



How the Civil War Civilized Seattle

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How the Civil War Civilized Seattle

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A Thesis in the Field of History
for a Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Abstract

Founded in 1851, Seattle was little more than a rough-and-tumble frontier town at the onset of the Civil War. However, by 1880 the young community had developed into a small, but prosperous city. Not only did the population grow immensely during this time, but the character of the town also changed. By 1880 Seattle was no longer just another western logging town, but rather a civilized metropolitan center. Although the rapid development of Seattle is widely accepted, the connection between it and the Civil War has not been reported. Historical data suggest that the Civil War did influence the development of Seattle. The Civil War caused Seattle's population to grow through recruitment of unemployed war widows and orphans. These recruits brought New England culture to Seattle, which served as a civilizing force. The Civil War also led to policies that helped Seattle develop in other ways. The Morrill Act led town fathers to establish their own territorial university in Seattle. It was a bold move that would shape Seattle for decades. The Federal Government's support of the Northern Pacific Railroad led Seattleites to seek their own railroad. Likewise, telegraph technology, another Civil War priority, turned the remote settlement of Seattle into a well-connected town, able to communicate efficiently and reliably with the rest of the country. Similarly, Seattle's first newspaper, which was established to report Civil War news, helped to keep the residents of Seattle informed about and connected with the Union. These war-related developments along with war-induced immigration make it clear that Civil War helped *civilize* Seattle.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Paul Hagen spent his childhood roaming the forests and exploring the shores of Whidbey Island where he grew up. Island life gave Paul a unique sense of place and an undying appreciation for the Pacific Northwest. After graduating summa cum laude with a degree in history from Manhattanville College, Paul moved to Spain with his wife, Teresa, where they both taught English, read Michener, and drank cheap wine.

Beyond his natural love of history, Paul maintains an eclectic set of interests as he continually feeds his relentless curiosity. He has taught English in Thailand, rode a motorcycle through the American Southwest, worked as a radio DJ, and backpacked through Europe. He has lived in Spain, New York, and on a coffee farm in Hawaii. He has built a log cabin in Alaska, written poetry, and been featured on National Public Radio. He loves to throw pots and dreams of one day opening a pottery studio on a bluff above the sea.

Paul Hagen is currently the Dean of Students at Eastside Preparatory School in Kirkland, Washington, where he has developed a significant global education program, created meaningful service opportunities, and where he loves spending his days working with dynamic faculty members, dedicated parents, and curious, kind, and inspiring students. Paul also serves as a member of the Parks and Recreation Commission for the City of Woodinville, where he lives with Teresa and their three sons, Benjamin, Adam, and Theodore.

Dedication

TC, you are my dream both night and day; my favorite of everything.

This is for you.

Acknowledgments

This undertaking would not have been possible without the support of many, and I am grateful to all who aided my efforts. A special thanks to my father, David Hagen, who inspired me to dream big, taught me to work hard, and whose intellect I aspire to emulate. And to my mother, Candace Hagen, who was my first and best teacher. I am humbled by the sacrifices that you made on my behalf. Thanks to Charles and Annette Nagy for aiding me in a hundred ways throughout this process and for being steadfast cheerleaders. Your encouragement kept me going. Thank you, Susan Reposa, for opening your home to me. Having a quiet, comfortable place to study and rest was an immeasurable help. Brian and Margie Jennings the use of your car for my weekly trips from Garrison to Cambridge made all the difference. Thank you. I am grateful to my exceptional colleagues for taking an interest in my work and for inspiring me daily. Thank you, Dr. Terry Macaluso for giving me the time to pursue this quixotic quest. I could not have done it without your support. A very special thanks to my excellent thesis advisor, Dr. Donald Ostrowski, and my extraordinary thesis director, Professor John Stilgoe. I am indebted to you both for the wisdom and encouragement you so freely gave throughout this long process.

To my wife, TC, thank you for forcing me to follow my dream and for your unending encouragement and unwavering support. We both knew this would be a team effort, and we make a damn good team! And to my boys, Benjamin, Adam, and Theodore, who inspired me to keep working and who wrestled with me after long hours of writing. I love you!

Table of Contents

Author's Biographical Sketch	iv
Dedication	v
Acknowledgments	vi
List of Figures	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter I: "A Desperate Venture"	6
"Piles and Timber"	11
"Among Wild Men"	15
Chapter II: A "Much-Needed and Desirable Emigration"	24
"Anxious, Aimless Women"	27
"Women of Respectability"	33
"A Blessing to the Commonwealth"	45
Chapter III: "The Minds and Hearts of the Citizens"	54
"A Matter of Profound Regret"	60
"A Very Small Beginning"	64
Chapter IV: "Practicability of a Railroad"	73
"A Very Active Competition"	79
"The Miserable Farce"	82
"Seattle's Opportunity"	83

Chapter V: “Thought Projecting Engine”	88
“The Wires Are Up”	93
Conclusion	96
Bibliography	103

List of Figures

Fig. 1.1	The Schooner <i>Exact</i> , n.d.	7
Fig. 1.2	Arthur Denny with Family, c. 1859	10
Fig. 1.3	Chief Sealth (c. 1864) and David “Doc” Maynard (c. 1870)	12
Fig. 1.4	Henry Yesler, c. 1870	13
Fig. 1.5	Loggers in Seattle, c. 1890	15
Fig. 1.6	Reverend David and Catherine Blaine, n.d.	18
Fig. 1.7	Sketch of Seattle’s Blockhouse, 1855.	19
Fig. 1.8	Emily Denny, The Battle for Seattle, 1856	20
Fig. 1.9	Thomas Phelps, Sketch of Seattle, 1856	22
Fig. 2.1	Asa Mercer, c. 1875	28
Fig. 2.2	Ticket for passage from NY to Seattle on the <i>Continental</i>	43
Fig. 2.3	Mercer’s Belles aboard the <i>Continental</i> , January 1866	44
Fig. 2.4	<i>Continental</i> departing New York, January 1866	45
Fig. 2.5	Lizzie Ordway, c. 1866	51
Fig. 3.1	Governor Isaac Stevens, n.d.	55
Fig. 3.2	Reverend Daniel Bagley, c. 1867.	59
Fig. 3.3	Territorial University of Washington, c. 1860s	65
Fig. 3.4	Sketch of Seattle Waterfront, c. 1870s	72

Fig. 4.1	Seattle's first locomotive engine, the <i>A.A. Denny</i>	86
Fig. 4.2.	Bird's-eye view of Seattle, 1878.	87
Fig. 5.1	First edition of the Seattle Gazette, December 10, 1863	91

Introduction

“In the space of the allotted lifetime of a man, since the first hardy pioneers began to carve out homes for themselves in this new, and, at that time, unsettled wilderness,” reflected the well-respected pioneer, Ezra Meeker in 1921, near the end of this own notable lifetime,¹ “there have sprung up, as by the wand of the magician, beautiful and populous cities, humming with the industry of hundreds of factories, with wharves and piers to which can come in safety, the largest ships that traverse the seas. In these also are thousands of beautiful and artistic homes and commercial buildings that can vie with any to be found in far older cities.”² One of the cities that had “sprung up” in such a short time was Seattle. And by Meeker’s writing, it was undeniably the chief city—in terms of size, economic power, and cultural influence—in the Pacific Northwest.

Despite the incredible growth in Seattle,³ it was, in its earliest days, an unremarkable logging town. Hewn from the heavily forested hills above Elliot Bay in

¹ Ezra Meeker came to Washington Territory overland on the Oregon Trail in 1852, and spent the rest of his long life (he died in 1929 at the old age of 98) promoting the West and marveling at its potential. Meeker also lived long enough to take a flight in an airplane (in 1921), and to meet three presidents (Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Calvin Coolidge).

² Ezra Meeker, *Seventy Years of Progress in Washington* (Tacoma: Allstrum Printing, 1921), 89.

³ A mere seventy after its founding, Seattle had grown from twenty-four settlers to more than 315,000. King County, of which Seattle is the principal city, grew from just 111 settlers in 1853 to 301 by 1860, an increase of 171%. By 1870 the population had jumped another 604% to 2,120. And by 1880 the population had swelled to 6,910, a 225% increase. While this growth is notable, it is, taken by itself, less revealing than when compared with other counties on Puget Sound during that same time. Pierce County, directly south of King County, for example, had similar opportunity to attract pioneers, similar natural resources, and similar opportunity for growth. Yet, Pierce County, and its principal city, Tacoma—the *city of destiny*, Seattle’s chief rival in the region, and the site of the much-anticipated Northern Pacific Railroad terminus—grew at a much slower rate than Seattle did. From 1853 to 1860, Pierce County grew 117% from 513 residents to 1,115. By 1870 the county had grown to 1,409, an increase of only 26%, compared to King County’s growth of 604% during that same period. And by 1880 it had grown to 3,319 residents, an increase of 135%, well behind the growth in King County. Likewise, Thurston County, home of the capital

1851, Seattle was rough, isolated, and wild. In its early years there was no obvious indication of Seattle's future prominence, nor was Seattle's meteoric rise easily predicted. By its second decade, as the Civil War raged in the East, Seattle remained small and underdeveloped. The population had grown as men moved to the area looking for employment in the lumber industry, but growth was slow and uneven, especially after the Indian War of 1856. The town, if not destined for complete collapse, seemed likely to remain small and unexceptional.

Early visitors to Seattle described it as dirty, small, and otherwise unimpressive. "We did not stay very long in Seattle not being very favorably impressed with the place," wrote Ezra Meeker after visiting the town for the first time in the 1850s. According to Meeker, "there was not much of a town, probably twenty cabins in all," and "of course" there was "scarcely the semblance of a street." Beyond this, Meeker described Seattle's harbor, which locals believed to be a great asset, as "uninviting [in] appearance and scent."⁴ Another visitor, Edward Jay Allen, called Seattle "rather a pretty place," when he stopped briefly there in the 1850s, but complained that "they have built it (instead of fronting the bay) to face a street about a block from it, which brings the rear of the buildings in view first [when sailing into the harbor]. . . ." He also noted the town's diminutive size, "It contains about twenty-five houses."⁵

city Olympia, never kept pace with King County's growth. In 1853 Thurston County had the enormous population for that time of 996. Seven years later the population had grown to 1,507, an increase of 51%. By 1870 the population had grown to 2,246, and by 1880 it stood at 3,270, an increase of only 49% and 45% respectively.

⁴ Ezra Meeker, *Pioneer Reminiscences of Puget Sound* (Seattle: Lowman & Hanford, 1905), 66.

⁵ Karen L. Johnson and Dennis M. Larsen. *A Yankee on Puget Sound: Pioneer Dispatches of Edward Jay Allen, 1852-1855* (Seattle: Washington State University Press, 2013), 125.

Even early residents found it hard to describe Seattle as anything other than a tiny logging town. “Our village contains only about 30 houses, and I think 26 of these have been put up during the last six months,” wrote the Reverend David Blaine in a letter to his parents on December 6, 1853, “but as yet it is mostly in the woods.”⁶ Eight years later, in 1861 when young Asa Mercer arrived in Seattle, the village remained small and still had not developed into anything beyond a muddy logging town.⁷ Later in life Mercer would reminisce that “Yesler’s mill was about all there was of the town. . . . There couldn’t have been over 200 people in the whole town. . . . Of course, we didn’t really have any streets—just a rough road along the beach and a few trails.”⁸ And Sophie Frye Bass, granddaughter of Seattle’s founder,⁹ Arthur Denny, remembered from her childhood that the logging industry had left Seattle a “desolate and dreary land, rough and broken.”¹⁰

But something changed dramatically in Seattle and by 1880 the city had begun to grow into an urban center in the region. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, something changed in the town’s character during that same period. Instead of a rough-and-tumble frontier town, full of brothels and taverns, it became a cosmopolitan center

⁶ David E. Blaine, “Reverend David E. Blaine letter to his parents regarding his first impressions of Seattle and Washington Territory, December 6, 1853,” *University of Washington Libraries, Pacific Northwest Historical Documents Collection*.

⁸ Asa S. Mercer, “Asa S. Mercer reminiscence of life in early Seattle and the beginning of the University of Washington in 1861, n.d. Transcript of Interview.” *University of Washington Libraries, Pacific Northwest Historical Documents Collection*.

⁹ Two of Denny’s granddaughters wrote narratives of life in early Seattle, Sophie Frye Bass and Roberta Frye Watt. Sophie Frye Bass wrote two books about Seattle, both filled with personal stories and reminiscence of the early years in Seattle. *Pig-Tailed Days in Old Seattle* recounts Bass’ childhood in the 1870s, while *When Seattle was a Village* describes Seattle as it was from its founding through the 1880s.

¹⁰ Sophie Frye Bass, *Pig-Tail Days* (Portland, OR: Binfords & Mort, 1937), 47.

with a university, libraries, and a weekly newspaper. The population, once almost entirely men seeking their fortunes in the logging industry, became increasingly literate, civically engaged, and familial. In a word, Seattle had become *civilized*.

Seattle's rapid development from a logging town to a city of regional importance was extraordinary, and somewhat peculiar considering that little had distinguished Seattle from other settlements in the region in its early years. The fact that Seattle's growth and development was concurrent with the American Civil War leads one to wonder in what ways that war influenced the development of Seattle.

It is true that Seattle was isolated and insulated from the Civil War. No battles were fought in Seattle, no military units were stationed there, and yet the Civil War had a meaningful impact on the growth and development of the town. Federal Government policies during the Civil War, such as the Morrill Act, which granted land to universities that would offer study in "military tactics . . . agriculture and mechanical arts,"¹¹ the chartering of the Northern and Central Pacific railroads, the promotion of telegraph technology, and others, helped to energize the cultural and economic development of Seattle. Without question, the population of Seattle grew because of the Civil War. War widows and orphans fled New England in search of opportunity in the West, and veterans sought a fresh start after the bloodletting had concluded. When they arrived in Seattle they brought with them eastern culture, which in turn helped to develop the city of Seattle.

¹¹ "An Act Donating Public Lands to the several States and Territories which may provide Colleges for the Benefit of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts." Chap. 130. *Our Documents, The National Archives*.

Additionally, the development of Seattle's key civic institutions during the 1860s and 1870s were the result of the Civil War and wartime policies. Schools were founded by war widows, newspapers were established to report war news, telegraph lines were strung and rails were laid as part of a wider network of cables and rails to support the war effort, and immigrants from the war-torn states augmented the numbers of settlers in Seattle.

From Seattle's humble beginning in 1851 it grew in population and regional influence through the 1860s, 1870s, 1880s, and beyond becoming the principal city in the Pacific Northwest. This growth and development can be attributed not only to the ambitious and hardworking pioneers who settled Seattle, but also to the Civil War and wartime policies that provided opportunities for the town to progress, in this way the Civil War *civilized* Seattle.

Chapter I

“A Desperate Venture”

On the morning of November 13, 1851, amidst a steady shower of rain, the schooner *Exact* arrived off what is now called Alki Point in present-day West Seattle. Twenty-two passengers, ten adults and twelve children, two of which were only infants, who had taken passage from Portland, disembarked. The party—known now as the Denny Party after its leader, Arthur Denny—left Cherry Grove, Illinois seven months earlier by wagon with the intention of settling in Oregon, where they hoped to find economic opportunity and a milder climate.¹² On the trail, however, the party met a man known to them only as “Brock” who convinced them to settle on the banks of Puget Sound instead, which was at that time unsettled. There Denny could found his own settlement and, he hoped, could reap a sizable profit in so doing.

Upon arrival the party met Arthur’s younger brother, David, who had come overland from Portland in September, along with Lee Terry and John Low, to scout for a suitable claim on Puget Sound, and to prepare for the arrival of the others. After exploring the Duwamish River valley and other possible sites, Denny, Terry, and Low settled on a spot the natives called “Smaquamox.” There the men laid out the foundation for the first cabin, before Terry and Low departed, Low to retrieve his family and Terry

¹² Arthur Denny’s granddaughter, Roberta Frye Watt, in her book *4 Wagons West*, recounts a story told her by her mother, Louisa Denny (who was seven years old at the time of the Denny Party’s arrival), about how the decision was made to go West. Apparently during a particularly bitter winter night in Illinois the Denny’s received a letter from friends who had gone to Oregon. The letter reported that flowers grew all year round and that there was never any frost. Arthur Denny reportedly opened the window to the howling wind, stared into the cold night, then turned to his wife and suggested they go West.

to retrieve a froe¹³ from the Indians. John Low carried with him to Portland a note from David Denny addressed to his older brother, Arthur. “We have examined the valley of the Duwamish River and find it a fine country,” the note read, “There is plenty of room for one thousand settlers. Come at once.”¹⁴

Heeding his younger brother’s advice, Arthur secured passage for himself, his wife Mary Ann, and their three children, Louisa, Lenora, and newborn Roland, along with the Borens, the Bells, the Lows, and the Terrys, on the *Exact*, which sailed north from Portland on November 5, 1851.

