



THE OLYMPIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY VOL.1 No.1 ~ WINTER 2004 - 2005

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Welcome to the first newsletter of the Olympia Historical Society. We want this publication to accomplish several things. It should record the Society's efforts. It should showcase elements of Olympia's history that help tell its story. Most of all, it should entertain and spark the curiosity of its reader to learn more. It's a tall order. But since historians love to share, it should be a fun order to fill!

We formed in 2002 when we realized that of all the communities in Thurston County, Olympia was the only one without an historical society! The community had relied on a succession of history and heritage related organizations to document our fascinating history - the State Capitol Museum and the City's Heritage Commission serving most recently.

Over the last three years, we have focused on public programs and events to share Olympia's history with the community. Now, in 2005, we are stretching out to include this newsletter. Edward Echtle and Roger Easton are dedicated historians and co-editors. I am excited about their work and hope you enjoy it too!

Thank you for your interest and support of history and heritage - especially in Olympia.

Annamary Fitzgerald

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THE SOCIETY'S FIRST ORAL HISTORY PROJECT IS UNDERWAY!

By Lois Fenske

Early in 2004, the Olympia Historical Society was approached by Evergreen State College student, Erica Stillman. She inquired about the possibility of an internship with the Society to further develop her oral history skills. Coincidentally, several of us in the Society had been talking about the need for some one to record Winnifred Olsen's wonderful stories about her years in Olympia as a life-long teacher, community leader, and volunteer. The timing was perfect and the Olympia Historical Society became the host organization for Erica's internship in oral history.

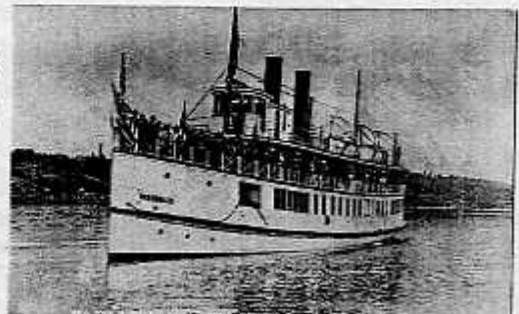
Erica met Winnie and the two spent hours and hours talking and recording the events of Winnie's life. The taped interviews are now complete and the final transcribing is being done. Winnie will review the transcripts and the oral history will then be published, with photos, by the Olympia Historical Society.

This publication is actually the Society's second publication. Last year, as another part of Erica's internship, she developed an Oral History Guide Book for the Society so that future histories of Olympia's citizens could be more easily and systematically accomplished. The publication includes guidelines to start a project, research and interview basics, and specific questions to ask regarding Olympia's history. Sample release forms for oral histories, images, and documents were also developed for the Society's use.

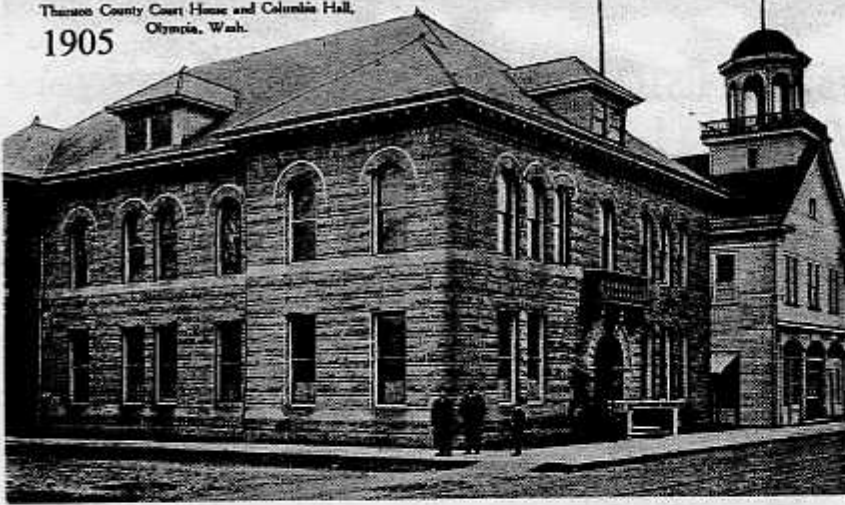
Erica has contributed a great deal to the Society and we look forward to the publication of Winnie's oral history this spring. *

Steamer *Nisqually*
at Olympia,
ca 1900.

