits. But the fort would have resources to help operate and tell its story.

God willing, I'm going to be fascinated to see how Fort Steilacoom is managed in 20 years! I hope the fort is not still all-volunteer, because the car is going to be pretty darn soaked by then.



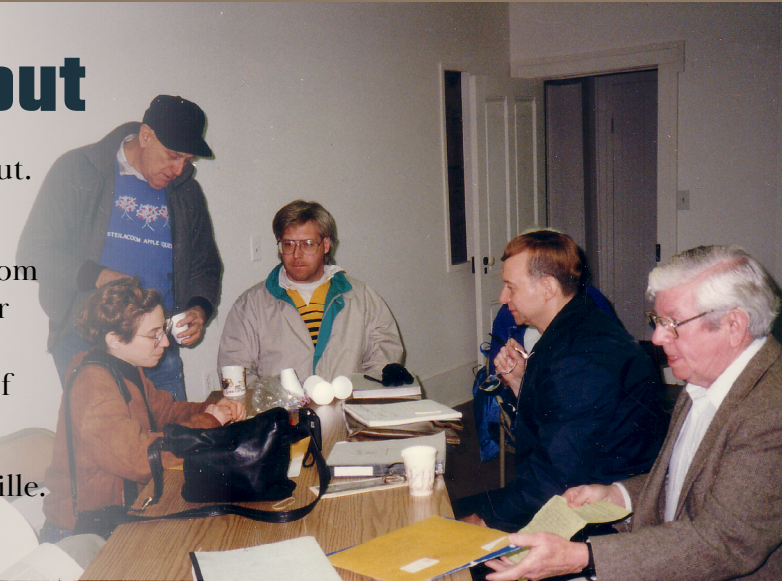
Memories of Orville Stout

Everyone at Fort Steilacoom grieves the loss of Orville Stout.

[An obituary can be found here.](#)

The photo on the right is a 1990 gathering at Fort Steilacoom including historian Esther Schooler, seated; board member Arnold Stern, standing; fort consultant Steve Anderson, seated at middle; Orville Stout, board secretary; and one of the four leaders of the fort's restoration, Jack Langston.

A couple other HFSA champions offered memories of Orville. Here are their stories:



From Steve Dunkelberger

I remember when I first arrived as a cub reporter of the Lakewood Journal back in 1994 and was learning about the yet-to-be city that I was covering. I wanted to know all about its history and there was no Lakewood Historical Society back then, so I dived into Fort Steilacoom. Orville handed me a suitcase of newsletters that I read over an extended weekend. He then gave me a tour of the area, with stops here and there to give me a sense of place, all for the cost of breakfast at Bair's Hardware.

I then got involved with the board during Cannon Days, as it was known back then and gave tours of the buildings. I felt I knew it all, as all young reporters tend to do. He then gave me another suitcase of information and another tour. We ended at his printing operation in his basement that was filled with what was then state-of-the-art equipment, including this room dedicated to developing and printing photographs. We called it a darkroom back then since digital imaging was still ten years away from being the norm.

From those tours and talks came my involvement in founding the Lakewood Historical Society, two productions of the "Place of Firsts" plays at Pierce College Fort Steilacoom, and a love of local history that now includes coauthoring two books on the history of Lakewood, one on McNeil island and at least one more in the works.

That tab for an omelet and potatoes O'Brien was the best purchase I ever made.

With my move to Tacoma 15 or so years ago, Orville and I lost contact, but we exchanged emails there for a while, but we ultimately lost contact as our circles never converged again. Now I can only tell him thanks for everything he did for me in the only way I can, in the newsletter he kept alive for so many years.

That seems fitting and right. So, thanks Orville. You changed my life.

From Joan Curtis

The Steilacoom Historical Museum Association has greatly benefited from the many talents of Orville Stout. His contributions have greatly enhanced the preservation of the history of Steilacoom, Fort Steilacoom, and Lakewood.

For over 30 years, Orville was the publisher of the "Steilacoom Historical Museum Quarterly." He and I worked closely together and his expertise was greatly appreciated—with his technical knowledge and his thoughtful advice.

He was the publisher of our book, "Town on the Sound, Stories of Steilacoom." It was selected as one of the books honoring history during Washington State's centennial celebration in 1989. It has gone through three printings.

In celebration of the Steilacoom Historical Museum Association's 20th anniversary, Orville presented a slide show of its events and activities at the annual dinner in December 1990. When the call went out to reproduce pictures of families and locations of historic Steilacoom, Orville came to town, set up his equipment, and made copies of the original photos. These greatly enhanced the museum's photo collection.

To honor Orville for his work and his willingness to share his technology, he was presented with The Lee Merrill Fellows Award at the December 2007 annual dinner of our organization. This award is given to "those dedicated members who quietly and effectively contribute to the Association." That indeed was Orville.