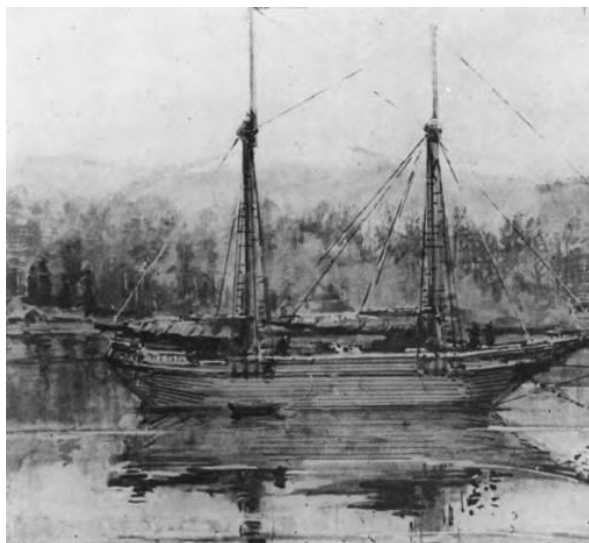


Figure 1.1. *The Schooner Exact*, n.d. University of Washington, Special Collections.

The arrival of the Denny Party eight days later, on November 13, and what is commonly referenced as the founding of Seattle, proved rather inauspicious. David Denny was seriously ill,¹⁵ the cabin he had begun nearly two months earlier, on September 28, was as yet unfinished,¹⁶ the rain was demoralizing, and the contrast from Portland, which the settlers had found “quite a thriving town, probably containing a

¹³ Which was needed to cut the cedar shingles for the cabin’s roof.

¹⁴ Roberta Frye Watt, *4 Wagons West: The Story of Seattle* (Portland: Binford & Mort, 1931), 32.

¹⁵ After he had been left alone, David Denny’s food was eaten by a skunk, he cut his foot with an ax, and he came down with a severe fever. All this left Denny in a perilous situation and prevented him from completing the cabin as planned.

¹⁶ Arthur Denny, *Pioneer Days on Puget Sound* (Seattle: C.B. Bagley Printer, 1888), 11.

population of 2,000 or more,”¹⁷ was profound. The dense wilderness was overwhelming for the new arrivals who had never seen forests so thick and expansive. “Seattle,” wrote Arthur Denny some years after, “was then as wild a spot as any on earth.”¹⁸

The shallow bay prevented the *Exact* from anchoring close to shore, so the pioneers were forced to row themselves a good distance to land. The tide being “well out” the party then had to carry and drag their supplies over mud flats until they were beyond the reach of the tide. “While the men of the party were all actively engaged” in this task, recalled Arthur Denny, “the women and children had crawled into the brush, made a fire, and spread a cloth to shelter them from the rain.”¹⁹ “We women and children clambered up the bank while the men began to carry the things up from the beach,” remembered Lydia Low, “Mrs. Denny was sitting on a log crying, with her little baby in her lap”²⁰

The men continued to work while the women and children sought protection from the unyielding rain. Once Denny and the other men had completed their task they came to “look after the women” and found them huddled together, “their faces . . . concealed. On closer inspection,” Denny remembered many years later, “I found that they were in tears, having already discovered the gravity of the situation.”²¹ One of the women “in tears,” Lydia Low, later recalled that Arthur Denny “came to us and said you are a pretty lot of

¹⁷ Arthur Denny, *Pioneer Days on Puget Sound* (Seattle: C.B. Bagley Printer, 1888), 9.

¹⁸ Arthur Armstrong Denny, “Reminiscence of early pioneer life in Seattle from 1851 to 1852,” *University of Washington Libraries, Pacific Northwest Historical Documents Collection*.

¹⁹ Denny, “Reminiscence of early pioneer life in Seattle.”

²⁰ Denny, “Reminiscence of early pioneer life in Seattle.”

²¹ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 40.

pioneers, go to crying the first thing.”²² The exhausted and wet Arthur Denny quickly redeemed his brash remark with a now famous urging to his fellow male settlers. “They say white women are scarce out here,” he reportedly proclaimed, “The best thing we can do is to go to work to provide shelter for those we have.”²³

As the 29-year-old leader of the party, Denny had not intended to be impatient or cruel in his first moments in the new land he was to call home. He had not set out to offend the women as they sat in the “brush,” trying to shelter themselves from the incessant rain, weeping. He had simply misjudged the severity of the situation. “I confess that I made a mistake,”²⁴ a reflective Denny later wrote. “I did not, for some time, discover that I had gone a step too far.”²⁵

The situation was, in fact, fraught with many dangers, and the pioneers’ path proved to be pitted with hardships. Although the first moments of the little settlement had not immediately alarmed its founder, it was only a short time before Arthur Denny realized just how precarious the situation really was. Denny’s mood changed when soon after arrival the local Indians “commenced to congregate,” and arrived in such numbers that soon the twenty-four pioneers were surrounded by “over a thousand” natives.²⁶

“It was not until I became aware that my wife and helpless children were exposed to the murderous attacks of hostile savages that it dawned upon me that I had made a

²² Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 40.

²³ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 42-43.

²⁴ Denny, “Reminiscence of early pioneer life in Seattle.”

²⁵ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 40.

²⁶ Denny, *Pioneer Days on Puget Sound*, 13.

desperate venture,” remembered Denny, “I had brought my family from a good home, surrounded by comforts and luxuries and landed them in a wilderness.”²⁷ If Denny had second thoughts about bringing his family and leading the others to Puget Sound he never expressed it openly to them. Denny had chosen this “wilderness” full of “hostile savages” as his homestead claim, he had left his home in Illinois for an opportunity to make his fortune out West, and this was the opportunity he sought. Denny, ever the optimist, refused to cower from a challenge. “My motto in life,” he later boasted about his settling of Seattle, “was never to go backward and in fact if I had wished to retrace my steps it was about as nearly impossible as if I had taken up my bridge behind me.”²⁸



Figure 1.2. *Seattle's founder, Arthur Denny, with wife Mary Ann and two of their children, c. 1859, Seattle Historical Society.*

In the coming weeks more natives arrived, surrounding the pioneer cabin with their “huts” and bringing with them “a multitude of wolf like dogs which made the situation exceedingly unpleasant, especially for the women and children.”²⁹ Although the settlers were uncomfortable to live in such close proximity with so many natives, they were too frightened to ask them to leave. Instead, understanding that their “lives depended on cultivating friendship and keeping the peace with them,”³⁰ the settlers

²⁷ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 40.

²⁸ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 40.

²⁹ Denny, “Reminiscence of early pioneer life in Seattle.”

³⁰ Denny, “Reminiscence of early pioneer life in Seattle.”

endured the Indians' company, which quickly proved to be vital to the tiny settlement's survival.

“Piles and Timber”

The Denny Party had come to Puget Sound not for religious freedom or to escape hardship elsewhere. They had come to get rich. Even before the party arrived, David Denny, Lee Terry, and John Low had scouted the area to determine its suitability for a settlement, with an eye for economic gain. David Denny's note to his brother urging them to “come at once” also claimed that there was room for a growing population, in other words, there was room for a town. And a town would bring commercial opportunities for the Dennys and other early pioneers. As noted by Arthur Denny's granddaughter, Roberta Frye Watt,³¹ “The settlement of Seattle had never had agricultural possibilities nor were her citizens farmers,”³² they were in it for industry, for real estate development, and to found a prosperous city.

The pioneers first named their settlement what one early visitor called “the pretentious name of New York,”³³ a nod to their expectation that it would one day be as prosperous as its booming eastern namesake, which, at that time was the largest American city and boasted a thriving economy. Shortly after choosing this audacious name, a group of frontiersmen scouting the area paddled past the insignificant settlement

³¹ Roberta Frye Watt was one of two of Denny's granddaughters who wrote about early Seattle. Watt's narrative, *4 Wagons West*, recounts her grandparents' journey from Illinois in covered wagons along the Oregon Trail, as well as the early years of Seattle. Watt's writing is based largely on the stories she heard from her mother (Arthur Denny's daughter). Watt was born in 1873 in Seattle and died there in 1963.

³² Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 324.

³³ Ezra Meeker, *Pioneer Reminiscences of Puget Sound* (Seattle: Lowman & Hanford, 1905), 65.

in a canoe and inquired as to the name of the place. “New York!” John Low yelled back to them from the shore. To which the men in the canoe laughed hardily before responding, “New York Alki,” which in the chinook jargon of the region meant *by-in-by* or *someday*. The joke and name, New York Alki or *someday*, stuck until the settlement moved to the eastern shores of Elliot

Bay. There the town was known by the unattractive name of *Duwamps* because of its proximity to the Duwamish River, until Doc Maynard³⁴ convinced the others to bestow a more charming name on the little settlement. Ever after the town would be known as Seattle, in honor of the friendly and well-respected Duwamish chief by that same name.

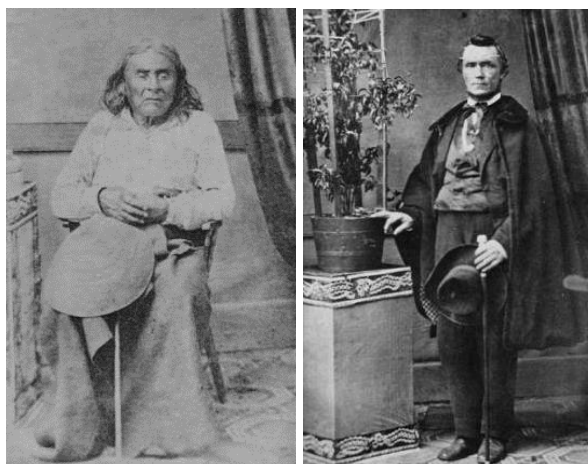


Figure 1.3. The only known photo of Chief Sealth, for whom Seattle is named, c. 1864, and his friend, David “Doc” Maynard (c. 1870), who convinced other town fathers to call their settlement “Seattle.” Museum of History and Industry, Seattle.

The first commercial opportunity in Seattle arrived shortly after the Denny Party. “About the time we had completed our winter quarters,” wrote Arthur Denny, “the brig *Leonesa*, Capt. Daniel S. Howard, came to anchor in the bay. Seeing that the place was inhabited by whites the captain came on shore seeking a cargo of piles, and we readily

³⁴ David “Doc” Maynard is one of the most colorful characters in early Seattle. He was, in fact, a medical doctor, though he was more interested in business than medicine by the time he arrived in Seattle shortly after its founding. Maynard left his first wife, Lydia, in Ohio (where they had moved twenty years earlier) while he traveled west in 1850. Apparently, Doc and Lydia never divorced (and Doc claimed the 640 acre claim in Seattle which was available only to married men). Despite his marriage to Lydia, Maynard took a second wife, Catherine Broshears, in 1853. Maynard worked in the lumber industry for a time (making a fortune by shipping his lumber directly to San Francisco and selling it there for inflated prices), he also invested in real estate, and even practiced law for a time (as a self-taught lawyer). Later in life Maynard’s first wife arrived in Seattle and, for a time, lived with Maynard and his second wife amicably. Doc Maynard died in Seattle in 1873.

made a contract to load his vessel.”³⁵ In this way, the settlement of New York Alki became a logging town. In reality, there were no other commercially viable products, ventures, or vocations in the early days of Seattle. “Piles and timber,” noted Denny, were the only “dependence for support in the beginning.”³⁶ The founding pioneers had high hopes commercially and culturally for their new town, but the only valuable commodity was timber, so the men began to pursue it with gusto.

The work was tedious, more so because the settlers had “no team at that time,” but the men, eager to turn a profit, “went to work cutting the timber nearest to the water, and rolled and hauled it by hand.”³⁷ This first laborious commercial venture only wetted the settlers’ appetite, and soon they were marketing their timber to San Francisco.

It was not long before Henry Yesler arrived in Puget Sound looking for a suitable location for his steam powered sawmill. After some convincing by Denny and Maynard, Yesler agreed to establish his mill in Seattle. In October 1852, Olympia’s newspaper, *The Columbian* reported the development. “Huzza for Seattle!” the article read, “there is a new steam mill in process of erection by Mr. H. L. Yesler, at Seattle, mouth of the Duwamish river, and which, we are told, will be ready to go into operation early in November next.”³⁸

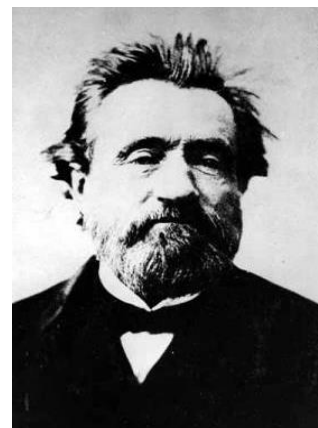


Figure 1.4. Henry Yesler who brought the sawmill—the first industry—to Seattle in 1853, c. 1870. University of Washington.

³⁵ Denny, *Pioneer Days on Puget Sound*, 12.

³⁶ Denny, *Pioneer Days on Puget Sound*, 17.

³⁷ Denny, *Pioneer Days on Puget Sound*, 12.

³⁸ *Columbian*, Olympia: October 30, 1852.

The mill, as Henry Yesler recalled years later, “commenced sawing wood under a shed in March [18]53.”³⁹

The mill brought a new prosperity to the undeveloped town, as well as an influx of new immigrants looking for jobs. “The droning of the mill and its sharp whistle were welcome sounds to the men and women who dared to live in the new world, for it was, indeed, a new world to them,” wrote Arthur Denny’s granddaughter, Sophie Frye Bass. “The puffing little engine meant employment, good cheer, warm clothing and food, and was the envy of all the settlements on the Sound.”⁴⁰

Twelve years after Yesler’s mill opened in Seattle the town’s only industry remained lumber. “Puget Sound is *emphatically* a lumbering district,” wrote Asa Mercer in his 1865 promotional pamphlet.

We manufacture annually a hundred and thirty million feet of lumber, twenty-two and a half million laths, twenty and a half million shingles, a hundred thousand feet of piles, and above two thousand spars, also a large number of ship knees. The supply of logs for lumber will only be exhausted when the mountains and the valleys surrounding the Sound, are destroyed by some great calamity of nature. For when this generation shall have perished, the forests by them laid low, will have begun anew to assume proportions that do honor to the former growth. Thus nearly as rapidly as is the axe laid at the root of the tree, will others grow into place, so quickly does the fir tree grow in the Puget Sound climate.⁴¹

Mercer’s message was simple; the logging industry provided good, sustainable jobs, an unshakable economy, and excellent opportunities for intrepid settlers willing to come West. Indeed, commercial enterprise and the growth of the village was on the mind of all new emigrants to Seattle. Even Reverend David Blaine, Seattle’s first minister, was

³⁹ Henry Yesler narrative in “Eldridge Morse Notes on the History and Resources of Washington Territory Furnished to H. H. Bancroft (ca 1880),” *Hubert Howe Bancroft Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley*, Berkeley, California.

⁴⁰ Bass, *Pig-Tail Days in Old Seattle*, 18.

⁴¹ A.S. Mercer, *Washington Territory: The Great North-West, Her Material Resources and Claims to Emigration* (Utica, NY: L. C. Childs, Book and Job Printer, 1865), 17-18.

enamored as much by the potential of financial return for his labor as he was by the potential of spiritual return. In a letter he wrote soon after arriving in Seattle in 1853 to his brother, Blaine predicted “There is only beginning enough to indicate the certainty of a future here not unlike New York or London in commercial importance. This may sound like castle building and it may be years ere such a state of things is realized, but it is conceived in the womb of the future beyond a reasonable doubt.”⁴²

By 1855 the logging industry, boosted by high demand and high prices in San Francisco and elsewhere down the coast, was booming. “Yesler’s mill had many equals,” wrote Denny’s granddaughter, “There was more than enough work for all.”⁴³



Figure 1.5. *Loggers in Seattle, c. 1890*, University of Washington.

“Among Wild Men”

The lumber industry in Seattle “fairly hummed with prosperity” by the mid-1850s,⁴⁴ but regional tensions were building between white settlers and natives. News reports of violent confrontations between Indians and homesteaders reached Seattle, bringing with them a sense of great unease. Nevertheless, the local natives in Seattle remained amicable through 1854 and 1855. The flourishing logging industry in the young

⁴² Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 201-202.

⁴³ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 190.

⁴⁴ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 188 and 190.

settlement, however, was seen as a threat by some natives who rightfully believed that economic success in Seattle would lead to increased population, which in turn would lead to ever-decreasing tribal lands and an irreversible loss of native influence in the area. “The prosperity of the summer of [18]55 unquestionably helped to precipitate the Indian War,” wrote Roberta Frye Watt. “The buoyancy and confidence of the whites, their spirit of conquest and of racial supremacy incited the Indians to make their last stand against them.”⁴⁵ In a desperate attempt to stem the tide of white settlers, the “restless spirits among the native tribes,” believing that it was their last opportunity to dislodge the pioneers and to regain their homeland, began planning military action against the village of Seattle.⁴⁶

From the founding of Seattle the local natives had been an imposing, albeit friendly, force. “The *Exact* had scarcely dropped anchor on November 13, 1851, before the beach was alive with Indians,” wrote Denny’s granddaughter, Sophia Frye Bass. “From that time on they were ever-present, very often helpful with their knowledge of sea and shore, but also very often a nuisance with their everlasting curiosity.”⁴⁷ The Indians taught the pioneers where and how to fish and clam, advised them on where to build their cabins, and encouraged them through the first winter.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the settlers in Seattle remained uneasy with the natives living in such close proximity.

⁴⁵ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 203.

⁴⁶ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 203.

⁴⁷ Bass, *Pig-Tailed Days*, 13.

⁴⁸ Arthur Denny reported that, thankfully for the settlers, the first winter was unseasonably mild.