UW Digital
Archives Photo



Thurston County Court House and Columbia Hall,
Olympia, Wash.
1905



2003



WHERE WAS THAT?

These photos show the northeast corner of Fourth Avenue and Washington Street in 1905 and in 2003. The sandstone building was the third building to serve as county courthouse. It was built in 1900 to replace the second courthouse (now known as the "Old Capitol"), when that was converted to state government use. The building immediately to the right was "Columbia Hall," Olympia's first city hall. The sandstone courthouse was razed in 1929 after county officials deemed it unsafe and inadequate for their needs. Historian Gordon Newell wrote that contractors hired to demolish the building found it "to be about as flimsy as the great pyramids... By the time the monolithic basement jail was chipped away the contractors were convinced that they, if not the county's voters, were the victims of political propaganda." The site is now the location of the State Theater (built in 1950), currently home to Harlequin Productions.*

Top: University of Washington Digital Archives. Bottom: Olympia Historical Society Photo.

THE OLYMPIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Stump the Board!

Why does it say "Sunset" in the Sidewalk on Legion Way between Franklin and Adams? What happened to First, Second and Third Avenue? What was the "Pagan Frolic?" What's the deal with the totem pole where Capitol Lake drains into Budd Inlet?

Do you have a question about Olympia History? Ask the Society! We'll do our best to answer whatever questions come our way. Just send in your query by email or post and we'll put our crack team of history experts* on it. We'll print the questions and the answers in upcoming issues of the Olympia Historical Society Quarterly. *

*Or whoever of us is willing to spend the time...

"ITS FUTURE IS A BRIGHT ONE"

An excerpt from *Puget Sound Business Directory and Guide to Washington Territory, 1872.*

Transcribed and edited by Roger Easton and Edward Echte

Introduction

On the cusp of the beginning of the railroad era in Western Washington, two Olympia newspaper editors combined resources to produce a regional directory. John Miller Murphy of the *Washington Standard*, along with John Harned of the *Puget Sound Courier* published the *Puget Sound Business Directory and Guide to Washington Territory, 1872*, subtitled, "*Comprising a Correct History of Washington Territory; Together With a Directory of Olympia, Steilacoom, Seattle, Port Madison, Port Gamble, Port Ludlow, Port Townsend, and Every Town and Hamlet on Puget Sound.*" Written as a tool to promote the region to potential immigrants and investors from "the states" and abroad, the guide is a valuable economic, political, and social snapshot of the time.

Each community had its own section in the directory. The introduction to the Olympia section

is a very early description of the city and contains an abbreviated recounting of its history. Written in the early 1870s, it downplays the disappointment local residents felt at losing a railroad connection, while it captures the determination of the community to continue to grow and flourish as a population center. Murphy and Harned lauded Olympia's residents as calm, orderly, quiet, god-fearing, and literate, relying on a positive "spin" as the best strategy to promote continued growth despite losing the advantages promised by the railroad.

While original copies exist in rare book collections in area libraries, researchers wishing to use this resource will find the microfilmed copies at the Washington State Library, University of Washington and elsewhere much easier to access and reproduce.

OLYMPIA

Olympia, the Capital of Washington Territory and county seat of Thurston County, is situated at the head of Puget Sound, on a peninsula formed by Budd's Inlet, an arm of the Sound. This peninsula is about one mile and a half in length, and forms the limits of the city proper, though several additions have been made, which extends its limits for several miles more. Olympia has a population of about 1,800, is handsomely situated, possesses fine broad streets, shaded by the beautiful maple peculiar to the country. It has several churches, two public schools and two or three private ones, a female academy, several societies, seven newspapers, and many handsome private residences. The country back of it is heavily wooded, and the shores of the inlet are steep and bold until they reach within a quarter of a mile of the city, where they shoal suddenly. The large mud flat extends for a distance of a mile and a half at low tide, and this is the

greatest drawback to the place.¹ At high tide the water is deep enough for any class of vessels, but at low water small boats are even left beached. The consequence of this is that steamers have to come in at high tide and leave on the next. Should the city reach the importance that is anticipated for it, this defect to navigation can be readily overcome by means of a breakwater or a dock. Being the head of navigation, the principal steamers plying the length of the Sound make it their headquarters. It is also important from its position as the entrepôt between the Sound country and Oregon, and the only city of importance in an extensive region of the country. The stages for the Columbia River leave daily, and the steamer running to Victoria and intermediate

