

## In Their Own Words: Interview With John Swan, 1878

Transcribed and researched by Roger Easton and Edward Echtele

In the late 1800s, historian Hubert Howe Bancroft (1832–1918) traveled the western territories gathering information for his multi-volume histories of the region. A major component of his research was first hand interviews with early settlers. Bancroft visited Olympia in 1878 and interviewed several pioneers including Olympia founder Edmund Sylvester. He also spoke with others, including John M Swan, (1823-1904) whose homestead is now the east side of Olympia.

Swan arrived in Olympia in 1850 and was a shipwright by trade. He built his first home in Olympia on one of the lots given away by the town's founder Edmund Sylvester to anyone who agreed to build a house and stay. Swan then took up a claim just east of Sylvester's. Originally, the eastside was separated from what is now downtown Olympia by a tidal inlet that stretched south all the way to the present intersection of Union Ave. and Plumb St. Swan platted a separate city, which he called "Swantown," and locals referred to the inlet as "Swantown slough." . In 1856 settlers constructed a bridge to connect Swantown and Olympia on 4<sup>th</sup> St, approximately between present Cherry and Chestnut Streets. Olympia absorbed Swantown and filling eradicated the slough in the early 1900s, though the name lives on in the Swantown Marina development.

Bancroft's research and collected manuscripts eventually became the core of the Bancroft Library at University of California Berkeley where this transcript and many other such interviews reside today. Originally written in longhand, the interview is presented here as written, misspellings and bad grammar intact. The text includes notes in [brackets] for clarification and annotations so that the reader may follow obscure references made by Swan.

### The Colonisations Around Puget Sound

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J. M. Swan  
Olympia, W.T.  
1878

This article was continued from a conversation with John M. Swan by H. Bancroft at the Hotel Olympia, Sunday evening, June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1878. Present were John M. Swan, H. Bancroft and Frank Tarbell.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Swan said:

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Tarbell was another early arrival to Olympia. He is listed in early directories as an insurance agent in downtown Olympia. He also served in a number of elected positions, including as Territorial Treasurer, 1875-1880.

There is one little thing I happened to think of while the Captain (Tarbell) was relating his experiences. It would have a bearing upon the extent of country the Hudson Bay Company<sup>2</sup> carried their business on in. I remember hearing Mr. Work<sup>3</sup> tell once about camping when he was a trapper. He was a trapper when he was a young man camping on the very ground where the gold was discovered. I do not remember anything about it only that this was the place where gold was first discovered in California. He said he had a body of men under his charge for a considerable time on the very spot where the gold was first discovered.<sup>4</sup> When I heard him tell this it was a long time before gold was discovered on the Fraser at all.<sup>5</sup> He referred to the place where gold was first discovered, at Coloma [California] I suppose.

I left San Francisco on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of April 1849 and went to the mines. Was in the mines about three months and got sick up there! Got the bilious complaint.<sup>6</sup> As far as society was concerned it was pretty rough. I left the mines on account of my health. After staying there a while my health was such that I got a little afraid of California. I thought I would get away from there. I understand that Vancouver Island was to be colonized, and thought I would go up there. I found a vessel coming up to the Sound. Men who went from this section to the mines had purchased it. They bought the vessel on a sort of speculation. I presume it was the only way they could get here. The vessel came from Calais or Eastport, Maine I think. It was the "Orbit"<sup>7</sup>

I was in Victoria only one day ashore. I did not like their terms and condition of settlement and came along with the vessel to its destination. There was an inducement to come here, [Olympia] of course. It was expected by the few people that were in Oregon, and on the Sound that every settler was going to get 640 acres of land for nothing. They got it afterwards. This was in the winter of 1849-50. The bill passed Congress on the 27<sup>th</sup> of the following September. The provisions of the bill were that a single man would get 320 acres and a man and wife 640 acres. That is what they called the Donation [Act?] I took up the claim adjoining Sylvester's<sup>8</sup> in the spring of 1850. That was before the town was laid out here. When that vessel came up here Simmons<sup>9</sup> had two shares in here and

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<sup>2</sup> The Hudson's Bay Company had extensive operations in the Pacific Northwest prior to American settlement. Fort Nisqually was founded in 1833 near present day Dupont and was the center for their fur trapping and agricultural activities in present Pierce and Thurston Counties.