“Our cabins were surrounded by huts of more than a thousand [Indians],” recalled Arthur Denny, “The only means by which we kept them out of our houses, during the day, was to make the doors in two parts, upper and lower, and the lower part could be closed and securely fastened while the upper was left open, then they would come round all day with their heads in the door.”⁴⁹ The settlers clearly felt uncomfortable living with a people they viewed as savage, ill-mannered, and immoral. “Could the indians [sic] and alcohol be removed,” wrote one early settler, “this would be in most respects one of the most delightful regions of country in the world.”⁵⁰ Although natives had only ever treated the pioneers gracefully, and although the Indians and pioneers had lived peaceably side-by-side since 1851, the settlers were still disconcerted by their presence, feared for their safety, and “felt like pulling our hair when we got up in the morning to make sure that our scalps were still in place.”⁵¹

By 1854 news of growing tensions between white settlers and unfriendly Indian tribes nearby reached Seattle and caused increasing alarm amongst the settlers there. “You write that you fear we are among wild men,” wrote Catherine Blaine, Seattle’s first school teacher, and wife of Reverend David Blaine, to her parents in March 1854, “We are but the people [here] have not apprehended any danger from them until quite recently.”⁵² This perceived “danger,” nevertheless, seemed to vanish almost as quickly as

⁴⁹ Denny, “Reminiscence of early pioneer life in Seattle.”

⁵⁰ Reverend David E. Blaine, “Letter to his parents regarding life in Washington Territory, January 24, 1855,” *University of Washington*.

⁵¹ Denny, “Reminiscence of early pioneer life in Seattle.”

⁵² Catherine P. Blaine, “Letter to her family regarding life in Washington Territory and conflicts between settlers and local Native Americans, March 7, 1854.” *University of Washington*.

it had appeared. Catherine's letters of April 18, May 3, May 31, and June 26, 1854 scarcely mentioned the natives. Instead Catherine described life on the frontier. "We are having about two thirds of the time, the most delightful weather imaginable," Catherine wrote in one letter, "the rest of the time it is as gloomy and dreary as rain and cloudy skies can make it."⁵³ On another occasion she wrote with amusement, "We cannot get a lemon [here]."⁵⁴ In nearly all Catherine's letters she wrote about the economic opportunity in Seattle, particularly in real estate prospecting. "If we had some money I think we could invest it profitably in the town," she wrote in one letter, "It has every natural advantage for becoming the principal place on the Sound. It is growing. Business increases."⁵⁵ In another letter Catherine proudly announced, "We have no doubt that the increase of property [value] is sure."⁵⁶



Figure 1.6. Rev. David and Catherine Blaine, University of Washington.

Catherine's mood, and those of her counterparts in Seattle, changed again by late 1854. "The unpleasant situation of indian [sic] affairs renders it so disagreeable," Catherine wrote on December 1, "It is impossible to tell what is in store for us but certainly there never was a time in the settlement of any part of the country when things

⁵³ Catherine P. Blaine, "Letter to her family and friends regarding life in Washington Territory, May 3, 1854," *University of Washington*.

⁵⁴ Catherine P. Blaine, "Letter to her family and friends regarding life in Washington Territory, June 26, 1854," *University of Washington*.

⁵⁵ Blaine, "Letter . . . May 3, 1854."

⁵⁶ Catherine P. Blaine, "Letter to her family regarding life in Washington Territory, April 18, 1854," *University of Washington*.

presented a more serious aspect than now.”⁵⁷ A month later, Catherine’s husband, hoping to reassure his worried parents and Catherine’s back in New York, wrote in a letter dated January 24, 1855, “I think we need not apprehend much more trouble from [the Indians].”⁵⁸ Blaine’s prediction was sorely misguided.

Several Indian attacks on nearby settlements and homesteads in 1855 led to a sense of general apprehension within the town of Seattle. Seeking to quell their fear, the people of Seattle decided to build a blockhouse fortress for additional protection against

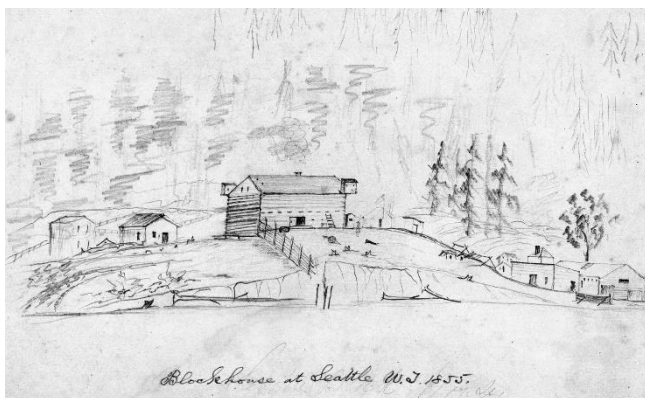


Figure 1.7. Sketch of Seattle’s blockhouse by John Taylor, 1855. Yale University, Beinecke Library.

potential Indian attacks. “Two houses were built of this [large hewn, 12 inch-square], timber,” remembered Arthur Denny, “of sufficient capacity to hold the entire population at that time.”⁵⁹ Seattle’s blockhouse, in fact, accommodated more than the

village’s population as settlers from surrounding areas abandoned their homesteads and retreated to the safety of Seattle. Still the town prospered. Lumber was in high demand and sold for high prices. More mills opened in and around Seattle, profits were made, and more settlers arrived regularly. “All these incidents,” wrote early Seattle figure and historian, Clarence Bagley,⁶⁰ “served to convince the more restless spirits among the

⁵⁷ Catherine P. Blaine, “Letter to her family regarding life in Washington Territory, December 1, 1855,” *University of Washington*.

⁵⁸ Blaine, “Letter . . . January 24, 1855.”

⁵⁹ Denny, *Pioneer Days on Puget Sound*, 69.

⁶⁰ Clarence Bagley, the only son of Seattle’s revered Reverend Daniel Bagley, was born in Illinois in 1843. He arrived with his family in the small town of Seattle in October 1860. Clarence, like his father,

native tribes that if ever attempt was to be made to stay the increasing tide of white immigration, this was the time to begin.”⁶¹

On the morning on January 26, 1856, an Indian force attacked the town of Seattle. “We had an engagement with the Indians,” William Bell⁶² wrote to Arthur Denny who was in Olympia at the time, “It commenced at 8:30 o’clock A.M. and continued until dark incessantly and resulted in the death of two Bostons—Milton Holgate and Robert Wilson.”⁶³

Beyond the loss of life, Seattle was plundered and burnt, and future attacks appeared imminent. “The Indians we suppose are back near



Figure 1.8. “The Battle for Seattle: Settlers Fleeing to the Fort” January 26, 1856. Painting by Emily Inez Denny, daughter of David Denny and niece of Seattle’s founder, Arthur Denny. University of Washington.

the lake where they must be from 500 to 1000 strong and say they will give us two or three months siege,” wrote Bell, “and from the best information I can obtain the majority of Indians on the Sound will join them.”⁶⁴ Beyond the immediate threat of siege and

was dedicated to education and helped in the establishment of the University of Washington, although in less notable ways than Daniel Bagley did (while Clarence was engaged in clearing the trees on the University’s grounds, his father, Daniel, was serving as the University Lands Commissioner tasked with raising funds for the establishment of the University). By the late 1860s, Bagley had taken up an interest in printing, and purchased newspapers in Washington Territory (but not in Seattle at that time). Bagley also kept detailed notes on the history of Washington Territory, and ultimately wrote and published the multi-volume *History of King County* and *History of Seattle*. Bagley died in 1932 in Seattle at the age of 89.

⁶¹ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 203.

⁶² An original member of the Denny Party, William Bell was born in Illinois in 1817 and arrived in Seattle in 1851. Seattle’s Belltown neighborhood was the site of his homestead and is named for him. He died in 1887 in Seattle.

⁶³ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 244.

⁶⁴ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 244.

attack, the settlers faced another, more destructive prospect—an exodus of settlers from Seattle. “Should this state of things continue,” warned Bell, “there will not be six families left here in the spring.”⁶⁵

One family planning to leave Seattle was David and Catherine Blaine. “I cannot tell with certainty what we will do,” wrote David Blaine three days after the attack, “but we intend to adopt the most feasible plan that we can devise to make our escape from this most inauspicious land.”⁶⁶ The Blaines were not alone in their desire to “escape” Seattle; many settlers who had come for fortune now left with the threat of future Indian attack. “At the close of the Indian War the people of Washington were left in an almost hopeless condition,” wrote Clarence Bagley, “Many of them abandoned their homes and moved away. There was little money afloat and little business.”⁶⁷

With the exodus from Seattle came economic depression for those who remained. Historian C. H. Hanford notes that during the ten years after the attack, Seattle “made no progress.”⁶⁸ And Arthur Denny remembered that “it was years before we recovered our lost ground to any great extent. Business was generally stagnant. Little in the way of building or improvement was attempted.”⁶⁹ Author and historian Archie Binns⁷⁰ reported,

⁶⁵ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 244.

⁶⁶ Reverend David E. and Catherine P. Blaine, “Letter to their family regarding a Native American attack on Seattle, January 29, 1856,” *University of Washington*.

⁶⁷ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 256.

⁶⁸ C. H. Hanford, *Seattle and Environs: 1852-1924* (Seattle: Pioneer Historical Publishing Co., 1924), 99.

⁶⁹ Denny, *Pioneer Days on Puget Sound*, 72-73.

⁷⁰ A native of Washington, Archie Binns (1899-1971) wrote several novels, biographies, and histories based on the Pacific Northwest, and, after a stint in New York, taught writing at the University of Washington and other institutions in Washington.

“Few emigrants came to the territory, and still fewer came to the recently besieged village. By 1860, only twenty families were left.”⁷¹

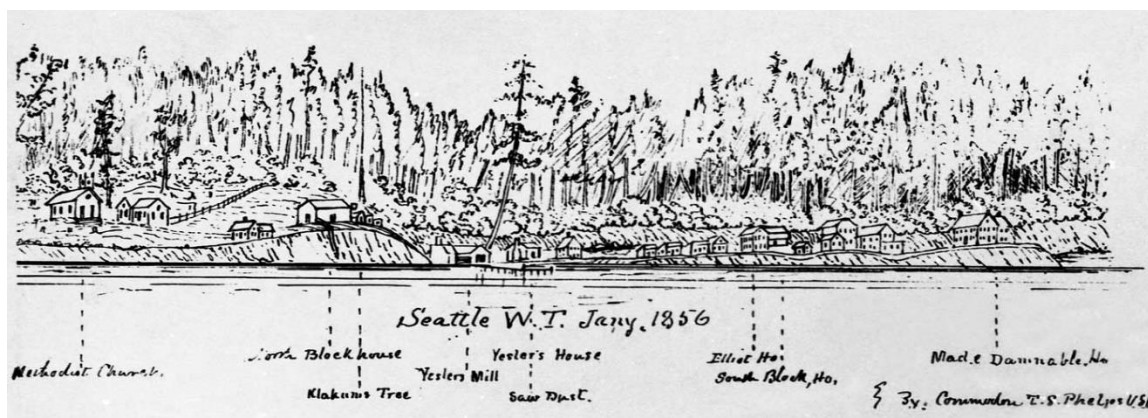


Figure 1.9. Sketch of Seattle from the bay at the time of the Indian War, January 1856, by Thomas Phelps including depictions of Yesler's mill, the blockhouse, the church, and a handful of other structures.

When Seattle was founded it was nothing more than a logging camp, with mud streets and humble shacks. The settlement, despite its first ambitious name, was unimpressive and did not boast any of the natural features that would predict economic or cultural significance. Seattle was, instead, a series of impossibly steep hills covered in dense coniferous forest. Apart from lumber, there were no great natural resources. No gold was discovered to fuel a rush of population growth or to generate significant wealth, as had been the case in California a half-decade before. There was not even good farm land to support the early settlers.⁷² In a sense, Seattle's future was bleak in its earliest days. Trees were plentiful, but once the trees were harvested and milled there would be little left in Seattle to keep the town alive, and, like so many other settlements in the West, it would wither and die, leaving only a ghost of itself. That, of course, did not

⁷¹ Archie Binns, *Northwest Gateway: The Story of the Port of Seattle* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1943), 160.

⁷² The best farmland lay to the north of Seattle on Whidbey Island, where Isaac Ebey successfully tilled the soil until meeting an untimely death and decapitation at the hands of northern natives in 1857.

happen. Instead, by the time the timber was felled, Seattle had already developed into a small but sustainable city.

Chapter II

A “Much-Needed and Desirable Emigration”

Recovery from the Indian War of 1856 was painfully slow, and Seattle struggled to restore the population it had lost. By 1860 the few families that had remained in Seattle were still desperately trying to eke out a living while encouraging others to emigrate to the settlement. Seattle’s founder, Arthur Denny, summed up the sentiment of many of the settlers when he recalled years later that “all were anxious to enlarge the settlement as much as possible.”⁷³

Lackluster population growth was a problem in Seattle, but more so was the lack of women in the town. Seattle was growing, although slowly, but its growth was comprised almost entirely of young men seeking employment in the lumber mill. Women were conspicuously absent from the rolls of emigrants to the region. In 1858 Charles Prosch writing in the Puget Sound *Herald* noted, “There is probably no community in the Union with a like number of inhabitants in which so large a proportion are bachelors.”⁷⁴ And again in 1859 the Puget Sound *Herald* reported that “the proportion of white men to white women here is almost twenty to one.”⁷⁵ The gender imbalance not only frustrated Seattle’s bachelors, but also threatened the existence of the little town. Without women to bring stability to Seattle, and with lumber being the only industry in town, it became

⁷³ Denny, *Pioneer Days on Puget Sound*, 20.

⁷⁴ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 308.

⁷⁵ Robert E. Ficken, *Washington Territory* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 2002),

increasingly likely that once the lumber was harvested the loggers and mill hands would simply move from the area in search of employment elsewhere. If this were to happen Seattle would be no more. “On Puget Sound,” one early commentator noted, “the scarcity of women in the pioneer days was a serious matter.”⁷⁶

The most readily obvious issue caused by this “scarcity” was the lack of marriageable women. There were, of course, native women available for concubinage,⁷⁷ but this was generally viewed as a threat not a benefit to society. The white men who took Indian partners were shunned as “squaw men,” while their offspring were ostracized.⁷⁸ As a result, most bachelors avoided interracial relationships, seeking desperately instead the scarce white woman to marry. In 1860 the Puget Sound *Herald* lamented that the region’s bachelors were “likely to remain so unless there is a large importation of women.”⁷⁹ The bachelors of Seattle were so troubled by the situation that in 1860 ninety-six of them called a meeting “to devise a way and means to secure this much-needed and desirable emigration [of women].”⁸⁰

In addition to needing women for the practical purposes of marriage and procreation, it was widely believed that women could be a civilizing force in society. This was due to their ability to domesticate their husbands, manage their households, and

⁷⁶ C. B. Bagley, “The Mercer Girls,” in *The Souvenir of Western Women*, ed. Mary Osborn Douthit, (Portland, OR: Anderson & Duniway, 1905), 135.

⁷⁷ Marriage, although not formally prohibited between whites and Indians in Washington Territory, was frowned upon. As a result, few interracial couples married.

⁷⁸ James R. Warren, *King County and Its Queen City, Seattle* (Woodland Hills: Windsor Publications, 1981), 60.

⁷⁹ Ficken, *Washington Territory*, 38.

⁸⁰ Lawrence M. Woods, *Asa Shinn Mercer: Western Promoter and Newspaperman; 1839-1917* (Spokane: Arthur H. Clark, 2003), 23-24.

bear and raise children. Women were, the men understood, agents of reproduction, not only of children but also of societal values. “Women were considered the agents of civilization on the frontier,”⁸¹ and without them Seattle could hope to be nothing more than a boomtown—rising and falling on economic merit alone. Such a town would lack houses of worship, theatres, schools, and other cultural centers. Without many females in the community, Seattle lacked the skill set and the sensibilities that many nineteenth century women possessed. “If Thomas was a man and had a wife I should not object so seriously to his coming here,” wrote Catherine Blaine in 1854, one of the few women in Seattle at that time, in regard to her little brother’s interest in coming to Seattle. “It is so in every respect the hardest country for an unmarried man that can well be imagined. The men already here want wives and a full cargo of girls would be snatched up with the greatest avidity.”⁸²

Although there was clearly a need for more eligible women and many Seattleites in the 1850s and 1860s complained about the lack thereof, not many ever did anything to remedy the situation. The venerable Judge Thomas Mercer often spoke of the need for young women to emigrate to Seattle, and suggested New England might be just the place to find women willing to make the move. These women, Thomas Mercer insisted, would not be mere wives and “household servants,” but instead were “needed as school teachers and for other positions.”⁸³ Nevertheless, despite all his talk, Judge Mercer, like the other men of the region, took no action. This inaction was largely a pragmatic calculation.

⁸¹ Warren, *King County and Its Queen City, Seattle* (Woodland Hills: Windsor Publications, 1981), 62.

⁸² Catherine P. Blaine, “Letter to her Family regarding life in Washington Territory, May 31, 1854,” *University of Washington*.

⁸³ Bagley, “The Mercer Girls,” 135.

“There are hundreds of single men here well able to go to the States and ‘woo and wed,’” explained Francis Chenoweth at the time, “but to leave their business would be ruinous.”⁸⁴ It would seem that most of the economically minded men of Seattle chose monetary over matrimonial interests.

