THE INDIAN WAR

OLYMPIA, THURSTON COUNTY, WASHINGTON TERRITORY

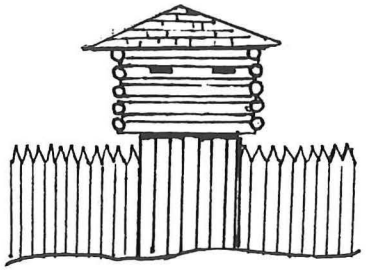
Formerly

SMITHFIELD, LEWIS COUNTY, OREGON TERRITORY

Formerly

CHEETWOOT

Thursday Afternoon, October 30, 1856



"For these were dark days of the betrayed and the betrayers, of sudden ambush and death in the forests and along the sunset shores...It was a story written in smoke and flashing lights--the smoke of signal fires on the ridge of the Cascades, the smoke of burning cabins, the smoke of the cannon of the DECATUR, too. It was a story written in torches suddenly lighted, then extinguished--and of fish-oil lamps pinched out in fear."

Puget Sound Profiles Vol 1 by Nard Jones

Today marks one of the final chapters of the Indian War on Puget Sound. It has been a time of great upheaval for this emerging pioneer community known as Olympia, and for the past residents of Cheetwoot who no longer call the peninsula their home. On this grey fall afternoon, the volunteer army of farmers, loggers, and shopkeepers, has officially been disbanded. Tomorrow the town's weekly newspaper, The Pioneer and Democrat, will report the event.

Governor Isaac Stevens is speaking to a group of weary settlers on an uneven plot of land, full of stumps, mud and a few grazing cattle. This spot is optimistically referred to as the "town square." The volunteers now gathered have been working under a constant state of tension for the past two years, clearing roads, guarding homes and livestock, fortifying the town, and hauling supplies to vulnerable army outposts.

The backdrop for the governor's speech is a large, rough-hewn blockhouse, built in haste last spring. But the real testimonial to this resourceful frontier town can be seen down on Fourth Street. There, a massive log stockade rises 15 feet above *both sides* of the street, spanning the distance from shore to shore. A bastion with an armed guard watches over each end of the stockade, while on Main Street another blockhouse stands at the only entrance to the pioneer's "great wall." Positioned near a small opening in the tower, the town's cannon stands ready to fire on intruders. In case of an alarm, all citizens have agreed to gather north of the stockade, where the small business center of the

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village is located.

Beyond the frontier communities of Olympia and Tumwater, (formerly New Market), the tension extends to the distant forests and prairies where Leschi, Quiemuth and other members of the Indian Force remain in hiding. They talk of the land they knew, which is now parcelled off and governed by the laws of the "Bostons" (Americans). The Indians have no part in these laws, since a full-blooded Indian cannot vote. With winter approaching, Leschi and Quiemuth have exhausted most of their supplies and are talking of surrender.

It has been almost two years since the uneasy signing of the Medicine Creek Treaty at Nisqually. Most of the tribal people in southern Puget Sound have now moved to their designated reservation lands. For the past year they were living in internment camps on Squaxin and Fox Islands where many became sick and died. It was explained that if they did not relocate to the camps, they would find themselves in the crossfire of the Boston's war with the "hostiles." Yet despite untold hardships, two tribes will endure near Olympia for generations to come; the Nisqually and Squaxin Island Tribes.

Instead of the "boom town" that Olympia's founder Edmund Sylvester had predicted, buildings have been boarded up, and crops have gone unplanted. Lumber that was supposed to build the Marshville bridge on the western channel, went instead for the massive stockade. Fear of attacks caused a number of settlers to move south to the Willamette Valley.

Yet the hearty pioneers who have chosen to stay, are no strangers to adversity, and they believe in a brighter future for their town. These are people who can look at a waterfall and imagine a grist mill. They see farms and roads where the forests now stand, and they can gaze at the rugged land around Budd Inlet and envision a thriving capital city someday. These are the builders.

Most of the immigrants in Olympia today, like the Simmons and Bush Families, came by wagon trains over treacherous mountain ranges and seemingly-endless deserts. They floated their wagons at river crossings, breathed trail dust every day, savored meager allotments of food and water, and prayed each night that their wagon train would be spared disease, accidents or Indian attacks.

Others, like Edmund Sylvester and John Swan, came by sailing ship. They weathered choppy seas and long voyages around the Horn, and then travelled up the west coast of two continents. Or they sailed to Panama like Margaret Stevens, crossed the isthmus by wagon and mule, and then boarded another ship north. To enter Puget Sound, they faced the

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dangerous Straits of Juan de Fuca. Or they crossed the bar at the Columbia River which sent many ships to a watery grave. Even after a safe crossing at the Columbia, settlers still had to trudge north for days on the muddy, tangled Cowlitz Trail.

A decade ago, in the middle of winter, Edmund Sylvester and his partner Levi Smith hiked that final branch of the Oregon Trail. Levi staked his claim on a sandy point at the southern reach of Budd Inlet, named it "Smithfield," and built a 16 X 16 foot log cabin near the beach. His two acre clearing and the dense woods behind it would one day evolve into the heart of Olympia's downtown. Edmund chose land to the south, on Chambers Prairie, but soon decided to join his partner on the peninsula. They renamed the waterfront claim "Smithter." Unfortunately Levi did not live long enough to see his picturesque property become a town. Late in the summer of 1848, Olympia's first founder suffered an epileptic seizure in the waters of Budd Inlet, and drowned.

Edmund was left with the land, and the task of carrying on the dream of his partner. In January of 1850, he laid out the town and donated blocks for a public square, a school, a customs house, and 10 acres for capitol grounds. His friend Charles Smith suggested the town be named in honor of the Olympic Mountains, and this is how the peninsula made its final transition from Cheetwoot to Smithfield to Smithter to Olympia.