On a personal note, Orville was a good friend. He helped and encouraged me during the 35 years the "Quarterly" was printed, being only a phone call away. Many hours were also spent at his home as we went over copy, and with his quiet way, making suggestions for the betterment of the publication. It was a privilege and a delight to attend Carol and Orville's wedding many years ago and to know that they had those good years together.



“Puyallup-Nisqually culture is gone.”

Marian Smith’s mentors told her not to write her book.

She wrote it anyway.

By Walter Neary

Marian Smith was an anthropologist who interviewed several elders of the Puyallup and Nisqually Tribes in the late 1930s. Her book, [“The Puyallup-Nisqually.”](#) Columbia Press, New York, 1940, has been cited in many places, from the histories of Nisqually historian Cecilia Carpenter to the [new mini-museum created by the Puyallup Tribe](#). Smith described herself as the last student of a giant of American anthropology, [Franz Boas](#), of Columbia University in New York.

There is a sentence in that book that is particularly problematic to read today: “Puyallup-Nisqually culture is gone.”

This article is about Smith, her work in relation to the Tribes and our fort - and a possible explanation for such a strange thing to say. I call it a strange thing to say, because after that sentence, the book goes on for more than 300 pages to detail Smith’s records of Tribal culture that are often highly detailed and specific.

I recently visited Smith’s papers and personal archive in London. Smith had saved very few of her papers from her days among the Puyallup and Nisqually. But she did save a few papers from her undergraduate research days, and one letter may provide context for the controversial sentence above.

Smith arrived as a young undergrad in Puget Sound in 1936. She had the use of one leg; function in the other leg was lost to polio. She must have written about what she found to Boas, and/or his chief disciple, Columbia Professor Ruth Benedict. It’s on my list to see if that letter survives somewhere at Columbia. In the meantime, we know how Boas and Benedict reacted.

I found a few notes from her 1936 days. She must have suggested that she thought many memories had been lost. Because Benedict wrote back an eye-popping letter to the student in the field.

In her letter, Benedict very gently suggested that Smith should maybe forget the Puyallup and Nisqually and find other Tribes. Benedict had conferred with Boas. She wrote, “Don’t take this suggestion as upsetting. If a good chance does come up, just feel free to make the most of it.”

Boas at this point was a giant of scholarship, so it would have to be intimidating for him to suggest to his youngest student that she reconsider her project

And yet. Marian Smith published “The Puyallup-Nisqually” in 1940. The two greatest figures of American

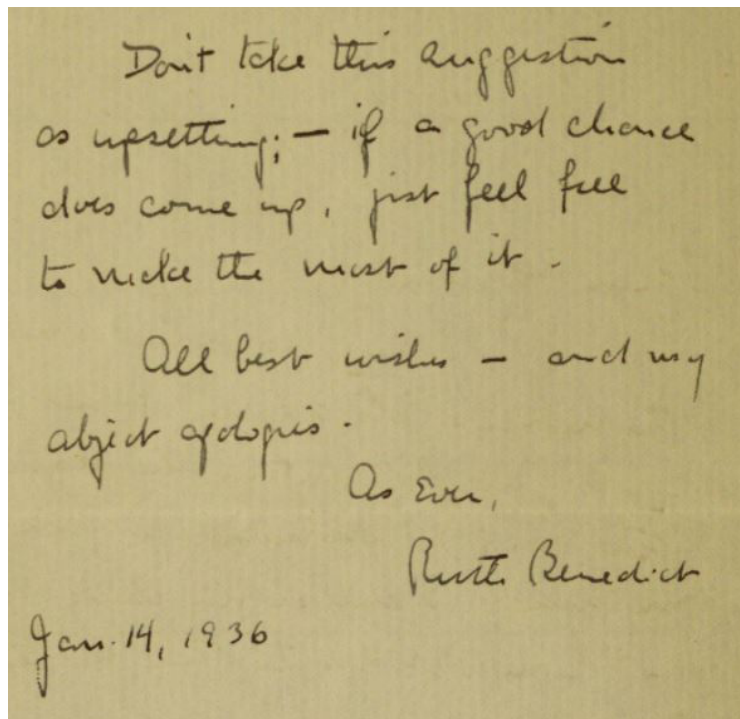
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Marian Smith on the Puyallup-Nisqually (cont'd):

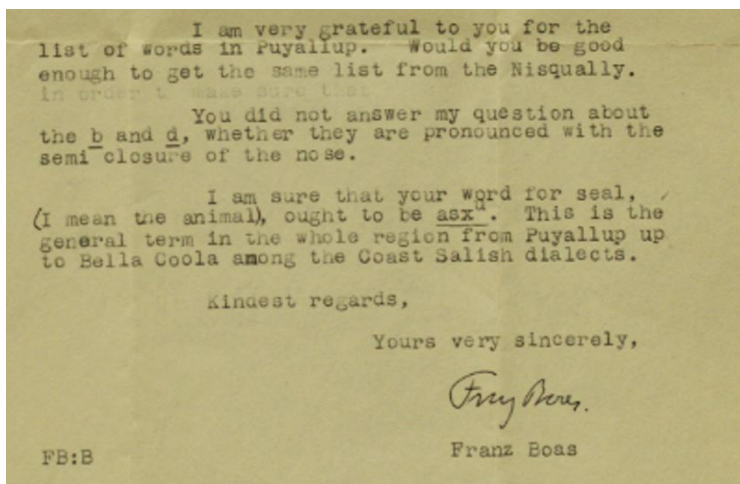
anthropology at the time had suggested she find another topic. She chose not to do so.