¹ Most of the mudflat is now below the Olympia port fill. The original shoreline is approximately two blocks north of State St. In recent years the city placed markers denoting the original shoreline and produced an interpretive brochure for a walking tour, available at the State Capitol Visitor Center.

ports semi-weekly, besides many other crafts plying between the various Sound ports.²

In aspect the city is decidedly pleasing, private residences being handsome and numerous, and all wear an air of neatness and comfort. Each dwelling has a flower garden attached, and the number and brilliancy of the flora are very striking and strongly suggestive of refinement of their cultivators. Perhaps there is not a city on the coast so arcadian in appearance, a circumstance which gives it a unique charm. It contains five churches, the Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian and Baptist being in charge of regular pastors, and the Catholic holding meetings only occasionally.³ The inhabitants are generally churchgoers, a fact which bespeaks much for their moral culture and order and explains why crime of any kind is a rare occurrence. The schools are of a superior order and well attended. Education is a matter in which all are interested, as may be inferred from the number of schools. There are three hundred and twelve children in the district, and of this number one-half attend the public schools; the remainder are scattered among the private institutions.

There is not another city of equal population in the world that publishes so many newspapers, there being two dailies and five weeklies. If the number of newspapers published in a country or city are taken as mental photographs of the intelligence of the people, then the populace of Olympia must take the first rank intellectually. These papers, though not equal in size to those of large cities, nevertheless display all the activity of more pretentious journals, and devote much space and attention to local matters, just what they should do. Every item of any importance is given in detail, hence we doubt if the people in any section of the country are better acquainted with all matters transpiring in their midst than those of Washington Territory. Though the population is small the

papers are well supported, a kindness which the latter reciprocate by carefully guarding the interest of the people. The city has two libraries, that of the Territory⁴ and one belonging to the Good Templars. Both of these contain over six thousand volumes, and are open to the public. The Good Templars also have a reading room, liberally supplied with newspapers, to which the general public are welcome.

Of the principal societies there are representative Lodges, in good financial condition and well attended. The city has three active organizations in a band, a baseball and boat club. During the summer season the former plays twice a week in the public park, the citizens raising a subscription to pay for such refined amusement.⁵ These outdoor concerts, which are given in the evening, when the labors of the day are o'er, are well attended by an attentive and appreciative silence. The clubs also have friendly contests among themselves, or test their skill against clubs of neighboring cities, and so keep up an active interest in their welfare. Improvements are constantly being made, and private residences and stores are constantly being erected. The number of improvements this year, however, has not been so numerous as they should, as persons did not like to invest their money until the terminus of the Northern Pacific Railroad at that point was located. This has now been settled, hence the people will now know how to act, as the speculations and anxieties incident to it are past.⁶

There are five manufactories [*sic*] in the city – a boot and shoe manufactory, two soap manufactories, one foundry and a lumber and sash and door manufactory. This is a small number

² Competition with newer settlements, such as Seattle, Tacoma, and Port Townsend with more accessible waterfronts made Olympia residents defensive of their less than ideal port.

³ In the 1870s, influxes of Irish and Italian immigrants coming to fill industrial jobs in the United States were primarily of the Catholic faith. Anti-immigrant sentiment at the time decried the influx of Catholics as detrimental to the dominant Protestant culture. The writer may have been trying to indicate that few of these new immigrants had yet settled in Olympia.

⁴ Isaac Stevens, first Governor of Washington Territory, brought the original volumes for this library when he came to Olympia in 1853. The Washington State Library now houses this collection, available to researchers.

⁵ Presently "Sylvester Park" named for Edmund Sylvester, a founder of Olympia. The author does not mention that the city enacted an ordinance banning cattle from the park not long before this writing.

