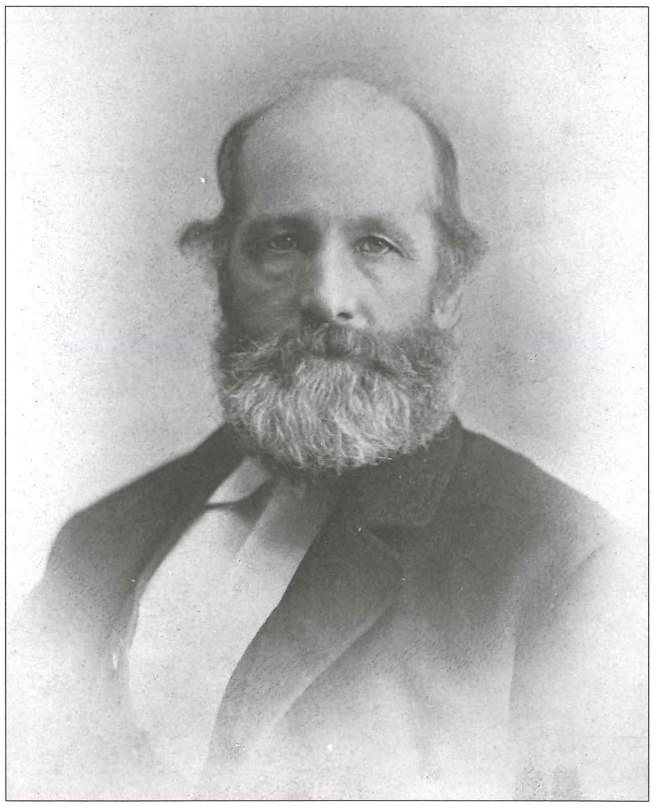
Creating Olympia: American Settlers and the Beginnings of a Frontier Community

by Drew W. Crooks

Even though the year 2009 is the 150th anniversary of the city's incorporation, people have lived in this area for a long time before 1859. Indeed, Native Americans have been here for thousands of years. The first Euro-Americans in the region were explorers and fur traders who arrived in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Only in the mid-1840s did American settlers appear upon the scene.

In 1845 the Simmons-Bush party of American settlers came to Southern Puget Sound and established the community of New Market (later known as Tumwater) at the base of Budd Inlet. Two Americans, Edmund Sylvester and Levi Lathrop Smith, settled to the north of New Market a year later. While Sylvester staked a claim inland on the edge of Chamber's Prairie, Smith picked as his home the spot that later became the town site of Olympia.