<sup>3</sup> John Work was employed of the Hudson's Bay Company 1823-1861 as a clerk and trader. During his tenure he traveled extensively and participated in the Bonaventure (Sacramento) River Expedition of 1833 into northern California, seeking new sources of furs. In 1854 he was assigned to Fort Nisqually which was in the process of divesting its assets in Washington Territory.

<sup>4</sup> James Marshall discovered gold while constructing the millrace for John Sutter's Mill in 1848.

<sup>5</sup> The Gold Rush on the Fraser River, British Columbia was in 1858.

<sup>6</sup> Most likely diarrhea.

<sup>7</sup> When news of the 1848 Gold Strike reached Puget Sound, many settlers to set out for the mines, including Isaac N. Ebey, B.F. Shaw, Edmund Sylvester and George Moore. When their dreams of riches didn't "pan out," they purchased the brig *Orbit* to carry themselves and saleable goods back to Puget Sound with the plan to open a mercantile at what is now Olympia.

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Sylvester, who jointly claimed the future site of Olympia with Levi Smith. Smith died in 1848 and Sylvester became the sole owner.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Troutman Simmons, who arrived in 1845 with the Simmons-Bush Party, founded New Market at Tumwater falls, the first American settlement on Puget Sound.

he was the leading one here at the time. When he came here previously to that, he built a sawmill and a small gristmill at Tumwater.<sup>10</sup> I think it would be 1848. He sold the Tumwater property that he had there to Crosby & Grey for \$35,000.<sup>11</sup> At the time I came here he was a man with some money besides his interest in the vessel.<sup>12</sup> He had some lumber up there and that with shingles, he loaded on the vessel and sent her to San Francisco. [Charles Harte] Smith, who came up as a passenger at the time right from San Francisco, he went down as super cargo to dispose of that lumber in San Francisco; but he did not find the market there to his satisfaction, and instead of selling the lumber, he stored it. And with that same money that Simmons sent with him, and some security on the lumber he bought up a stock of goods. Simmons and Smith started merchandising in Olympia. That was the first store; that was in 1850. I think they arrived with the goods in July 1850. It was a building 20 x 40 feet, two stories high made of undressed lumber. It was about the South West corner of First and Main Streets.<sup>13</sup> I do not think there was over 3 houses here at the time, aside from that store building.<sup>14</sup>

When Smith came up with those goods, [Captain Lafayette] Balch<sup>15</sup> came up with a vessel. He wanted to get some lots here. Sylvester donated some lots to Simmons and Smith as a bonus for starting the store and Balch wanted to get a location suitable for himself. Sylvester and he could not come to terms. Balch brought up from San Francisco the frame of a lumber building suitable for a large sized store. He landed part if not all of it on the beach here for the purpose of erecting it for a store. He afterwards put it on board his vessel again and went to Steilacoom with it. But the goods he brought up he left here and Henry C. Wilson<sup>16</sup> had charge of the store and sold the goods here; until he got the building put up at Steilacoom. The balance of the goods were taken down there.

Dr. Maynard, who started Seattle, resided in Olympia sometime before he went to Seattle. He came either in 1851 or 1852; I think probably in 1851 he crossed the plains. He must have been here over a year, probably two years. He was practicing medicine.<sup>17</sup> Maynard was married and left a wife in the states. Mrs. Maynard had half the claim and

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<sup>10</sup> Originally called "New Market" They chose the site for its proximity to saltwater for shipping and the water-power potential of Tumwater Falls.

<sup>11</sup> Captain Clanrick Crosby was a sea captain from Maine who relocated with his family to New Market on the advice of his brother Nathaniel, also a sea captain. Grey is probably L. C. Gray whose partnership with Crosby ended in 1865. Gray may have been a distant partner, as available records show him as residing in San Francisco.