⁶ In 1872 the Northern Pacific Railroad was building its line north from Kalama to the Sound. Originally, residents and speculators expected Olympia to be the terminus. When the construction crews reached the present site of Tenino, they turned northeast to Commencement Bay and founded "New Tacoma" instead. At the time of the Directory's publishing, Olympia promoters were reeling from the economic blow of being bypassed by the railroad.

owing to the superior facilities of Tumwater, only a mile and a half distant, where they are numerous.⁷ Olympia is connected with Tumwater by a bridge five hundred and twenty feet long which spans the channel formed by the union of the Des Chutes River with Budd's Inlet.⁸ Its [Olympia's] peninsula conformation also separates it from the western shore, but communications is established by means of a well built, substantial bridge 2,030 feet long.⁹ The commerce of Olympia is not very extensive as yet, and is confined to the region of country extending from its location to Gray's Harbor.

The principal stores keep a fine assortment of goods, and of a character to suit all classes of people. A well established bank is also located in the city, and travelers will find the hotels comfortable. The population is the most quiet, perhaps, on the continent; riotous drunkenness is rarely seen on the street, and assaults, shooting affrays and kindred crimes are comparatively unknown. A moral tone, stringent in its judgment, seems to pervade the community and to condemn all riotousness.

The scenery visible from the city is charming and grand. Facing northward that beautiful body of water, the Sound, tranquil as a lake and crystalline as a mirror, its borders heavily fringed with evergreens and relieved by the ever-pleasing snowy Olympic Range in the background, is seen, and makes a tableau that can be witnessed from few cities. On summer evenings the scene from the city is delightful. Flitting up and down the bay, gracefully gliding along, or churning the water with ponderous wheels, are fragile canoes of the natives, the white-winged yachts laden with merry parties, and handsome steamers, and contrasting, yet

harmonizing with the general landscape, make a picture possessing grandeur and repose, tranquility and movement. Nature has certainly been kind to Olympia in beauty of surroundings.

The early history of the city may be expressed in a few words. The first settlement was made by Mr. Edmund Sylvester, now a merchant of the place, in 1846, and he resided on his claim until the breaking out of the gold excitement in California, when he hied to the new-found Eldorado, and tarried there nearly two years. On his return he found that some more adventurous pioneers had joined him and located convenient to him. The site of the present city was laid out in 1851, and as vessels began to frequent it in the quest of lumber for the San Francisco market, a few stores were started to supply the logging camps, and from this small beginning it has grown in importance daily. A saw mill had also been erected at Tumwater by Col. Simmons and his party, who had crossed the plains from Illinois in 1844, and this also aided the development of the place by furnishing employment to several persons. The road leading to Tumwater was opened in 1852, and a weekly mail, on horseback and by canoe, kept communication open with Oregon and the outside world. The first mail was carried down the Sound in 1854, by the steamer *Major Tompkins*, for in the few intervening years several towns had sprung up, extending as far north as Port Townsend.

The *Columbian* was issued in September, 1852, and was the only paper north of Oregon. Its printers were Wiley & McElroy. The first church was built by the Catholics in 1852 and the school house was opened in 1853. In the autumn of the latter year Gen. Isaac I. Stevens, who had surveyed an overland route for the North Pacific Railroad, was made Governor of the Territory, and he chose Olympia as the Capital, it being centrally located.

Since then the city has quietly, though steadily, grown, and is constantly improving. It has not sprung up like the mushroom towns on certain railroads, but it has improved more steadily and permanently than any of them. That its future is a bright one is evident from its position, importance, and the extensive area of agricultural land which surrounds it and depends upon it for a market. *

⁷ Tumwater falls water power supported a number of the area's earliest industrial enterprises, including a grist mill, sawmill, pipe factory, tannery, furniture manufacturing, among others.

⁸ The bridge, which included a drawspan to allow water access to industry at Tumwater Falls, is long gone. It was located under present Interstate 5, and connected what is now Tumwater's Historical Park to the foot of "Oregon Trail Drive" in the South Capitol neighborhood. The bridge crossed what is now the head of Capitol Lake, formerly a substantial tide-flat prior to the construction of the retention dam at 5th Avenue in the 1950s.

⁹ This was the original Fourth Avenue bridge, which extended from Columbia Street to the Westside. It also contained drawspans to allow waterborne traffic access to what is now Capitol Lake; then a tidal basin.