“Anxious, Aimless Women”

Early in 1861 Judge Thomas Mercer’s younger brother, Asa, arrived in Seattle, bringing with him a freshly minted degree from Franklin College and an insatiable ambition. It did not take long for Judge Mercer’s ideas regarding the benefits of female emigration to the region to rub off on the younger Mercer, throwing him into feverish action. Asa Mercer, an early and excited celebrant of the promise of the Pacific Northwest, dedicated himself to extoling the virtues of the region. The potential for the region was great, he maintained, “all that is lacking . . . is an increase of population, especially the introduction of female society in greater abundance.”⁸⁵

Appointed “commissioner of immigration” by Washington Territorial governor, William Pickering, in 1863,⁸⁶ Mercer embraced his work, scheming ways to encourage fresh emigration to the region. In 1865 he wrote the promotional pamphlet *Washington Territory: The Great North-West, Her Material Resources and Claims to Emigration* in which he gave “a simple narrative of the facts” in order to “stimulate thousands to cut loose the chains that bind them down to the frozen North, East and West, and the ‘sunny

⁸⁴ Fricken, *Washington Territory*, 38.

⁸⁵ Mercer, *Washington Territory*, 38.

⁸⁶ Woods, *Asa Shinn Mercer*, 23.

South,” and to emigrate to Washington Territory.⁸⁷ Mercer was acutely aware of the undesirable imbalance between men and women in the Territory, especially considering that even he could not find an available bride. But he must have also understood the need for education in the region. As one of the only Seattleites with a college degree and as the first acting president of the Territorial University of Washington, Mercer appreciated the need for other educated individuals to emigrate, especially teachers. This importation of an educated class, he believed, would stimulate civilization in the region, and would secure Seattle’s future as an important American city. “I interested myself in the matter of emigration,” As Mercer recalled years later, “and . . . took a great number of young ladies from the East to help build up Puget Sound.”⁸⁸

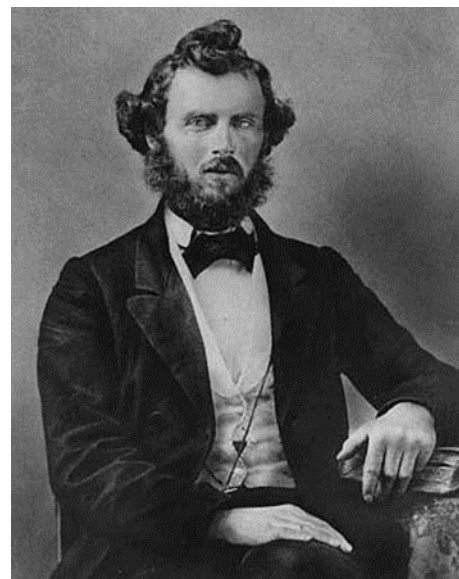


Figure 2.1. Asa Shinn Mercer, Seattle, c. 1875
Museum of History and Industry, Seattle.

By early 1863, perhaps earlier, Asa Mercer realized that the Civil War,⁸⁹ which continued to rage with seemingly unquenchable ferocity, provided him the unanticipated opportunity to recruit female émigrés. The War, he knew, had killed hundreds of thousands of men—fathers and husbands who now left orphans and widows alone and uncared for. These recent widows and orphans, reasoned Mercer, might “welcome the

⁸⁷ Mercer, *Washington Territory*, 1.

⁸⁸ Mercer, “Letter to Linnie Marsh, December 7, 1910,” *University of Washington*.

⁸⁹ A war, which had perhaps provided the impetus for Mercer’s emigration to Seattle in 1861, as he apparently ran as far from the fighting as possible.

opportunity to move to Washington Territory.”⁹⁰ It is estimated that 620,000 soldiers died during the Civil War, or roughly 2 percent of the country’s population.⁹¹ This level of devastating loss of life coupled with traditional societal roles for women, left many women, former dependents, in peril. The War left a “large surplus of marriageable females in the population,”⁹² Mercer noted, and he intended to persuade several of them to come to Seattle with him. He set his sights on Massachusetts, where Governor John Albion Andrew⁹³ spoke of the increasing number of “anxious, aimless women.”⁹⁴

The surplus of war widows and orphans, however, was only part of the problem facing Massachusetts in the 1860s. The War had also interrupted the lucrative cotton industry, not only in the South where cotton was grown, but also in the Northeast where the grand old textile mills employed thousands of young women. New England textile mills suffered great losses, leaving many unemployed. In Lowell, the second largest city in Massachusetts at the time, and a center for the textile industry, and where Mercer found ten of his original eleven recruits, “hundreds of men and women were thrown out of employment” during the War as the result of the “stagnant” cotton industry.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Woods, *Asa Shinn Mercer*, 24

⁹¹ Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Republic of Suffering, Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), xi.

⁹² Woods, *Asa Shinn Mercer*, 25.

⁹³ Andrew was born in 1818 in Maine. After studying law, he became interested in politics and ran for the Massachusetts Legislature in 1858. After one term Andrew ran for and won the governorship in 1860, a post he held for six years during the pivotal Civil War period. Andrew died shortly leaving office in 1867.

⁹⁴ Vernon Carstensen, Edward E. Hale, and Harriet F. Stevens. “Two Letters concerning the Mercer Girls,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1944): 343-347.

⁹⁵ Flora A. P. Engle, “The Story of the Mercer Expeditions,” *Washington Historical Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1915), 225-237.

Governor Andrew complained that this excessive unemployment led women to an “unnatural” competition for jobs “fitted for men alone.”⁹⁶ Mercer, however, saw a silver lining in the economic crisis in the northeast. His first trip hinged on attracting unemployed textile workers to come to Seattle where jobs, particularly in education, awaited them.⁹⁷

In the spring of 1863, “having said very little to anyone,”⁹⁸ Asa Mercer left Seattle bound for New England. It was a year before he arrived in Massachusetts in 1864, and while it is unclear what took him so long, or even where he was during that time, it is likely he was raising additional funds for his venture, and perhaps attempting to recruit women elsewhere to emigrate to Seattle.⁹⁹ Once in New England, Mercer wasted no time trying to convince the residents of the abundant economic opportunities that awaited them, especially the females amongst them, in Seattle. In Boston, a “proposition was placed before the public for such of the young women . . . who had been made fatherless by the civil war to accompany Mr. Mercer to Washington Territory.”¹⁰⁰ And in Lowell the local paper, *The Courier*, in a small article on the second page of its January 23, 1864 edition, announced the arrival of Mercer and his planned recruitment meeting. “TEACHERS WANTED,” the notice read:

Mr. Mercer, of Seattle, Washington Territory, has been in our city to-day, almost wholly, we believe, for the purpose of procuring female teachers to go to Washington Territory. He has visited several of our teachers and public schools, and will arrange to meet those

⁹⁶ Woods, *Asa Shinn Mercer*, 32.

⁹⁷ Mary Elizabeth Massey, *Women in the Civil War* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 298.

⁹⁸ Asa S. Mercer, “Letter to Clarence B. Bagley, February 1, 1912,” *University of Washington*.

⁹⁹ Woods, *Asa Shinn Mercer*, 25.

¹⁰⁰ Bagley, “The Mercer Girls,” 135.

interested in his object at the vestry of the Unitarian Church on Tuesday evening next, at 7 1/2 o'clock. Mr. Mercer comes well endorsed; he has personally no more interest in the matter than other citizens of Washington Territory; but whatever he does is for the public good and not for himself. His object will be further presented at the meeting named above.¹⁰¹

A resident of Lowell later remembered, "One evening in early spring, Asa S. Mercer, of Seattle, addressed an assembly in Mechanics' Hall and pictured in glowing terms the wonderful financial advantages that would without a doubt accrue to any and all young ladies who would leave their New England homes and migrate to Washington Territory."¹⁰²

The promise of jobs in the West must have been music to the ears of the economically depressed women of Lowell where the Civil War's greatest casualty was the textile mills. As a result of the meeting "ten well-educated and accomplished young ladies, ranging from fifteen to twenty-five years of age" optimistically "embraced the golden opportunity presented to them."¹⁰³ It was not, however, only women who agreed to join Mercer on his journey back to Seattle. At least one man, an unemployed overseer of Lowell's textile mills, and the father of two of the young ladies, also decided to go West.¹⁰⁴

Each member of the party paid \$225 for their passage to Seattle,¹⁰⁵ and then "with the conflicting emotions of joy and sorrow in their hearts, but with those selfsame hearts

¹⁰¹ "Teachers Wanted," *Lowell Courier*, January 23, 1864.

¹⁰² Engle, "The Story of the Mercer Expeditions," 225.

¹⁰³ Engle, "The Story of the Mercer Expeditions," 226.

¹⁰⁴ Woods, *Asa Shinn Mercer*, 26.

¹⁰⁵ Woods, *Asa Shinn Mercer*, 26.

fired with ambition and enthusiasm” they proceeded first to New York, where Mercer hoped to recruit additional emigrants, then to Panama, where the party crossed the isthmus before taking passage to San Francisco, then on to Seattle.¹⁰⁶

On May 28, 1864 the *Seattle Gazette*, under the heading “RETURNS,” announced the arrival of Mercer and the women from Massachusetts. “We neglected last week to notice the return home of our highly esteemed fellow-citizen, Mr. Asa S. Mercer, from the East, where he has been on a visit for the greater part of the past year,” the article read. “It is to the efforts of Mr. Mercer—joined with the wished of darlings themselves—that the eleven accomplished and beautiful young ladies, whose arrival was lately announced, have been added to our population. . . . The thanks of the whole community, and the bachelors in particular, are due Mr. Mercer for his efforts in encouraging this much needed kind of immigration . . .”¹⁰⁷

The *Gazette* also reported, in the same edition, that “on Tuesday the 17th . . . the good people of Seattle assembled at the University Hall to welcome Mr. A. S. Mercer, and his company of fair ones. . . .” The ceremonies included a speech by Doc Maynard and Reverend Doane, who spoke of the “undeveloped condition of the land,” and wished the recent emigrants “might find pleasant homes, and that blessings might attend, and success crown, their every effort.” Asa Mercer also spoke in his “wonted eloquent and graceful manner” and thanked the community for their welcome, both of him and the young ladies who had come with him. After Mercer spoke, “A vote of thanks was tendered to the young ladies for the self-sacrificing spirit they had manifested in leaving

¹⁰⁶ Engle, “The Story of the Mercer Expeditions,” 226.

¹⁰⁷ “Returns,” *Seattle Weekly Gazette*, May 28, 1864.

the loved firesides of happy homes, to ‘plod life’s weary way’ on this North-Western coast. A vote of thanks was also tendered to Mr. Mercer, for his untiring efforts in [sic] behalf of Washington Territory.”¹⁰⁸

“After [the women] beheld with admiration and delight the beauties of the western sunset,” on that first night in Seattle, they “sought their respective homes,”¹⁰⁹ and settled into the community they would help shape. It did not take long for them to begin to contribute to their adopted community. Within weeks all began teaching in area schools, and within months all but one were betrothed or married.

“Women of Respectability”

“They did not become lonesome or tired of the Territory,” reported the *New York Times* in 1865 regarding Mercer’s first emigrants, “nor have they desired to return.”¹¹⁰ Bolstered by the success of the first foray as an emigration agent, Asa Mercer began planning a second journey to recruit young ladies from the East. As the *Times* noted: “The success of this first enterprise encouraged Mr. Mercer to extend his plans so that they would comprise the emigration of a shipload of women.”¹¹¹

“Scarcely a year had passed,” observed one of the women from Mercer’s second voyage, “when Mr. Mercer conceived a scheme for an expedition on a much larger scale than his former successful venture.”¹¹² “I felt justified to go East and undertake an

¹⁰⁸ “Reception,” *Seattle Weekly Gazette*, May 28, 1864.

¹⁰⁹ “Reception,” *Seattle Weekly Gazette*, May 28, 1864.

¹¹⁰ “Female Emigration,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1865.

¹¹¹ “Female Emigration,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1865.

¹¹² Engle, “The Story of the Mercer Expeditions,” 225-237.

immigration on a larger scale,” Mercer wrote years later, “500 being the number I figured upon.”¹¹³ With the goal set, Mercer asked Territorial Governor William Pickering, as well as the Territory’s legislature, for help with the venture. The legislature balked. Mercer would not receive any funding from the Territorial Legislature. Despite this disappointment, Mercer did receive enthusiastic encouragement for his emigration project from Governor Pickering. “God bless you, Mercer,” the governor purportedly gushed, “and make your undertaking a great success.”¹¹⁴ The bachelors of Seattle and the surrounding region were equally enthused by Mercer, many eagerly agreeing to pay the sizable sum of \$300 for him to bring them a bride “of good moral character.”¹¹⁵

When Mercer arrived on the East Coast he brought with him the hopes of the territorial bachelors along with the sanction of the Territorial government. “Know ye,” declared Governor Pickering in a glowing letter of reference that Mercer carried with him, “the Honorable Asa Shinn Mercer . . . is a Gentleman of the best standing in Society, is universally respected, as a man of honor, integrity, and moral worth . . . [he will] work in the noble & good cause of aiding young women of respectability, to better their condition in life, by securing good homes in a new and exceedingly healthy & productive country.”¹¹⁶ Clearly Governor Pickering felt that Mercer’s emigrant-seeking expedition would be beneficial to the Territory as well as to the “women of respectability” who would come.

¹¹³ Mercer, “Letter to Clarence B. Bagley.”

¹¹⁴ Woods, *Asa Shinn Mercer*, 33.

¹¹⁵ Woods, *Asa Shinn Mercer*, 32.

¹¹⁶ Roger Conant, *Mercer’s Belles: The Journal of a Reporter*, ed. Lenna A. Deutsch (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960), 158.

With Territorial support behind him, Mercer set his sights on Federal support. The Civil War was quickly coming to an end and the Federal Government, he presumed, would be happy to help ship women from the economically depressed and gender imbalanced East to the newly developing far western territory. Mercer knew that there were plenty of idle ships and seamen that could be employed in the task of transporting women. So, with high hopes and an appointment to speak with President Lincoln,¹¹⁷ he set off for Washington D.C. The *New York Times* reported that Mercer hoped to “lay the plan of emigration before [Lincoln]; not questioning that the President would at once approve the plan, and aid it by designating a government vessel in which the daughters and widows of soldiers might be taken to Washington Territory, to be provided with homes without expense to themselves. He naturally thought Mr. Lincoln would not only acquiesce in the propriety of justice of this cause, but would also give such assistance as would render the scheme certain of success.”¹¹⁸ Timing, however, conspired against Mercer, and he arrived in Washington on April 15, 1865—the very day of Lincoln’s death.¹¹⁹ “Under these circumstances Mr. Mercer felt compelled to abandon that portion of this plan,” reported the *Times*.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, Mercer began to lobby others for support and he “did not lose hope in the ultimate feasibility and success of his novel

¹¹⁷ Although Mercer often claimed that he had known Lincoln as a child, and that he would sit on Lincoln’s knee and listen to his “funny” stories, this claim is dubious.

¹¹⁸ “Female Emigration,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1865.

¹¹⁹ Warren, *King County and Its Queen City, Seattle*, 64.

¹²⁰ “Female Emigration,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1865.

undertaking.”¹²¹ It would take the better part of a disappointing year before Mercer’s return trip to Seattle could commence.

Mercer did gain support from Governor Andrew of Massachusetts who introduced him to Reverend Edward Everett Hale. A Unitarian minister interested in emigration, Hale proved a great asset to him.¹²² He wrote letters of support and was always eager to vouch for Mercer and his venture. Hale understood the desperate situation that many New Englanders faced as a result of the Civil War, and he felt that importing several hundred women to the Pacific Northwest would benefit both communities. On December 3, 1864, Hale sent a report to the Massachusetts legislative committee on emigration. In the report Hale illuminated the striking shortage of women in the West. “We are informed that the evil of this alarming deficit shows itself in every form,” Hale wrote. “The great agricultural resources of the state cannot be developed till they have more women to work in their dairies. The school system cannot be well organized for want of teachers. All the operations of the simplest manufacture, or of domestic economy, which call for the work of women, are hampered in the same way.”¹²³ Hale understood clearly, as did pioneers in Seattle and other western towns, that women were necessary for economic growth and societal development. Women would also bring with them the trappings of society, thus helping to *civilize* the West. As Hale noted, “The organization of all the best social influences, in the civilizing of the state, by the organizations of charity and religion, they cannot be forwarded without women.”¹²⁴

¹²¹ “Female Emigration,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1865.

¹²² Woods, *Asa Shinn Mercer*, 36.

¹²³ “Surplus of Women,” *Boston Daily Globe*, 12 November 1905.

¹²⁴ “Surplus of Women,” *Boston Daily Globe*, 12 November 1905.

Hale was not only a proponent of western emigration for the benefit of the West, he also saw emigration as solving a problem in Massachusetts—a problem that had been brought on by the Civil War. “On our side,” wrote Hale, “the surplus of women is equally surprising not to say alarming. . . . Such a surplus is disastrous in every view. It entirely disorders the market for labor. . . . The competition of women with each other brings their wages to a starvation point. The presence in all our towns of a large surplus of women above the number of men is fatal to all efforts to preserve the ancient high tone of the morals of New England.”¹²⁵ Mercer’s collaboration with Hale would be mutually beneficial. Mercer sought women to help develop Seattle’s economy and society, and Hale hoped to remove women from Massachusetts in order to save the state’s economy and culture. By sending women from Massachusetts to Seattle, Mercer and Hale could solve what they saw as an untenable gender imbalance in both locations.