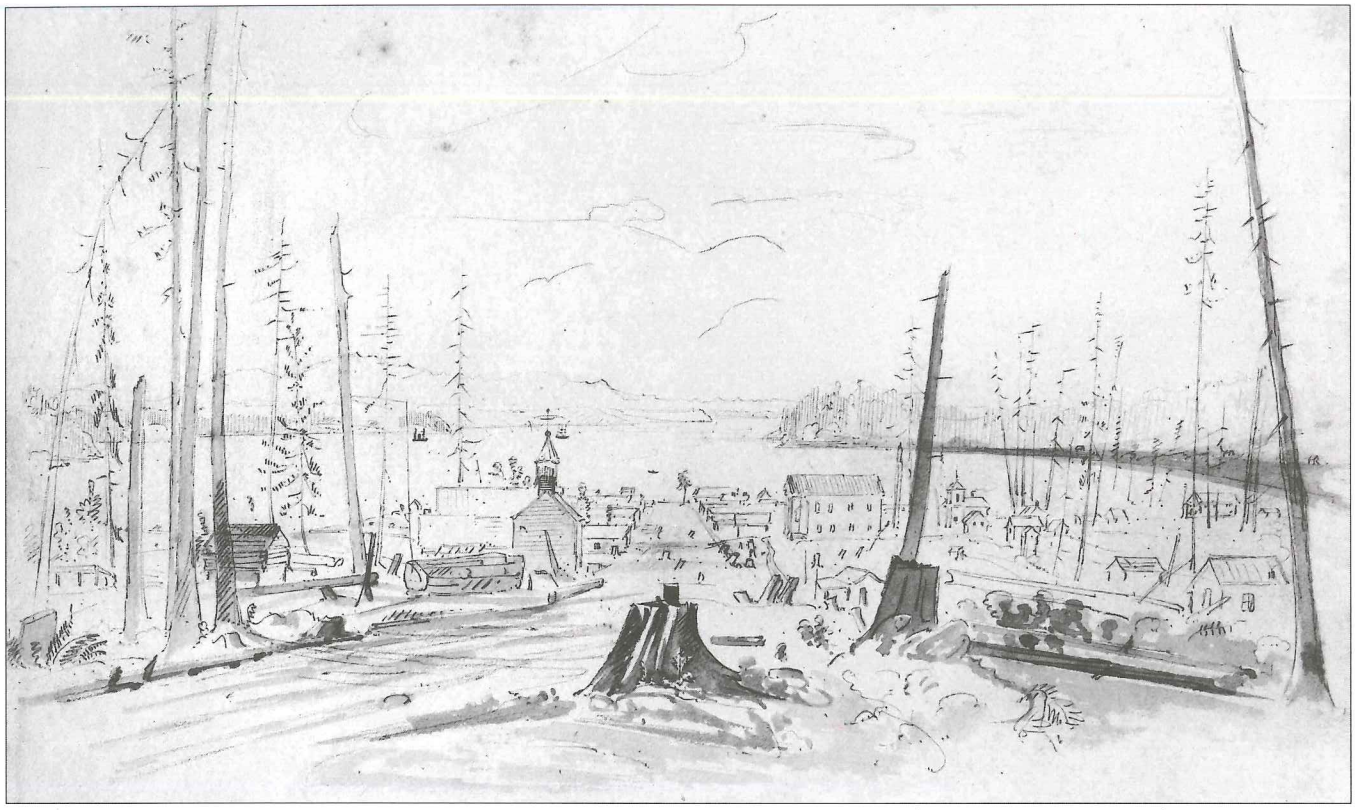
Edmund Sylvester, founder of Olympia. *Courtesy Washington State Archives, Susan Parish Collection.*

However, Levi Smith died unexpectedly in 1848, drowning in a canoe accident. Edmund Sylvester was his business partner. As a result, Sylvester inherited Smith's claim and moved to the waterfront. He did not enjoy his new surroundings for long. Early in 1849 Sylvester, like numerous other American pioneers on Puget Sound, caught gold fever and headed south towards the Californian mines. His claim on Budd Inlet was temporarily abandoned.

Edmund Sylvester failed to find his El Dorado in California. Instead, he joined many other prospectors in getting sick. He even lost the hair on his head. A discouraged Sylvester returned to Puget Sound on the brig "Orbit" in early January 1850. Many of the passengers and crew members on this American vessel were disappointed miners recovering from various illnesses.

"When I got back [to Puget Sound],' Edmund Sylvester later recalled, "I found things just as I had left them. I had my log cabin here and went right into it." [1] Still Sylvester and several other American settlers were now not content with the status quo of scattered land claims. They decided to create a new Euro-American community on the shores of Budd Inlet which would assist efforts to exploit the natural resources of the area, especially timber.

Pioneer John M. Swan described this event in his history of early Olympia: "At a mutual consultation held by [Michael T.] Simmons, [Isaac N.] Ebey, [John



Drawing of Olympia in 1857 by James Madison Alden. View looking north along Main Street (present-day Capitol Way). *Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.*

M.] Swan, [Benjamin F.] Shaw, [Edmund] Sylvester, [Charles H.] Smith, and [Henry] Murray, on January 12 [1850], it was decided to locate the future town on that certain point of land at the head of navigation on Budd's Inlet . . . On this point Edmund Sylvester had a land claim . . . and therefore became town-proprietor." [2]

At this time, according to Edmund Sylvester, "We layed off the town and had a map made. A man by the name of Dr. Fraser from Oregon City surveyed it first." [3] One street (Main Street which was later renamed Capitol Way) and eight or ten blocks were measured out in this initial survey. Dr. Fraser and his settler assistants used a line, a right angle triangle, and a ten foot pole in their work. The street was established as sixty feet in width while the blocks were two hundred and fifty feet square.