In spite of the recent troubles, Edmund and his wife Clara have cause to celebrate as they watch the final touches being put on their grand "Italianate" home facing the public square. The windows in the third story tower offer a sweeping view of the town, the saltwater and the snow-capped peaks beyond. On this day, the landmark Sylvester Home is brand new...a symbol for the pioneers of prosperity and better times to come.

Just behind their home stands the Masonic Hall with its stately columns, where the Masons meet on alternate Saturdays and private school is held. If you walked south up the hill you would come to the "temporary" wood frame capitol building where the legislature will soon be in session. Governor Stevens "Greek Revival" style home is being constructed nearby. The Governor might have difficulty believing this "temporary" capitol building will host Washington's government for the next 45 years!

On the eastern point of Budd Inlet, smoke is rising from the Catholic Mission, where Father Ricard runs the school for Indian boys. Closer in, on the Eastside, the Bigelow house is almost finished. Just south is John Swan's cabin, the first house built after Olympia was named back in 1850.

Ann Elizabeth Bigelow, Olympia's first teacher, and Margaret, the governor's wife, are discussing the merits of the new two-story school

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that John Swan built last year on the edge of town. They remember the first log cabin schoolhouse, where the roof collapsed during a heavy snow.

Leaning against the corral fence in the town square, two old friends are reminiscing. George Bush and Michael T. Simmons have come a long way since the days when they traveled together on the wagon train from Saint Joseph, Missouri.

The area around Chinook Street which once housed a thriving Coast Salish community, is now dotted with cabins and a few storefronts. Native Americans still working in town stay close to their employers and friends for safety. George's Indian friend wears a blue cap with a red band, knitted by local women, to signify that he is not one of the "hostiles."

Over on Main Street, Elizabeth Simmons, Isabella Bush and several of their children tend a cartload of supplies after a morning shopping. They will start back to their farms soon, dodging mud puddles and stumps on the primitive road south . The women have been to Rutledge & Lowe's Store in the Post Office Building on Second to purchase soap, candles and molasses. Though they spent only 10 cents for salmon and 20 cents for pork at Mitchell's Meat Market, the letter they sent to a relative back east was a costly 40 cents for postage. They bought drygoods at Bettman's, medicine from Doc Willard, stove supplies at Ayers Tin Shop, and, at Wood's Cooperage, they picked up a barrel of fish oil for their lamps.

The family of immigrants in the covered wagon that just passed them is headed for Sylvester's Livery Stable on Third Street. (This building will serve as the depot for the overland stages for many years.) The family will spend a few nights at Galliher's Boarding House, before they move to their donation land claim and begin farming. A man walking toward them is hauling water from the town spring at Fourth and Main.

Standing near the blockhouse, with plans under his arm, is a young lawyer named Daniel Bigelow. He is working to create a building for higher learning called the Puget Sound Institute, a few blocks south of town. Across the square from Daniel, John Swan and Stephen Ruddell are comparing notes on schools since John recently finished the Olympia school and Stephen built the first school in what will one day be Lacey.

Another person in the town square today is not an American and not a resident of this town, yet he probably knows the territory better than most. He is Dr. William Tolmie of the Hudson's Bay Company. His company has been in competition with the American settlers, but they are not enemies. During the recent unrest, the British sent the steamer Beaver to Olympia to patrol the waters. The Beaver is well known in this region as the first steamship on Puget Sound. It is helping pull logs today, but will

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soon return north. Dr. Tolmie is here in defense of his friend Leschi.

It has been almost seven years since Olympia's first streets were laid out, and about five years since Thurston County was created out of Lewis County. Three and a half years ago Washington Territory separated from Oregon Territory, and almost two years ago Olympia was named the permanent territorial capital by the second legislature.

Back in February of 1854, the first legislature spent most of their time talking about the construction of roads. By only one vote, they enacted a law denying women's suffrage. The tie breaking vote had been cast by a legislator with an Indian wife. Since his wife would still not have been allowed to vote, he opposed suffrage for all women.

Though the trees in town have been logged, many of the stumps remain, and they are a nuisance to maneuver around with a horse and wagon. (Down in Portland, stumps are painted white so people won't bump into them at night!) Near the end of Olympia's Main Street the lone pine stands in front of the Washington Hotel, where last night over 100 people dined on pork and chicken at a dinner for Governor Stevens and Colonel Shaw. Afterwards the tables were moved outside and a dance was enjoyed by all. Dances with fiddle music are very popular in town, and often stretch into the early morning hours. At the Washington Hotel you will also find a reading room, with the beginnings of the territorial library.

Olympia does not yet have a jail, fire hall, bank or hospital, but it can boast a theater, bowling alley, several stores and a few saloons, as well as a public school. The school will reopen in a few days, and will continue for five months. To the east, Reverend Devore is putting the final coat of paint on the new Methodist Church, and to the north the U.S. Mail Steamer Traveler is docked at Giddings Wharf. The wharf extends 300 feet from the foot of Main Street, and a large ship can tie up there for just $5 a day. The customs house, which was the first on Puget Sound, is now used for other purposes, since operations moved to Port Townsend.

In the world beyond Puget Sound, the Crimean War has ended for Europe and Russia, while in the United States, the question of slavery is dividing the nation and becoming more violent each day.

The big talk in Olympia these days is about the possible construction of a westside bridge, the need for faster mail service to the States, and about the new threshing machine that T.W. Glasgow introduced last month.

Though the volunteer army has been disbanded, a number of Puget Sound battles are yet to be fought. But they will not be fought in Olympia. Meanwhile, the grand new Sylvester Home will stand sentinel over the building and rebuilding of this Capital City for the next 100 years.

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