Let's return to how the book begins with that "Puyallup-Nisqually culture is gone."

I hope to begin a conversation by suggesting two explanations for that sentence.



The scholar who would later edit the book "The Puyallup-Nisqually" wrote Marian Smith to suggest switching her focus to another tribe.



Six months later, Columbia's giant of anthropology, Franz Boas, must have eventually approved of Smith's choice as he thanked her in this letter for information.

One is that she personally felt that way. Columbia's scholars spent a lot of time with a lot of Tribes in ways now thought controversial and problematic.

Here's another option: Maybe it took the entire cultural arrogance of the Columbia University Anthropology department to put its weight behind that statement. Here's something I probably should have told you earlier: the book was edited by Ruth Benedict.

We just don't know the origins of the sentence. But we do know some of the reaction. A [paper written by a doctoral student at the University of Washington](#) addresses "culture is gone." Karen Marie Capuder wrote in 2013:

"It is undoubtedly true, as will be recounted throughout this dissertation, that incredible and often devastating changes had been wrought in peoples' lives throughout Puget Sound due to the active efforts of federal and Christian assimilationists to destroy First Peoples' systems of governance, spiritual praxis and land tenure, as well as their languages, subsistence strategies and sacred responsibilities within their sentient homelands. It is not entirely true, however, to say that "Puyallup-Nisqually culture is gone."

Very fortunately, there is more to the work than that sentence. Any interchange with a Tribal member was precious in the late 1930s and offered vital information, whatever "scholars" at Columbia University wanted to judge about it. Capuder notes in her dissertation that Smith gathered important materials still of use today.

For example, the new Puyallup Tribe museum quotes one of the most disturbing passages in her book in one of their displays. Smith wrote that people in Tacoma had learned that if you wanted to get land from a Native, you could arrange to have them hit and killed by a train so that it looked like an accident. Even though Smith was an anthropologist, she wrote this about present times. Surely that was a deliberate decision on her part to include a present-day detail.

In summary, we can be glad Marian Smith did not heed the gentle coaching of her mentors. We can be glad she interviewed and published recollections.

If you would like to know more about recollections specific to the Puget Sound Treaty War and Fort Steilacoom, please [read the full version of this story](#).



Virtual Tour of Historic Fort Steilacoom

In this virtual tour, Chris Staudinger of [Pretty Gritty Tours](#) eagerly emphasizes the significance of Historic Fort Steilacoom and its museum as he encourages visitors to take a tour in person.

[Watch the entire 53-minute tour on YouTube.](#) Here are some key points:

- Staudinger features excellent footage from inside each of the buildings that remain.
- The museum's diorama is used as a reference so viewers can get a sense of where each existing building is located within the original layout.
- Staudinger, an engaging storyteller, gives us the history Fort Steilacoom's historical relevance, including the fort's establishment, and the events, the people, the injustices, turmoil, and victories that generated the site's legacy.
- There's an intriguing focus on the home life of soldiers and their families.
- Highlights many "moments in time" with daily schedules, sleeping quarters, the medical office, and pastimes.
- There are some inviting aspects that make one want to visit because a virtual tour couldn't do justice. We see the research library and some interactive exhibits. Plus, we get a teasing look at reenactments; and the tour makes the Christmas tour very appealing (see page 8 for more info!).
- The overall production value really enhances this virtual experience. This video was very well done.



Candlelight Christmas at our fort

A Victorian Christmas by candlelight at Historic Fort Steilacoom 1859 (in 2023)

Living historians re-enacted the Christmas of 1859, highlighting how the holiday season might have been celebrated in these buildings 165 years ago.

Re-enactors gathered in candlelight to talk, sing, dance, and dine as our predecessors did in these buildings. Visitors witnessed scenes as if spirits from the future.



Above photos by Steve Dunkelberger.



Photo by Laurel Lemke.



Photo by Walter Neary.

Washington State Archives 101:

The regional branch system

Part of the Archives 101 series about Washington State Archives, a division of the Office of the Secretary of State, [this video is about the Archives' regional branches](#), what they hold, and why their holdings are preserved at the regional level instead of the state level.

For more information, visit their site or the Digital Archives website:

www.sos.wa.gov/archives | digitalarchives.wa.gov

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



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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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