Mercer, who had been frantically attempting to gain the support of the Federal Government, soon found another friend in General Ulysses S. Grant when the two met in 1865.¹²⁶ It did not take long for Mercer to connect with the newly victorious general. Grant himself had served in Washington Territory in 1852, and harbored fond memories of the area. Moreover, Mercer stressed that the trip would aid “widows and orphans of the Civil War.”¹²⁷ Apparently Grant was inspired by Mercer’s plan, claiming that he “felt

¹²⁵ “Surplus of Women,” *Boston Daily Globe*, 12 November 1905.

¹²⁶ The *New York Times* reported on September 30, 1865, that Governor Andrews wrote Mercer a letter of introduction to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, but that Mercer upon hearing that Stanton was “not easily accessible” approached instead Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, who was supportive of Mercer’s plan, but claimed he had no authority to help. According to the *Times*, Mercer then approached Col. Bowers, who was on General Grant’s staff and an introduction to Grant was made.

¹²⁷ Woods, *Asa Shinn Mercer*, 38.

sure the officers of the government would embrace every opportunity presented to assist women who had lost their fathers in the service.”¹²⁸ Grant then told Mercer he would “lay the matter” before the President.¹²⁹ The following day immediately after discussing it with President Johnson and the rest the cabinet, Grant reportedly called out to his attending military officer, “Captain Crosby, make out an order for a steamship, coaled and manned, with capacity to carry 500 women from New York to Seattle for A.S. Mercer and I will sign the same.”¹³⁰

Back in Massachusetts, Mercer again worked to recruit women to join him on a journey to Washington Territory. “Mr. Mercer,” reported the *New York Times*, “issued circulars and traveled from place to place in that State and in the States of Connecticut, New-Hampshire, and Maine.”¹³¹ “On my part,” wrote Hale years later, “I knew that there [were a] number of well-educated young women of the first character who would be glad to go.”¹³² Mercer boasted that he would gladly “take 700 single women to Washington Territory free of charge and give them immediate employment as soon as they landed on [the] shores of Puget Sound.”¹³³ And while this claim was clearly hyperbole,¹³⁴ it must

¹²⁸ “Female Emigrants,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1865.

¹²⁹ “Female Emigrants,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1865.

¹³⁰ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 315.

¹³¹ “Female Emigrants,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1865.

¹³² Carstensen, “Two Letters concerning the Mercer Girls,” 343-347.

¹³³ Conant, *Mercer’s Belles*, 30.

¹³⁴ The town of Seattle, then only a settlement of about 300, could not have possibly employed 700 women. There is evidence that Mercer hoped to find employment elsewhere for his female emigrants. In June 1864, Mercer wrote to Governor Gibbs asking him to aid in “inducing New England teachers to come among us for the purpose of establishing good schools . . . Oregon needs many teachers.” It is unknown whether or not Governor Gibbs responded to Mercer, but in any case, Mercer was not contracted to bring any women to Oregon. Additionally, it is unclear how Mercer intended to provide passage to the young ladies “free of charge.” Although Mercer took a collection in Seattle, it does not appear enough was

have sounded very attractive to war widows and orphans with little opportunity in New England.

By the summer of 1865, Mercer had recruited nearly 300 women to go with him to Seattle. It was not the 500 he had originally hoped for, nor was it the 700 he had boasted he would be able to take, but it was a sizable expedition nevertheless. “The 19th of August I sailed from New York with upwards of three hundred war orphans—daughters of those brave, heroic sons of liberty, whose lives were given as offerings to appease the angry god of battle on many a plain and field in our recent war,” Mercer wrote in a letter to the *Seattle Weekly Gazette* on July 23, 1865. “I can cheerfully vouch for the intelligence and moral character of all those persons accompanying me,” continued Mercer, “and take pleasure in saying that they will be a very desirable addition and help to the country.”¹³⁵ The letter, published on September 16, caused quite a stir in the little town. In the same edition the editor of the *Gazette* questioned Mercer’s wisdom in bringing so many young ladies to Seattle. “Mr. Mercer is a young man of great enterprise, and is deserving of much credit for his exertions to advance the interests of this territory; as, also, for his patriotism and philanthropy in his endeavors to provide homes for those who have been deprived of theirs by the ruthless hand of war,” wrote the editor, “but the expediency of bringing so large a number at this time into our thinly settled country, may be questionable.”¹³⁶ The paper also announced a “PUBLIC MEETING”

raised to provide for free passage. Roger Conant reports that women were required to pay \$125 for passage, while others at the time reported that they had paid \$200 for the trip. It is entirely possible that Mercer expected to provide free passage, but failed to generate the support he needed, thus making it impossible to honor his promise and inducing him to charge emigrants for the journey. This may also be why Mercer failed to secure as many emigrants as he had originally intended.

¹³⁵ *Seattle Weekly Gazette*, September 16, 1865.

¹³⁶ *Seattle Weekly Gazette*, September 16, 1865

to be held “at Yesler’s Hall this evening at seven o’clock, to make arrangements for the reception . . . of the immigration expected to arrive here.”¹³⁷ The venerable Seattleite, Reverend Daniel Bagley,¹³⁸ wrote an urgent letter “to the public” two days after the report was printed, calling for “prompt and efficient action” to be taken in order to avoid “embarrassment and suffering” to be “experienced by the orphans of our departed heroes.” Bagley continued, “Humanity and patriotism alike, call upon us to make their condition as comfortable as possible.”¹³⁹

Despite Mercer’s audacity in bringing so many women to Seattle and despite the concern felt by residents of the town who feared they would not be able to accommodate such large numbers, there was a general sense that the war widows and orphans would be an important addition to the town. “We trust,” wrote Daniel Bagley in 1865, “[the emigration of women] will result in good to the territory and all concerned.”¹⁴⁰ The *Seattle Weekly Gazette* was equally optimistic in its assessment of Mercer’s emigrants. “These young ladies,” commented the editor, “when here and permanently located, will be an important acquisition to our community, and will have a beneficial influence, as many of the young men in this Territory who are now unsettled, will find companions

¹³⁷ *Seattle Weekly Gazette*, September 16, 1865.

¹³⁸ Reverend Daniel Bagley arrived in Seattle in 1860 having come from Illinois. He quickly became a well-respected member of the community. He founded one of the first churches in Seattle, but is best known for his contributions to the establishment of the Territorial University (see Chapter III). Bagley died in Seattle in 1905.

¹³⁹ Conant, *Mercer’s Belles*, 162.

¹⁴⁰ Conant, *Mercer’s Belles*, 162.

among their number, and will settle down and make themselves [a] home, to their own, the young ladies, and the country's benefit.”¹⁴¹

Success was within grasp. “HUNDREDS OF MARRIAGEABLE YOUNG WOMEN GOING TO WASHINGTON TERRITORY,” bellowed the *New York Times*, describing Mercer’s plan as “an enterprise that seems to possess all the elements of success.”¹⁴² Mercer had already secured a large contingent of women for the Territory, and had gained Federal support in the form of transport. Mercer’s letter of July 23 to the *Gazette* was not, it seems, only a way to prepare the population of Seattle for the sizable influx of females, but also a chance for him to boast a little of his imminent triumph. But he wrote too soon. Pragmatism would conspire against Mercer, leaving his plans in peril.

On August 1, 1865 Mercer began preparations in New York for the sailing to Seattle. It was then that General Van Vliet,¹⁴³ who served as liaison between Mercer and the Federal Government, told him that “he thought Mr. Mercer could not depend upon any aid from the government,” and that General Grant “had no right to issue the order for [the vessel].”¹⁴⁴ The cost of transporting hundreds of women from New England to Seattle was simply too great for the government to justify, and funding was pulled, leaving Mercer to find another means to transport the emigrants. While he worked to solve this challenge, other problems arose. As summer faded into autumn, several

¹⁴¹ *Seattle Weekly Gazette*, September 16, 1865.

¹⁴² “Female Emigration,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1865.

¹⁴³ Born in Vermont in 1815, Stewart Van Vliet graduated from the Military Academy at West Point 1840. Van Vliet steadily rose through the ranks as he fought in the Mexican-American War and Civil War. He retired in 1881 having served 41 years in the army. He died in 1901 and is buried in the National Cemetery at Arlington.

¹⁴⁴ “Female Emigration,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1865.

emigrants changed their minds, leaving Mercer with fewer and fewer passengers for which to provide transport. Upon the arrival of the chilly winds of winter, only a handful of women remained committed to the journey. It is not entirely clear why so many women backed out of their planned relocation to Seattle. Some likely grew tired of waiting for Mercer to secure passage to the region,¹⁴⁵ while others may have been swayed by negative press coverage claiming that the men of Seattle were “rotten” and that the women were only wanted for prostitution.¹⁴⁶ The journalist Roger Conant,¹⁴⁷ who accompanied Mercer on his second voyage, reported that “a natural distrust of the man’s intentions seemed to prevail.” Moreover, “It was hard to believe that any man, especially a young man [such as Mercer], would be so philanthropic as to be willing to spend his entire fortune in an operation where he could receive no benefit.” He also wrote that Mercer was “looked upon as an adventurer, and many efforts were put forth to prevent the expedition from becoming a success.”¹⁴⁸ The *New York Times* reported: “Mr. Mercer found many difficulties to overcome, and many discouragements to combat.” Primarily Mercer had to combat negative press. “Editors of prominent newspapers . . . refused to give him any countenance or support. . . . The local newspapers of Massachusetts did not favor him: . . . they accused him of seeking to carry off girls for the benefit of miserable

¹⁴⁵ Woods, *Asa Shinn Mercer*, 48.

¹⁴⁶ Warren, *King County and Its Queen City, Seattle*, 65.

¹⁴⁷ Roger Conant wrote for the New York papers and apparently met Mercer during his time in that city. Conant’s journal of the voyage gives interesting details of the trip from New York around Cape Horn, to San Francisco and then on to Seattle. While Conant’s writing does not give any detail of what the “Mercer Girls” did after arriving in Pacific Northwest, it does provide excellent insight into the journey and is an indication of the public interest that the Mercer expedition generated.

¹⁴⁸ Conant, *Mercer’s Belles*, 30.

old bachelors; and they threw their influence against him and all that he did.”¹⁴⁹ Perhaps the greatest reason that women decided to stay in the Northeast, however, was economic. The Civil War was over and the mills were beginning once again to open, hiring back many of the women they had laid off during the war years. Many no longer needed to relocate to the far and foreign Northwest to find opportunity, because the opportunity had returned to the Northeast.

Whatever the reason, the number of Mercer’s “Girls” was dropping by the day, and Mercer would have to work quickly to salvage the operation. With Federal support pulled, and with little money himself, Mercer turned to “stagecoach king” Ben Holladay¹⁵⁰ to finance the journey.¹⁵¹ Holladay was able to purchase the steamship *Continental* from the U.S. Government at a surplus price, and agreed to take Mercer and seventy-five passengers to the West Coast for a “nominal figure.”¹⁵² Finally, after several departure dates had been published and abandoned, and after months of wrangling and waiting, on January 16, 1866 Mercer and his diminished party boarded

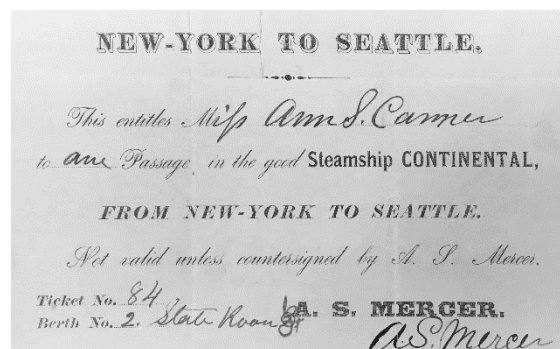


Figure 2.2. An original ticket “No. 84” for passage on the *Continental* from New York to Seattle, signed “A.S. Mercer.” University of Washington, Special Collections.

¹⁴⁹ “Female Emigration,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1865.

¹⁵⁰ Benjamin Holladay was born in Kentucky in 1819. Holladay first made his fortune selling supplies during the Mexican-American War, before going into the stagecoach business in California at the height of the gold rush. By 1861 Holladay had received a lucrative contract to deliver mail along his stagecoach routes, and by 1862 he had purchased the Pony Express. Although Holladay himself moved to Oregon in 1868, his interest in Mercer’s emigration scheme was almost certainly only economic. Holladay died in Portland, Oregon in 1887.

¹⁵¹ Woods, *Asa Shinn Mercer*, 53.

¹⁵² Woods, *Asa Shinn Mercer*, 54.

the *Continental* bound for San Francisco.¹⁵³ “At 3 p.m.,” Roger Conant wrote in his journal on January 16, 1866, “the noble ship left her berth at pier 2 N.R. [North River] and sweeping proudly into the stream sailed slowly down the bay.”¹⁵⁴

“No more curious or more suggestive Exodus ever took place than the Exodus of Women to Washington Territory under the leadership of Mr. Asa S. Mercer,” reported *Harper’s Weekly* in January 1866 in a two-page article with beautiful illustrations of women aboard the ship. “The scheme proposed by Mr. Mercer,” the article continued, “is in every way original and praiseworthy.”

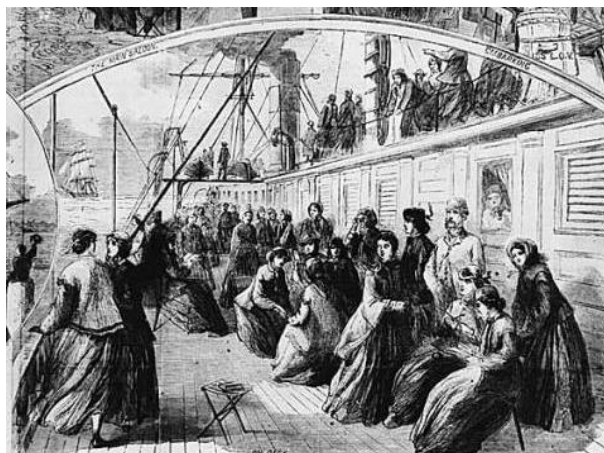


Figure 2.3. Harper’s Weekly illustration of “Mercer’s Belles” aboard the *Continental*, January 1866. University of Washington.

This gentleman the Moses of this Exodus from New England to the West, is a graduate of Franklin College, Ohio. He went to the Washington Territory five years ago for recreation. He found the Territory rich in resources, which it required a vast population fully to develop. The actual population of the Territory was meager, owing in great part to the small proportion of women. Mr. Mercer saw that there were nine men in the Territory to one woman. His official position as President of the Washington Territory University—an office to which he was chosen soon after his arrival in the Territory—brought him into direct contact with the people. He saw that the emigrants from Eastern States had been for the most part respectable young men who sought the more promising opportunities for business which a new and fertile country always offers. His survey of the social condition of the Territory led Mr. Mercer to come to New England to find women for teachers. This was two years ago. He succeeded in inducing twelve ladies to emigrate for that purpose. This was an experiment, and it proved a success. He found that the ladies were soon married, and there were none to take their places. Mr. Mercer therefore determined to undertake the transportation of women on a larger scale. He traveled over the North, from Kansas to Maine, in search of intelligent women willing to emigrate, and willing to labor at sewing or teaching. He chartered a steamer, expecting that the Government would pay the expense. Here he was disappointed, and this caused so great a delay that many of the young ladies (he had induced about 750 to enter upon the expedition) returned to their homes. Some friends advanced the necessary funds, and Mr. Mercer persevered in his

¹⁵³ Holladay had only agreed to take Mercer to San Francisco, where the party would have to find other means of transporting themselves to Seattle.

¹⁵⁴ Conant, *Mercer’s Belles*, 32.

undertaking. Although he takes but about four hundred women with him, we wish him success in his undertaking, hoping that this first Exodus may not be the last.¹⁵⁵

“The party,” remembered one of the women, “consisted of five childless couples, six couples each with one son, two couples with two or three children, seven widows with offspring . . . three unencumbered widows, one woman . . . coming to join her

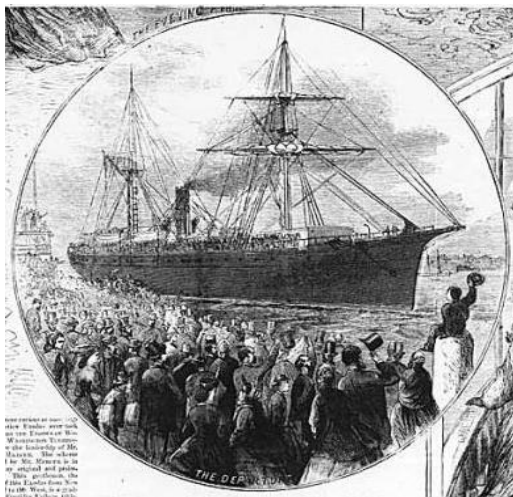


Figure 2.4. Harper's Weekly illustration of the Continental departing New York, January 1866. University of Washington.

husband, thirty-six unmarried women, and fourteen single men.”¹⁵⁶ This was hardly the grand band of hundreds of women that Mercer had imagined and publicized, but nevertheless this party, particularly the women in its midst, would have a profound influence on the development of Seattle and the entire Pacific Northwest.

“A Blessing to the Commonwealth”

Asa Mercer always maintained “his mission was one of immense benefit to [Washington] territory,” and that the women he brought had made sizable contributions to Seattle and the region as a whole.¹⁵⁷ Indeed Mercer's “Girls” did positively impact Seattle, bringing culture and learning to an otherwise uncultured and unschooled populace. These intrepid women and those like them, left indelible marks on Western

¹⁵⁵ “Emigration to Washington Territory of Four Hundred Women on the Steamer ‘Continental,’” *Harper's Weekly*, January 6, 1866.