<sup>12</sup> The brig *Grecian* which Crosby purchased specifically for the voyage.

<sup>13</sup> The Simmons and Smith store was located near the corner of present Thurston Ave and Capitol Way. This was the waterfront of Olympia prior to extensive filling.

<sup>14</sup> Swan is apparently disregarding the Squaxin dwellings that were located at what is now Fourth Avenue and Columbia Streets.

<sup>15</sup> Lafayette Balch was also a Maine sea captain. He founded the settlement of Steilacoom, which became the territory's first incorporated town.

<sup>16</sup> Henry C. Wilson later became one of the earliest settlers in Port Townsend, Washington.

<sup>17</sup> Dr. David Swinson Maynard (1808-1873) earned money cutting cordwood for sale in Olympia until relocated to Duwamps (now Seattle) in 1852. He later sold his claim which included much of what is now the Pioneer Square District after natives attacked Seattle during the 1856 Indian War. He relocated to a farm in West Seattle.

he had half. In the last few years, his first wife and son came out. I am of the impression that a portion of the claim that the second Mrs. Maynard held was not of good title. I think she lost it.<sup>18</sup> Maynard was the first man to settle there according to my knowledge; it was called after an Indian Chief that he was very friendly with.<sup>19</sup> He was a fine old man, too, old man Seattle. He seemed to be a good dispositioned man. He was a large, portly old man with good features.

When I called at the Hudson's Bay Office at Victoria, Governor Douglas<sup>20</sup> had a very comfortable seat not far from the fire. It happened that there was a long table between us and the fire, and it was a rather cold day. It sort of impressed me; I think I can see the picture of it now. It rather looked to me as though there would have been impropriety in moving the table away a little to allow those parties to have some of the benefit of a good fire on a cold day in December, along about Christmas time.

In regard to the hardy character of the Indians when I came out here, and how they could stand cold weather. I may mention that vessel the "Orbit" when she was being loaded with some lumber that was brought down from Tumwater; and she lay down here in the middle of the bay. The lumber was rafted down by the Indians. There was about two and one half feet of snow on the ground and the water was pretty tolerable cold. Well, they worked rafting that lumber in the water, and putting it on board the vessel, sometimes up to their knees in water without any clothing on them except a piece of blanket or something of that sort tied around their middle and they stood it very well. I know that several of us that were looking at them were shivering with the cold.

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<sup>18</sup> The personal life of "Doc" Maynard was the source of much public gossip among the pioneers. Maynard left a wife in the states when he came west to search for gold. On the Oregon Trail he met the recently widowed Catherine Broshears. Broshears was Michael T Simmons sister and her party was on their way to join Simmons in Tumwater. Maynard agreed to accompany the party to Tumwater, where he continued to court Broshears. Maynard petitioned the Oregon Territorial government to grant him status as a single person, based on a sworn statement by Maynard that they read as stating his first wife was not living. The territory granted the petition, and Maynard and Broshears married. However, when the first Mrs. Maynard arrived in Seattle, Maynard's marriage to Broshears was dissolved.

<sup>19</sup> Duwamish leader Sealth a.k.a. Seattle spent a great deal of time on Budd Inlet as it was a productive food gathering area shared by a number of tribes. Sealth was baptized by the French Catholic missionaries at Priest's Point and took the Christian name, Noah. Sealth suggested the East Side of Elliot Bay as a good site for a homestead, and Sealth accompanied Maynard when he traveled there to claim the land.

<sup>20</sup> Sir James Douglas, K.C.B, (1803 –1877) governed the colony of Vancouver Island from 1851-1864. Prior to his governorship, Douglas served as accountant and chief trader at the Hudson's Bay Co.'s Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River. During his governorship, Douglas supervised the colonization of Vancouver Island and later inland British Columbia; managed the influx of gold seekers during the 1858 Fraser River Gold Rush, and dispatched troops to San Juan Island during the 1859 boundary dispute with the US commonly known as the "Pig War."