The community founders then faced an important decision. "Now the question was up for consideration," as John M. Swan later remembered, "what name shall we give the new town? The general view favored something new, that it should not be called after any other place nor by the name of any person. The Indian name of the location was 'Chit-hoot' [or 'Cheetwoot' meaning 'land of the Bear'], but that did not sound euphonical enough [to the Euro-Americans] to meet with much favor.

"After various proposed names being suggested and considered, Charles Hart Smith proposed the name 'Olympia,' which certainly had the novelty of being new, especially in this country, and it meeting the acceptability of those present, it was adopted as a pioneer name." [4] Most likely the settlers were inspired in the naming of their town by the view they had of the Olympic Mountains to the northwest.

Building started at once in Olympia, encouraged by the offer of free town lots by Edmund Sylvester to those on the scene who would construct housing. John M. Swan and Henry Murray, both trained shipwrights, built the first residences. Other houses followed, and Michael T. Simmons erected a store

at what is presently Thurston Avenue and Capitol Way. Economic activity focused on the shipping of timber to the booming San Francisco market.

More American settlers moved to Olympia. In 1852 the town was designated county seat for Thurston County. By the next year Olympia had grown to a population of several hundred. There were numerous businesses operating in the community, including a weekly newspaper. It was not surprising to the pioneers of Puget Sound that Governor Isaac Stevens picked Olympia in 1853 to be the capital of the newly created Washington Territory. Six years later Olympia officially incorporated.

But what happened to the original seven founders of Olympia? John M. Swan (1823-1904) took a donation land claim that later evolved into Eastside Olympia. He helped establish the Washington Odd Fellows Home in Walla Walla for orphans and seniors, and served as the institution's first superintendent. Isaac N. Ebey (1818-1857) soon moved to Whidbey Island and became heavily involved in politics. Northern Indians killed him at his Island home in revenge for the death of their chief at Port Gamble.

Henry Murray (1825-1908) settled a claim on Muck Creek east of Steilacoom, and successfully raised sheep and cattle on the local prairies. Benjamin F. Shaw (1829-1908) fought in Indian/Settler Wars of the 1850s, served in Washington Territorial government, and farmed in Clark County. Charles H. Smith (dates unknown) became the trusted business partner of Michael T. Simmons. In 1851 Smith disappeared during a Californian business trip with thousands of dollars in cash and credits from Simmons and other settlers of Puget Sound.

Michael T. Simmons (1814-1867) was economically hard hit by both Smith's desertion and troubles with selling his land claim in Tumwater. He served in several governmental positions, including Indian Agent for the Puget Sound District, before dying in Lewis County. Though disappointed with the slow growth of Olympia in the 19th century, Edmund Sylvester (1821-1887) remained loyal to his community. During his lifetime he gave away land in the town for a capitol, a school, a church, a Masonic Temple, and a public square. The square still exists today. It bears the name of Sylvester Park.

Drew W. Crooks grew up in Olympia, and graduated from the University of Washington with a masters degree in museum studies. For over twenty-five years he has worked with various museums in Southern Puget Sound, and written extensively on the region's heritage. Drew is especially interested in the story of Olympia from mid-19th century origins to the present.

Endnotes

1. "Edmund Sylvester's Narrative of the Founding of Olympia," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (October 1945), page 337.
2. John M. Swan, "Olympia, The Pioneer Town of Washington. ..," page 9. Manuscript, n.d., University of Washington Special Collections, Seattle, WA.
3. "Edmund Sylvester's Narrative of the Founding of Olympia," page 338.
4. Swan, "Olympia, The Pioneer Town of Washington . . .," page 9.