¹⁵⁶ Engle, “The Story of the Mercer Expeditions,” 225-237.

¹⁵⁷ Bagley, “The Mercer Girls,” 136.

society and culture.¹⁵⁸ As Clarence Begley later wrote: “Not one of the Mercer girls ever went wrong.”¹⁵⁹

Mercer had only sought “well-educated young women of the first character” to come to Seattle,¹⁶⁰ and long maintained that “The young ladies comprising the party were selected with great care, and never in the history of the world was an equal number of women thrown together with a higher average of intelligence, modesty and virtue.”¹⁶¹ The recruiting “circulars” published by Mercer in Boston and elsewhere declared “we only wish a class of emigrants who will improve the religion, morals and tone of society in the territory. None but those who can furnish us with good references need apply.”¹⁶² Roger Conant described the women as “from the middle class of New England society . . . respectable well meaning people, and [their] conduct . . . would have called forth strong expressions of praise from their stern old Puritan ancestors.”¹⁶³ As a result the women that Mercer brought back to Seattle with him were in fact the type of women, educated and upright, who would “improve the . . . morals and tone of society” in Seattle, and who would contribute in ways beyond just marriage and reproduction.

Perhaps the most readily obvious contribution that the “Mercer Girls” made to Seattle was that of education. Despite Seattle’s sparse population, the town fathers

¹⁵⁸ Douthit, “Preface,” *The Souvenir of Western Women* (Portland, OR: Anderson & Duniway, 1905).

¹⁵⁹ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 323.

¹⁶⁰ Carstensen, “Two Letters concerning the Mercer Girls,” 343-347.

¹⁶¹ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 323.

¹⁶² “Mercer’s Circular,” *New York Times*, January 26, 1866.

¹⁶³ Conant, *Mercer’s Belles*, 30.

believed they needed proper schools if Seattle was to become anything more than an unrefined logging camp. Providing education to youngsters, they reasoned, would also provide an additional draw to the region for future emigrants. But there was a distinct scarcity of qualified teachers. It was to remedy this problem that Asa Mercer had left on his first recruitment expedition. A half century after his first venture Mercer remembered his purpose in going East “was to secure 12 young schoolmams [sic].”¹⁶⁴ This he very nearly accomplished, bringing eleven school teachers from Massachusetts, after the twelfth “grew faint-hearted” and refused to come.¹⁶⁵ Shortly after arrival, seven of the eleven were employed in area schools,¹⁶⁶ and before long each had “obtained schools” or teaching positions of their own.¹⁶⁷ One young lady, Antoinette Baker, was so well educated that she was given a faculty position at the Territorial University, a relatively rare accomplishment for women in 1860s America.¹⁶⁸ Another, Ida May Barlow who had come as part of the second contingent, started her own private school in Seattle.

Overall, these teachers became an integral part of Washington Territory’s society. From at least as early as 1854 the population of Seattle had been supportive of providing education to its children.¹⁶⁹ This dedication to education was noted by Harriet Stevens, who had arrived with Mercer’s second party of emigrants in 1866. Stevens felt that the

¹⁶⁴ Mercer, “Letter to Clarence B. Bagley.”

¹⁶⁵ Mercer, “Letter to Clarence B. Bagley.”

¹⁶⁶ Massey, *Women in the Civil War*, 298.

¹⁶⁷ Engle, “The Story of the Mercer Expeditions,” 225-237.

¹⁶⁸ Massey, *Women in the Civil War*, 298.

¹⁶⁹ Gates, *The First Century at the University of Washington*, 7.

“fine structure” of the Territorial University “occupying so grand a site” was an indication of just how committed to education the little town of Seattle was.¹⁷⁰ But the university, although a fine gesture of intent, was hardly a bastion of lettered persons, as perhaps none in the territory could even pass “an examination to enter a university course.”¹⁷¹ Schools existed throughout the region, but students and teachers were scarce. So troubled were the early territorial schools that the superintendent of public instruction, B.C. Lippincott, took a stand against establishing the university because “Our common schools demand our attention first.”¹⁷² It was the women brought by Mercer who gave the territorial schools the “attention” they so desperately needed. It was these same women who brought education to an otherwise uneducated Northwest society.

Mercer’s female émigrés did not, however, only bring education to Seattle and the surrounding region, but also became an example for others to follow. Indeed, one of the greatest contributions that the “Mercer Girls” brought to Seattle was further population growth, as other Eastern women and families followed in their wake to a land that, thanks to the earlier emigrants, seemed less foreign and formidable. As Seattle continued to grow in the 1860s and 1870s the “Mercer Girls” attracted to Seattle many who otherwise would have never come, and who in turn were “instrumental in bringing others to this north-west corner of our United States.”¹⁷³ Between 1860 and 1870 the population of Seattle grew from 250 to more than 1,100, and much of this population growth was an

¹⁷⁰ Carstensen, “Two Letters concerning the Mercer Girls,” 343-347.

¹⁷¹ Charles M. Gates, *The First Century at the University of Washington: 1861-1961* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961), 3.

¹⁷² Gates, *The First Century at the University of Washington*, 3.

¹⁷³ Engle, “The Story of the Mercer Expeditions,” 225-37.

indirect result of Mercer's modest emigration ventures. The women Mercer brought to Seattle provided both the references for other emigrants to come, as well as the services for those settlers once they arrived. Asa Mercer remembered of the women he brought, "Their letters home to their friends gave glowing accounts of the country and they advised, in many instances, their friends to follow them."¹⁷⁴

With the women also came the physical structures of civilization. Mercer recalled that in the early 1860s "Yesler's mill was about all there was of the town."¹⁷⁵ Roger Conant, arriving with Mercer's second voyage, described Seattle, "the town which for months had been in every body's mouth,"¹⁷⁶ in his journal as, "cut out of clearing from dense forest on a side hill."¹⁷⁷ After touring the area upon his arrival in 1866, Conant reported seeing "nothing but water, pine forests, and flat head Indians."¹⁷⁸ Harriet F. Stevens, who also arrived with Mercer in 1866, wrote to the editor of the Puget Sound *Daily* of the "discouraging circumstances under which the handful of female immigrants landed."¹⁷⁹ And Ida May Barlow, who had celebrated her twentieth birthday aboard the *Constitution*, lamented, "I would that I had the descriptive powers to picture to you Seattle as I saw it . . . Imagine forest clad hills and a tiny village of straggling two story buildings. . . ."¹⁸⁰ But after the women arrived in Seattle the town began to resemble a

¹⁷⁴ Mercer, "Letter to Clarence B. Bagley."

¹⁷⁵ Mercer, "Reminiscences."

¹⁷⁶ Conant, *Mercer's Belles*, 129.

¹⁷⁷ Conant, *Mercer's Belles*, 130.

¹⁷⁸ Conant, *Mercer's Belles*, 36-137.

¹⁷⁹ "Communicated," Puget Sound *Weekly*, June 4, 1866.

¹⁸⁰ Lenna A. Deutsch, "Appendix A: The Passengers on the S.S. Continental." *Mercer's Belles: The Journal of a Reporter* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960), 144.

more permanent community. New houses, churches, community centers, and schools were built, and pride in the community increased. This in turn helped to fulfill Mercer's 1865 prediction that "Short will be the lapse of time, ere the conveniences of the East will be scattered all over the now wild but interesting Territory."¹⁸¹

Civilized culture had been in short supply in Seattle in the early years, when young loggers constituted the majority of the population. Most of these men were interested in making their fortune and little else. Traditional morals fell by the wayside, as did civility and urban sensibilities. Ida May Barlow recalled the rumors she had heard, prior to her arrival in Seattle, of the "ignorance, coarseness, and immorality of the people" there.¹⁸² Journalist Roger Conant noted that Seattle was filled with "foolish" men with "strange" names like "Humbolt Jack, Lame Duck Bill, Whiskey Jim, White pine Joe, and Bob tailed and Yeke."¹⁸³ And Harriet Stevens wrote that when the party of girls arrived in San Francisco they were told that "Puget Sound was the last place in the world for women," and of the "dismal character of Washington Territory." In short, Seattle "missed the teaching, morality, and civic good works that womenfolk traditionally offered."¹⁸⁴ Yet with the arrival of Mercer's cargo of "intelligent, amiable, sprightly" young ladies who could "boast a fair share of beauty and culture,"¹⁸⁵ the city of Seattle was set to change for the better. The women who arrived in Washington Territory

¹⁸¹ Mercer, *Washington Territory*, 3.

¹⁸² Carstensen, "Two Letters concerning the Mercer Girls," 343-347.

¹⁸³ Conant, *Mercer's Belles*, 130.

¹⁸⁴ Warren, *King County and Its Queen City, Seattle*, 62.

¹⁸⁵ Bagley, "The Mercer Girls," 136.

became “respected citizens and contributed to the development of their communities.”¹⁸⁶

The development was largely cultural, as Mercer’s “Girls” brought their own ideals, morals, and sensibilities to their adopted community.

The “Mercer’s Girls” contributed to Seattle and the Pacific Northwest in other, less traditional ways as well. Lizzie Ordway, one of Mercer’s first recruits from Lowell, taught for many years, but also became heavily involved in the women’s suffrage movement, co-founding the Female Suffrage Society in Seattle. In 1871, Ordway met with famed suffragist Susan B. Anthony, and appeared at public events with her. Later that year she was named “Secretary of the Convention” for the Washington Territory Woman Suffrage Association. A decade later, in 1881, Ordway was elected Superintendent of Schools of Kitsap County, thus becoming one of the first women ever elected in Territorial Washington.¹⁸⁷



Figure 2.5. Lizzie Ordway, c. 1865 Museum of History and Industry, Seattle.

The Peebles sisters, Libbie and Annie, who had both arrived with Mercer’s second voyage, were also committed to women’s suffrage. After teaching for only three years, Libbie Peebles was appointed the first female clerk in the Territorial legislature. Annie Peebles served for many years as the deputy collector of internal revenue.¹⁸⁸ Annie also served as secretary for the Equal Rights Association of King County and sat on the

¹⁸⁶ Mary Elizabeth Massey, *Women in the Civil War* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 300.

¹⁸⁷ Shanna Stevenson, “Here Come the Suffragists: The Role of the Mercer Girls in the Washington Woman Suffrage Movement.” *Washington Women’s History Consortium*, Washington State Historical Society.

¹⁸⁸ Massey, *Women in the Civil War*, 299.

advisory committee for the Washington Equal Suffrage Association. She also became a successful business woman, investing in real estate and opening hotels. Both of the Peebles sisters remained active in women's suffrage and rights groups, and both regularly and generously donated their sizable financial resources to women's causes. Mehitable Haskell Lord, who arrived in 1866 as part of Mercer's second voyage, was also committed to women's rights, and founded the Women's Cup Olympics. These women, and the several other Mercer importees who worked for universal suffrage, were instrumental in securing the vote for women in Washington Territory in 1883.¹⁸⁹

The women who emigrated from the Northeast to the Northwest proved to be a great asset to Seattle. "The young women who came," wrote a friend of Mercer's "have proved a blessing to the commonwealth. In public and at the fireside their teachings and their example have conserved the well-being of the people."¹⁹⁰ These women, widowed, orphaned, or unemployed as a result of the Civil War, found for themselves new opportunities in Washington Territory, but they also afforded opportunities *for* the entire region. "The uplifting and stabilizing effect of this emigration of New England women to Puget Sound cannot be overestimated," wrote Arthur Denny's granddaughter, "Their influence was felt throughout the state. From these two groups of women, known as 'the Mercer girls,' sprang many of Washington's most substantial families."¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Although Washington Territory extended suffrage to women in 1883 the right was revoked five years later as Washington worked towards statehood. The women of the newly minted State of Washington would have to wait 22 years before their right to vote was reinstated. Many of the "Mercer Girls" spent those years advocating for the vote.

¹⁹⁰ Bagley, "The Mercer Girls," 136.

¹⁹¹ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 323.

They brought growth to the Pacific Northwest both by reproduction and recruitment. They offered educational opportunity to residents, young and old, throughout the Puget Sound region, and they provided societal stability and cultural values. These same women who, with the intrepid spirit that had led them across the continent to new homes in a foreign land, sought nontraditional vocations and societal stations, and fought for women's suffrage and equality in Washington and beyond. These were the women, emigrants from the war devastated East, who changed Seattle from a tiny, uncultured, uneducated logging town, to a prominent regional city. "I know that their influence upon the State has been, as a whole, for good," wrote Asa Mercer near the end of his life of the women he recruited, "God bless them and theirs."¹⁹²

¹⁹² Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 323.

Chapter III

“The Minds and Hearts of the Citizens”

Even before Congress separated Washington Territory from Oregon in 1853, the pioneers recognized the need for territorial universities. Education was seen as a mark of civilization—a sign of superiority on the frontier and a justification for the “overspreading of the continent” that was then widely accepted as “our manifest destiny.”¹⁹³ In 1850, the Territorial Legislature of Oregon passed the “Donation Law” which “made Donations [of land] to the Settlers,” and “granted to the Territory of Oregon the quantity of two townships of land in the said Territory . . . one to be located north [in what became Washington Territory], and the other south, of the Columbia River, to aid in the establishment of the university in the Territory of Oregon.”¹⁹⁴ The idea was that the donated land, totaling over 46,000 acres, would be sold to generate revenue to be used for the establishment of universities, and to create lasting endowments for long-term institutional support.

“The subject of education already occupies the minds and hearts of the citizens of this Territory,” noted Governor Isaac Stevens¹⁹⁵ in his first speech to the Territorial

¹⁹³ John L. O’Sullivan, “Annexation,” *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 17, no. 1 (July-August 1845): 5.

¹⁹⁴ “The Donation Land Claim Act (1850),” *University of Oregon*.

¹⁹⁵ Isaac Stevens was born in 1818 in Massachusetts. In 1839 he graduated first in his class despite his small stature (Stevens was so small that some have hypothesized that he suffered from a mild form of dwarfism). In the Corps of Engineers Stevens excelled, working on coastal defense systems. In the mid-1840s Stevens was given a taste of combat during the Mexican War. In March of 1853, Washington Territory was formed from the northern reaches of Oregon Territory, and Stevens, seeing an opportunity for self-promotion, wrote to the newly elected President Franklin Pierce, who he had backed during the

Legislature on February 28, 1854.¹⁹⁶ Even before Stevens had become governor, while he surveyed the northern reaches of what was then Oregon Territory, and as he planned for the organization of the new Territory of Washington, he wrote on January 2, 1852, “My attention is turned, towards the establishment of an university in Washington Territory.”¹⁹⁷ Two years later as he addressed the legislature of the newly formed territory, Stevens passionately promoted education. “Let every youth, however limited his opportunities,” declared Stevens, “find his place in the school, the college, the university, if God has given him the necessary gifts.”¹⁹⁸



Figure 3.1. Governor Isaac Stevens
Museum of History and Industry,
Seattle.

Stevens felt that education was an important right for territorial residents, and he knew that successful schools would lead to successful civilization in the far West. “Congress has made liberal appropriations of land for the support of schools,” Stevens reminded the legislature, “and I would recommend that a special commission be

election or 1852. Peirce granted Stevens’ request, appointing him the first governor of Washington Territory as well as the Superintendent of Indian Affairs. During his tenure, Stevens drafted several treaties with native tribes in the Territory, and confined tribes to Indian Reserves. By 1857 Stevens popularity in the Territory (and his handling of the Indian Wars of 1854-1856) propelled him to Congress where he served as the representative for Washington Territory. Despite Stevens’ belief that the institution of slavery was protected by the Constitution, and despite the fact that he had supported Democratic candidate John C. Breckinridge in his failed bid for the Presidency against Republican Abraham Lincoln, Stevens was quick to take up his commission as a brigadier general for the Union once the Civil War broke out. On September 1, 1862, during the battle of Chantilly, Stevens was shot in the head and killed while leading a charge. News of Stevens death, although slow in reaching remote Washington Territory, was met with widespread shock and grief.

¹⁹⁶ Charles M. Gates, ed., *Messages of the Governors of the Territory of Washington to the Legislative Assembly, 1854-1889* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1940), 3.

¹⁹⁷ Isaac Stevens, “Letter to Captain Henry W. Halleck, regarding the exploration of Washington Territory and the possibility of a railroad route, January 2, 1852.”

¹⁹⁸ Gates, ed., *Messages of the Governors of the Territory*, 8.

instituted to report on the whole school system.” Governor Stevens also pledged that he would “recommend that congress be memorialized to appropriate land for an university.”¹⁹⁹ Stevens understood, along with many of his contemporaries, the importance of the establishment of a university for the people of Washington, and the benefits such an institution would have on the cultural and economic development of the Territory.

The Federal Government also understood the need for such institutions. “Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind,” noted the Northwest Ordinance in 1787, “schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”²⁰⁰ The interest of the Federal Government was to spread influence—in the form of territorial acquisition, governmental programs, and cultural norms—ever northwestward, and the Northwest Ordinance was designed to aid in that endeavor. Even before the Federal Government was fully formed—before the Constitution was adopted—there was a desire not only to control the land “northwest of the River Ohio,” but also to spread American culture by spreading “religion, morality, knowledge . . . and good government” to those lands. One key way to spread these traits—the very traits of civilization—was to establish schools in order to teach and to enculturate the population in the West.

Seventy years after the passage of the Northwest Ordinance, Representative Justin Smith Morrill of Vermont rose from his seat in Congress on December 14, 1857 to again seek the support of the Federal Government for the spread of culture and knowledge

¹⁹⁹ Gates, ed., *Messages of the Governors of the Territory*, 8.

²⁰⁰ “Northwest Ordinance, 1787.” *Our Documents, The National Archives*.

through education. “I ask leave to introduce a bill,” Morrill intoned, “donating public lands to the several states and territories which may provide colleges for the benefit of agriculture and mechanic arts.”²⁰¹ The purpose of the so-called “land-grant universities” was not only to train and teach frontiersmen, nor was it entirely to spread the enculturating effects of education to western states and territories, it was also to strengthen the Federal Government’s hold on the West during a time of frightening and ever-increasing sectional tensions. Morrill’s high-minded bill ultimately made its way to President Buchanan’s desk only to meet its demise there with a few strokes of the veto pen in 1859. The concept of Federal grants of land for the development of colleges and universities, however, was not dead and three years later Morrill argued again that colleges and universities were worth supporting in the West.

In 1862, as the Civil War entered its second year, it was all the more important for the Federal Government to consolidate its influence on the western states and territories, argued Morrill. The concept behind the Morrill Act was quite simple—states and territories could apply for a grant of land to establish and maintain a university provided that that university taught agriculture, “mechanic arts,” and “military tactics.” This would help to develop western states and territories, and it would also strengthen Federal power. There was one notable caveat. “No State while in a condition of rebellion or insurrection against the government of the United States,” declared the sixth condition of the legislation, “shall be entitled to the benefit of this act.”²⁰²

²⁰¹ *Congressional Globe*, 14 December 1857. *A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774–1875*.

²⁰² “An Act Donating Public Lands to the several States and Territories.”

A continent away from the halls of Congress where land-grant universities were being debated, the small community of Seattle carved from the dense forests above Elliot Bay was hardly an obvious choice for the “colleges” that Congressman Morrill dreamed of, nor was it a likely location for the type of institution that the Northwest Ordinance sought to “encourage.” In fact, although the need for a territorial university was felt by many in the young Territory of Washington, the idea of locating such a university in the tiny, isolated village of Seattle was hardly taken seriously in the 1850s. Instead Seattle, along with other territorial towns, used the potential placement of the university and other public institutions such as the penitentiary, the insane asylum, and the territorial capital as bargaining chips as they vied for territorial power and influence. Each year the legislature passed acts that placed public institutions in various communities in the young territory—often in a wholly new location each year. While this thrilled the respective townfolk each time a territorial institution was placed in their community, with no funds available to build said institutions the placements existed only on paper and could easily be moved during the next legislative session, as they almost always were.²⁰³ So, when on January 29, 1855, the territorial legislation approved “An Act to Locate the Territorial University” which “located and established” the University in Seattle and which funded the University through the “two townships of land granted by act of congress of July seventeenth, 1854, for support of universities,”²⁰⁴ few seriously believed that the placement would stick. In fact, many in Seattle did not even recognize the value of the University’s placement there, and instead hoped for grander institutions or more

²⁰³ Clarence B. Bagley, *History of Seattle*, 158.

²⁰⁴ “An Act to Locate the Territorial University, January 29, 1855,” *Laws of Washington*.

economically beneficial developments for their youthful village, like the territorial capital or a rail line.

Seattle's over-optimistic founder, Arthur Denny, hoped that the territorial capital, which had been temporarily placed in Olympia, would be moved permanently to Seattle—a fanciful plan that must have seemed ridiculous to all but the most ardent dreamers.²⁰⁵ Others viewed Seattle as nothing more than a commercial center—a logging town and a potential shipping port—and hoped that one day the railroad would find its way over the nearly impassable Cascade Mountains and into the Duwamish Valley where Seattle lay. But despite the rumors of future development and the ambitions of the hardy residents of Seattle, few ever considered the possibility of permanently locating the Territorial University in their settlement, nor did many see the need of such an institution in the little logging town.

By 1860, however, one Seattle resident saw opportunity where others did not.

Daniel Bagley, a Methodist minister from Illinois, arrived in Seattle in October 1860, and set to work preaching the assurance of an eternal home while fervently promoting his newly adopted hometown of Seattle. Bagley believed that a university was a prize greater than the state penitentiary, greater than commercial venture, and still greater than the territorial capital. The ever-astute and shrewd Bagley hatched a



Figure 3.2. Reverend Daniel Bagley, c. 1867. University of Washington

²⁰⁵ Denny was so eager to see the capital located in Seattle that he chose a site for it on his own property and named the area “Capitol Hill,” a name which, despite the conspicuous lack of a capitol building remains to this day.

plan not only to locate the university in Seattle on paper, but also to fund and build it, thus cementing Seattle's hold on the institution permanently. His methods proved to be untraditional, unexpected, and, according to many, illegal.

“A Matter of Profound Regret”

Despite the implausibility of Seattle securing the University—essentially stealing it from larger, more established towns—Bagley devised a plan to do just that. And, using his powers of persuasion, Bagley convinced the skeptical Arthur Denny to join his quixotic quest. Together they worked to introduce a bill in the Territorial Legislature to once again place the University in Seattle. The plan required political horse trading. Denny, a territorial legislator by that time, joined forces with Paul Hubbs of Port Townsend and Lewis Van Fleet of Vancouver. Each had hoped to secure the territorial capital for their respective town, but through shrewd negotiations the men agreed to support each other in a scramble for territorial clout. Under the plan Port Townsend would get the penitentiary, Vancouver would get the capital, and Seattle would get the university, leaving the often-despised Olympia, where the capitol was temporarily housed, with nothing at all.

With the plan fully hatched, the legislators went to work quietly proposing legislation and securing votes. In January 1861, the Territorial Legislature passed “An Act to Relocate the Territorial University,” selecting Seattle once again as the site for the institution. The same act formed a land commission, which was charged with selecting the granted land that would be used for the establishment of the University, and, on Denny's recommendation, named Bagley as a member. Once on the commission, Bagley

was quickly elected to serve as its chairman, which gave him greater power to direct the commission's work. With the Territorial University placed in Seattle, Daniel Bagley as chairman of the lands commission, and increased Federal support for land grant universities, the stage was set for the University to be made permanent—something even the legislators in Olympia had not fully anticipated.

Bagley threw himself into the work of the commission, claiming he worked “every minute” to establish the University.²⁰⁶ The bulk of his work was selecting granted land to be sold in order to fund the building of the University, and keeping detailed records of income and expenditures, which he did faithfully each day in the “Washington University Cash Journal.”²⁰⁷ Bagley also lobbied his good friend, Arthur Denny, to donate a knoll overlooking the town as the site for the University. Denny complied, donating roughly nine acres, while his neighbor, Lee Terry, donated an adjacent acre for a total of ten acres for the University grounds.²⁰⁸ The speed at which Bagley proceeded with the plans for the University, and especially the tactics he used to raise the funds, however, raised the ire of strong opponents in the territorial capital in Olympia.

One of the strongest opponents was acting Territorial Governor Jay Turney who wrote a letter expressing his concern directly to Daniel Bagley in August of 1861. “I doubt your legal authority to dispose of the lands in question,” Turney wrote with alarm, “I hope you will pardon me asking to be referred to the law which in your judgement

²⁰⁶ “Daniel Bagley v. The State of Washington,” *Clarence Bagley Papers*, box 2 of 2, folder 29. *University of Washington Special Collections*.

²⁰⁷ Daniel Bagley, “Washington University Cash Journal,” *Daniel Bagley Papers*, *University of Washington Special Collections*.

²⁰⁸ “Daniel Bagley vs. The State of Washington.”

invests you with power to sell.”²⁰⁹ Turney’s concern was twofold. First, he, and other critics, believed that Bagley only had authority to *select* granted lands, and would have to wait for Congressional approval before *selling* it. It was, after all, Congress that had granted the land in the first place, and it was understood that Congress would need to take action in order to make the sale of the land legal. Turney was also likely unsure that Seattle was the best location for the Territorial University and probably preferred to keep the decision of the location of the University on the negotiating table as a way to retain political power.

Secondly, and the greater of Turney’s concerns, was the manner in which Bagley was selecting and selling land. Instead of selecting land *then* selling it, Bagley encouraged interested land buyers to choose their own tract of land, in any size or shape, then Bagley would record it as being selected as part of the university’s land grant. “The authorities,” remembered Bagley many years later, “said I had no right to sell.”²¹⁰

Despite Governor Turney’s understanding that “The University question involves much of our future welfare as a people,”²¹¹ he was rightfully nervous about the consequences of illegally establishing the University in Seattle, and he continued to rail against Bagley for what he believed to be the illegal sale of land. In his first and only

²⁰⁹ L. Jay S. Turney, “L. Jay S. Acting Governor of Washington Territory, L. Jay S. Turney, letter to Reverend Daniel Bagley, John Webster, and Edward Carr, regarding the sale and acquisition of lands for the University of Washington Territory, August 29, 1861,” *University of Washington Libraries, Pacific Northwest Historical Documents Collection*.

²¹⁰ “Daniel Bagley vs. The State of Washington.”

²¹¹ L. Jay S. Turney, “L. Jay S. Acting Governor of Washington Territory, L. Jay S. Turney, letter to Reverend Daniel Bagley, John Webster, and Edward Carr, regarding the sale and acquisition of lands for the University of Washington Territory, August 29, 1861,” *University of Washington Libraries, Pacific Northwest Historical Documents Collection*.

address to the Territorial Legislature on December 19, 1861, Governor Turney vehemently denounced the placement of the University in Seattle and reprimanded the legislators for the “illegal and void” act granting lands for the establishment of the University. In the speech Turney noted that the land commissioners’ actions, under the direction of Daniel Bagley, had been “hasty and unwarranted.” “It is a matter of profound regret,” remarked Turney, “that subjects of public concern should ever be made to yield to private interest.”²¹²

Bagley and the University also faced other powerful critics. Territorial School Superintendent, Benjamin Lippincott noted on December 10, 1861 that the “expense” of the Territorial University was “already too great for the public good. If the matter is well considered,” continued Lippincott, “we shall find that we are not yet prepared for a Territorial University. We have reason to believe that there is not a young man in the Territory who could pass an examination to enter the University course. Hence, where is the propriety of spending all this money?” Lippincott’s concern was legitimate. The University building at the time reportedly cost \$24,013,²¹³ an enormous sum in 1861, and all the more considering the University’s placement in the tiny town of Seattle, then a settlement of only between 150 and 200 residents. “There is not in all King County one hundred children of lawful age to attend even a district school,” Lippincott complained. “Our common schools demand our attention first; then our high schools, academies, colleges and universities, but in the above matters are reversed,” the confounded

²¹² Gates, ed., *Messages of the Governors of the Territory*, 94.

²¹³ “Board of Regents of the University of Washington Territory letter to the Washington Territorial Legislative Assembly, regarding school funds and salary, December 19, 1864.” *University of Washington Special Collections*.

Lippincott grumbled, “University first, then come common schools.” With his disappointment clearly stated, Lippincott proceeded with his official condemnation of the Territorial University in Seattle. “We feel it to be our duty to enter officially our protest against this hasty expenditure of our public school funds,” Lippincott declared, “We hold that public good should never be sacrificed for individual interest.”²¹⁴

“A Very Small Beginning”

Despite Turney and Lippincott’s objections Bagley tenaciously proceeded with his unconventional method of selling land *then* selecting it as part of the land grant. Thirty-five years later, Bagley recalled that of the estimated 45,000 acres of land he sold to raise funds for the University only “a few thousand” were selected by the land commission *before* the sale.²¹⁵ The rest had been sold illegally, according to Governor Turney and others, without the proper approval from Congress. Nevertheless, with the funds from the dubious land sales in hand, Bagley set about building the University, and on May 21, 1861 the residents of Seattle laid the cornerstone of the first University building.

At about the same time, Asa Mercer, at the bidding of his older brother Thomas, arrived in Seattle looking for opportunity and a job. “My brother used to tell me that this was going to be a great country,” wrote Mercer years later, “but I would reply that it was too hard to get at and develop—too much woods.”²¹⁶ Indeed the work was hard as Mercer

²¹⁴ B. C. Lippincott, “The University of Washington’s Early Years,” *University of Washington Special Collections*.

²¹⁵ “Daniel Bagley vs. The State of Washington.”

²¹⁶ Asa S. Mercer, “Reminiscence.”

learned firsthand. The young Mercer's first job in Seattle was to clear the grounds and "to dig a well" on the land that would become the University.²¹⁷ Upon reflection on the arduous nature of his first efforts on the University grounds, Mercer later recalled, "strenuousness marked the beginning of this great institution."²¹⁸ Work on the University progressed through much of 1861 under the direction of the contractors "Messrs, Pike Russell" who "spare[d] no pains in doing the work well,"²¹⁹ and whose payments Bagley carefully recorded in his "Cash Journal."²²⁰

On October 31, 1861 the *Puget Sound Herald* reported on the progress of the building of the University. "We had intended before this time to have given a more minute description than has yet appeared of this fine structure," apologized the paper, "but we have as yet been unable to do so, from various causes."

The work on the university is progressing very fast. The building is now enclosed, and all the outside work is done with the exception of the columns. This building will, without any doubt, be the most substantial and finest in structure of any in the territory. On approaching Seattle it is the first object that attracts attention; standing as it does on a high eminence and commanding a magnificent view of the Sound, with its four massive columns supporting the portico, and with its towering dome. The columns will be after the Ionic order, 28 feet tall and 3 feet in diameter. The dome is ellipsoidal, and 14 feet in diameter, in which a steel



Figure 3.3. *Territorial University of Washington, c. 1860s.* University of Washington, Special Collections.

²¹⁷ Asa S. Mercer, "Reminiscence."

²¹⁸ Mercer, "Letter to author, Linnie Marsh."

²¹⁹ "The University," *Puget Sound Herald*, October 31, 1861.

²²⁰ Bagley, "Cash Journal."

bell will be suspended. The lower story has a hall 12 feet in the centre, one school room to each side 34 by 36 feet, and a recitation room to each of 14 by 20 feet. The upper story is divided into three rooms, one lecture room 80 by 36 feet, and will be divided by a sliding partition, so that at pleasure it can be made into one or two rooms. The other two rooms will be recitation rooms. The school rooms will be furnished with stationary desks and seats of the most approved modern style.²²¹

On November 4, 1861, just a few days after the article was printed, and with the building mostly completed, territorial dignitaries from Olympia came to Seattle to dedicate the University. Asa Mercer had slyly asked a friend to suggest a speech to mark the occasion and to recommend him for the honor. The friend obliged and Mercer made what the crowd believed to be “an impromptu affair,” which, in fact, he had prepared for two days. “I got lots of glory out of it,” Mercer later recalled with pride.²²²

Mercer’s glory faded into frustration, however, as he struggled to recruit students for the University. Seattle, with a population “not to exceed 150 people”²²³ at that time, could now boast a new Territorial University, with a grand edifice to house it, but students proved harder to come by. As Lippincott had predicted there were no young men in Seattle, or possibly in the whole territory capable of passing the university entrance exam, and there was little interest in taking classes at the University. Instead, the students during the University’s first term were the “common school” aged children that Lippincott believed deserved the territory’s attention. This was not for lack of trying to recruit university students, but because, within the village of Seattle, there were simply no older, qualified students to be found. Fifty years after it opened Mercer remembered,

²²¹ “The University,” *Puget Sound Herald*, October 31, 1861.

²²² Mercer, “Reminiscence.”

²²³ Mercer, “Letter to author, Linnie Marsh.”

“Like all great institutions, the University of Washington had a very small beginning. Its early life was strenuous and seemingly without much promise.”²²⁴ Pioneer and territorial promoter, Ezra Meeker, near the end of his life, declared, “There cannot be found in the history of universities, another instance where the start was made under such adverse conditions.”²²⁵

“When I opened the university I wanted some scholars,” remembered Asa Mercer who had been asked by Daniel Bagley to serve as the University’s first president and faculty member, “for there were none here.”²²⁶ Indeed Seattle was hardly the place one would expect to find a university or scholars to fill it in the 1860s. The settlement was still little more than a muddy logging town, filled with hardworking men who lacked the time and ambition to seek higher learning. There were, at that time, reported historian Charles Gates,²²⁷ only 20 families in Seattle and “some bachelors” for a total of 200 or so white residents.²²⁸ Without a large enough population to justify a university, and without natural demand for higher learning, the University founders would have to rely on creative tactics to attract and retain students for their newly founded institution.

“In order to secure [students] in a sparsely settled region,” recalled Asa Mercer in a letter to Daniel Bagley’s son, Clarence, in 1912, “I hired an Indian and his squaw to

²²⁴ Mercer, “Letter to author, Linnie Marsh.”

²²⁵ Meeker, *Seventy Years of Progress*, 86-87.

²²⁶ Mercer, “Reminiscence.”

²²⁷ Charles Marvin Gates (1881-1963) served as a distinguished professor at the University of Washington and was instrumental in helping to found the Pacific Northwest History Project, which was dedicated the preservation of the history of the Northwest.

²²⁸ Gates, *The First Century at the University*, 4.

paddle me in his canoe to every logging camp on the east side of Admiralty Inlet.”²²⁹

Mercer also “got out a little circular and circulated it around among the logging camps,”²³⁰ and began advertising in local newspapers in the hopes of attracting students.

Recognizing that many would be deterred by the cost of a college education, Mercer devised a plan to encourage young men to abandon their economic interests in favor of higher learning. Offering young men the opportunity to earn the “big wages” of \$3.00 per week by cutting wood—two cords each Saturday—Mercer then sold the wood for \$2.50 per cord, making a profit of \$2.00 per student, which was used for tuition. Mercer had negotiated a deal with Arthur Denny, who owned the “land between the University and the Bay, upon which there were many downed trees,” to take the fallen wood free of charge. Mercer also made a deal with Henry Yesler, who by that time controlled not only the sawmill but the harbor as well, to forgo the wharf fee of \$0.25, thus increasing the profits for the young men who would work their way through their courses of study.

Mercer found other ways to make the University more affordable as well. He convinced Mary Shorey to “take charge” of the boarding house on the University grounds, which she did charging the bargain price of \$3.00 per week for each boarder. To help keep boarding costs down, Mercer had negotiated to get food shipped from San Francisco at wholesale prices, and encouraged students to furnish “their own blankets” and care for “their own rooms.” Mercer also noted that “bed room furniture was not

²²⁹ Mercer, “Letter to printer, publisher and historian, Clarence B. Bagley.”

²³⁰ Mercer, “Reminiscence.”

considered a necessity in those early days.”²³¹ So, the enterprising Mercer schemed a way in which his university students could, in one hard day of work each Saturday, earn enough money for room and board and have their tuition paid for as well. Through promotion and Mercer’s creative funding scheme, the number of “scholars” during the second term “swelled” to seventy-nine.²³²

The University’s future, however, remained doubtful. Bagley’s funding tactics had caused the Territorial Government to rule, twice, that the land commission “had no right to sell the lands—had a right to select them, but had no right to sell.”²³³ These rulings came only “after we had nearly done the entire work in our way,” noted Bagley. “They paid no attention to our sales,” he later testified, “they ruled that we must select the land by sections and not by acres, so that if we selected a 40-acre tract that it was not within their ruling a legal sub-division unless we called it 160 acres. The result was that what we had selected—we had sold the lands and got the money and put it in the University and couldn’t cancel our obligations with purchasers.”²³⁴

From 1862 to 1864, Bagley traveled twice to Washington, D.C. “to get the land department at Washington to reconcile some way with our doings—help us out of our difficulty and give the parties their title [to the land they purchased].”²³⁵ Finally, on February 12, 1864, the House of Representatives took up the issue and promptly passed

²³¹ Mercer, “Letter to printer, publisher and historian, Clarence B. Bagley.”

²³² Mercer, “Letter to printer, publisher and historian, Clarence B. Bagley.”

²³³ “Bagley vs. Washington.”

²³⁴ “Bagley vs. Washington.”

²³⁵ “Bagley vs. Washington.”

“An Act in relation to university lands in Washington Territory.” “All cases of sales made to individuals by the territorial authorities prior to the passage of this act,” the legislation declared, “shall and may be lawful.”²³⁶ The Act retroactively made legal Bagley’s disputed sales of granted land, silenced the territorial critics, and made the newly established university in Seattle permanent.

With the University duly established, despite the howls from some in the territorial capital, it would ever after serve as a beacon of learning in the region—shaping the character and culture of Seattle for generations to come. In the first edition of Seattle’s first newspaper, the *Gazette*, alongside the typical frontier advertisements for such enterprises as the “Fashion Saloon” with “the best quality liquor” and “a good billiard table,” the “Cheap Cash Store” with “dry goods, clothing, wines & liquors,” “H. McAleer, dealer of Stoves,” and “A.J. Smith, Sadler and Harness Maker,” was an advertisement for the University of Washington Territory—the first known print advertisement for the institution. “The University established at Seattle on Puget Sound... now opens its doors to all those who desire to avail themselves of the facilities it affords for acquiring a thorough acquaintance with the common and higher English branches, and also the usual Collegiate course of Study.”²³⁷ Clearly this was a new type of venture in Seattle, a venture in higher learning that would shape not only the students who availed themselves to the “Collegiate course of Study,” but the entire town as well. It was also a venture made possible through support from the Federal Government. As historian

²³⁶ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives. An Act in Relation to University Lands in Washington Territory. 38th Congress, 1st session, February 12, 1864. H.R. 116.

²³⁷ “University of Washington Territory,” *Seattle Gazette*, December 10, 1863.

Charles Gates notes, “the raw frontier community” of Seattle “learned of the possibilities of federal support for education and came quickly to the democratic ideal that every child should enjoy educational opportunities to the limit of his abilities, including a university education.”²³⁸ This realization, that the Federal Government could provide the resources for educational development in the territory proved to be the impetus for the audacious plan to establish the University in the woefully unprepared town of Seattle.



Figure 3.4 Sketch of the growing Seattle waterfront, c. 1870s. Notice the Territorial University building left-center of the image. University of Washington.

The establishment of the university, in turn, had a profound impact on the development of Seattle’s culture and character. By building a University—a seemingly unnecessary appendage on the frontier—the people of Seattle changed how they saw themselves and how others saw them. When Ida Barlow arrived in Seattle as one of the “Mercer’s Girls” she noticed immediately the impressive edifice of the University proudly sitting on the hill overlooking the town. Years later, after living and teaching in Seattle and watching it grow and develop into a civilized metropolis, Barlow described arriving in Seattle for the first time. “Forest clad hills and a tiny village of straggling two story buildings; a white cupaloe building nestling in the hills above the city, the old University,” Barlow wrote, “and it seems to me that that white pillared building above the

²³⁸ Gates, *The First Century at the University*, 4.

gallant little town expressed the true spirit of Seattle then and now, the high ideals and visions of those courageous early pioneers that hewed a mighty city out of the forest.”²³⁹

Bagley, Denny, and others built the university not to fill a need in their community, but to create an opportunity for their community to grow into an educated metropolis. It was not a reactionary gesture, but rather a gesture of expectation. The Territorial University of Washington brought to Seattle educational opportunities not seen before, and as a result it helped to civilize the rough and tumble logging town. Without a university, and without the Civil War era land grant policies that made it possible, Seattle would not have developed as an educational and cultural center in the Pacific Northwest.

²³⁹ Conant, *Mercer's Girls*, 144.

Chapter IV

“Practicability of a Railroad”

“The Terminus Commissioners of the Northern Pacific Railroad,” noted the *Weekly Oregon Statesman* on July 8, 1873, “have set Tacoma and Seattle sadly by the ears, now. They give it out that the terminus, at this moment, hangs in the most uncertain balance possible to think of between those two places. The Tacomans and Seattlers don’t speak to each other, now, and the other Puget Sounders are so thunderously disgusted that they have entirely abolished prayers and betaken themselves to the most talented swearing ever heard north of Mason & Dixon’s line.”²⁴⁰

Angst over where the Northern Pacific’s terminus would be fixed on Puget Sound had, truth be told, been constant for two decades by the time of the *Statesman*’s observation in 1873. Residents of Seattle and other early settlements on the Sound had long recognized the economic importance of the railroad, and had lobbied heavily to attract the Northern Pacific’s favor.

In 1851, before Washington broke from the Oregon Territory, military officer and soon-to-be territorial governor, Isaac Stevens was charged with surveying the Puget Sound region in the hopes of finding a suitable route for a transcontinental rail line. “I have reached the Sound and completed the exploration of which I had charge,” Stevens wrote upon completing his survey in January 1852. “Our operations have been pretty successful,” he boasted, “Of course we have met with the usual embarrassments and

²⁴⁰ *Weekly Oregon Statesman*, July 8, 1873.

difficulties but I think the results will prove valuable. Not only has the active practicability of a railroad route been established but the whole geography of the regions traversed has been well developed.”²⁴¹

The “practicability of a railroad route” must have been thrilling to the ears of all on Puget Sound, for it was well understood that rail lines brought with them economic development. “I am of opinion,” Stevens concluded, “that the waters of San Francisco Bay and Puget Sound should both have their connections with the States by railroad. The commercial importance of California is already established and here around Puget Sound we have most flattering prospects of a rapidly increasing trade.”²⁴² The residents of the two-month-old settlement of Seattle heard this prediction of “rapidly increasing trade” and imagined their community as the beneficiary of the economic blessings that rail would bring. For the next two decades the people of Seattle discussed the merits of a rail line and worked to secure such a line for their town. But although there was excitement and expectation, the path to securing a rail line would not be straight and the road would not be easy for the residents of the little town on the shores of Puget Sound.

In March 1853, Jefferson Davis, as the Secretary of War, was authorized by an act of Congress “to employ such portion of the corps of topographical engineers, and such other persons as he may deem necessary, to make such explorations and surveys as he may deem advisable, to ascertain the most practicable and economical route for a railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean.”²⁴³ Those in Seattle assumed that it only

²⁴¹ Stevens, “Letter to Captain Henry W. Halleck.”

²⁴² Stevens, “Letter to Captain Henry W. Halleck.”

²⁴³ *An Act making Appropriations for the support of the Army for the year ending the thirtieth of June, one thousand eight hundred and fifty-four*, Public Law 98 *United States Statues at Large* 10 (1855): 214-219.

made sense for the route to bring the railroad into their town. Isaac Stevens' survey had identified a suitable pass—aptly named Stevens Pass to this day—through the formidable Cascade Mountains, due east of Seattle. Although small and largely undeveloped, Seattle boasted a serviceable harbor, bountiful timber, and recently discovered coal to the east. “Besides this,” noted residents of Seattle, “there are several hundred miles less of road to build to connect New York with the Pacific than on any other route and if the connection with the Pacific be made here at this place the distance to China is several hundred miles less than from San Francisco and it is said to be over a much more desirable section of the Pacific Ocean for navigating than that across from San Francisco.”²⁴⁴ The residents of Seattle were making the case for the rail terminus to be located in their town, and they knew if it were, the economic benefit to them would be great.

Economic growth, however, was not the only benefit that the railroad would bring. Transcontinental rail lines would also help to unite the American people that were now stretched across the entire continent—strengthening the Union destined soon to fracture. Railroads would not only lead to a trade of goods, but also to an exchange of ideas, beliefs, and ideals. Speaking to a crowd in Pennsylvania on the subject in July 1853, Davis declared that the transcontinental railroad was “combining opposite interests, uniting remote localities, and socially, commercially, and politically binding men together.”²⁴⁵ The people of Washington Territory—including those in Seattle—were eager to be bound together with the rest of the country.

²⁴⁴ David E. Blaine, “Letter to his Uncle Saron, regarding life in Washington Territory, November 20, 1854.” *University of Washington*.

²⁴⁵ Jefferson Davis, “Speech at Philadelphia,” *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, vol. 5. Rice University, Fondren Library.

One year after his arrival in Seattle, Reverend David Blaine wrote to his uncle in Seneca Falls, New York. In his letter dated November 20, 1854, Blaine predicted “a future city here not unlike New York or London in commercial importance.”²⁴⁶ Blaine was aware that his claim would fall on incredulous ears. “This may look & sound like castle building,” he wrote, but it was in fact “a strong possibility” based on Seattle’s favorable setting for a transcontinental railroad. The settlement would grow, insisted Blaine, as all others had that are “situated favorably on thorough fares—at the junctions of ship & R.R. routs [sic],” and Seattle was just the place for such a junction.

“Now why will the R.R. by its Northern route terminate at this place?” Blaine asked rhetorically, “My answer is this”:

There is no possibilty [sic] of making the Columbia River a safe & convenient channel for shipping in all kinds of weather. It cannot become the outlet to the Pacific R.R. even though it should come through on the South Pass on account of the dangerous bar at its mouth. Then the Northern Pacific R. R. will have its terminus at some point on Puget’s Sound. There are said to be but two passes through the Cascade range of mountains, the Snowqualmy [sic] pass & a pass south of Mount Rainier where a road can be built, and the country on this side of the Cascade Mts. lays so that from either of these passes to this place a road can be built with the greatest ease while there are difficulties more or less insuperable in the face of the country lying between these mountain passes and the other towns on the sound. We have here in Seattle also one of the finest natural harbors for vessels of all sizes to be found in the world and large enough to contain all the shipping of England & America at the same time. In addition to this, Nature has deposited within ten miles of town hundreds & perhaps thousands of acres of stove coal for the supply of steam ships & steam cars innumerable. With one of the finest & most healthy of climates & most charming surroundings of natural scenery how could the prospects of a future growth at once healthy & permanent and unexampled be brighter?²⁴⁷

Blaine’s enthusiasm was felt by many in Seattle who audaciously clung to their belief that Seattle would with time be the “New York” of the Pacific coast. Blaine and others were convinced that their investments were sound and that they would see rich

²⁴⁶ David E. Blaine, “Letter to his Uncle Saron.”

²⁴⁷ David E. Blaine, “Letter to his Uncle Saron.”

returns. They also hoped to recruit other settlers and investors to augment their own numbers and to help grow the town into a city. “If you wish to make an investment here,” wrote Blaine, in what was a common refrain in his many letters to family members in New York, “I will lay it out for you to good advantage.”²⁴⁸

David Blaine’s wife, Catherine, was also hopeful for the promise of the railroad, if somewhat less certain as her husband. “I am not as sanguine as Mr. B that these lots will immediately increase in value,” confessed Catherine in a letter dated November 24, 1854, “[and I] Think until we get a railroad we have not very much to hope for in this respect, for until that time there is not much to make the towns grow.”²⁴⁹ Despite Catherine’s caution, most in Seattle believed that the railroad would, with time, arrive in their community, bolstering the population, increasing property values, and creating new commercial opportunities.

By 1860, however, talk of the Pacific Railroad was overshadowed by the impending constitutional crisis of secession. With the election of Abraham Lincoln, an advocate for rail himself, Jefferson Davis followed his home state of Mississippi into rebellion, ultimately becoming the President of the Confederate States of America on February 18, 1861. Two months later fighting between the states began, and talk of the best route for the Northern Pacific Railroad came to a halt in Congress. Even the residents of Seattle took a break from discussing the railroad to engage in “lively debate” with “considerable bitter feelings between Secessionists and Abolitionists . . . in the

²⁴⁸ David E. Blaine, “Letter to his Uncle Saron.”

²⁴⁹ Catherine P. Blaine, “Letter to her Family, Regarding Relations with Native Americans in Washington Territory and life in Seattle, November 23, 1854.” *University of Washington*.

winter of '60 and '61.”²⁵⁰ By 1862, however, when the Union feared it might lose California to the Confederacy, Congress broke from its war legislation to pass a bill chartering the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific railroad companies, once again igniting excitement over the prospect of a rail line in Seattle.²⁵¹

Congress, during that doubtful period of the war, felt that a transcontinental railroad was a matter of national security. The railroad—and telegraph, which was also taken up in the act approved by Congress on July 1, 1862—was considered of paramount importance to the defense of a unified country. Or, as Jefferson Davis had declared nine years earlier, when he was the Secretary of War charged with surveying routes for transcontinental railroads, “as a purely military question, it is necessary to have an intercommunication, so that the government’s munitions of war and men could be thrown upon the Pacific for its defence [sic].”²⁵²

Motivated to lay railroads and string telegraph lines across the continent, Congress passed “An Act to aid in the Construction of a Railroad and Telegraph Line from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean, and to secure to the Government the Use of the same for Postal, Military, and Other Purposes.” The unifying effect of rail was of vital importance, especially in the 1860s as a show of the Union’s strength, as a way to unify East and West, and as a way to transport men and munitions quickly. The congressionally mandated purpose of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific companies was “to lay out, locate, construct, furnish, maintain, and enjoy a continuous railroad . . . and to secure the

²⁵⁰ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 274.

²⁵¹ Louis Tuck Renz, *The History of the Northern Pacific Railroad* (Fairfield, WA: Galleon Press, 1980), 106-107.

²⁵² Davis, “Speech.”

safe and speedy transport of the mails, troops, munitions of war, and public stores thereon.”²⁵³ The purpose of the railroad was seen as essential to the survival of the Union, and was thus spurred on by the Civil War.

“A Very Active Competition”

Far from the halls of power in Washington, D.C., in the little town of Seattle in Washington Territory, the act passed by Congress elicited excitement. By July 1862, Seattle had grown roughly ten times from its founding with twenty-four settlers a decade earlier in November 1851. Despite growth, the town was as yet woefully underdeveloped. Letters and news from the East Coast still took more than two weeks to arrive in Seattle, if they arrived at all, and the town was isolated from the rest of the country with the Cascade Mountains to the east, nearly impenetrable forests north and south, and Puget Sound to the west. The settlement attempted to attract regular shipping contracts, with only mixed success. There was interest in Seattle’s timber, which was the town’s only real industry at the time, and ships out of San Francisco made Seattle a port of call in the 1850s and 1860s, when lumber was in high demand in California. Nonetheless, shipping was unpredictable—sometimes ships arrived, sometimes they did not—and the people of Seattle were reliant on the whims of ship captains who decided which ports to call. A railroad would open new markets for Seattle’s lumber and would also make Seattle an important seaport. Business would thrive, reasoned the residents of Seattle, and they threw themselves into the task of promoting their town to the commissioners of the Northern Pacific who would determine the route for the railroad.

²⁵³ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives. Pacific Railroad Act of 1862. 37th Congress, 2nd session, July 1, 1862. 12 Stat. 489.

Although other settlements had equal claim on the railroad, Seattleites were optimistic at their chances. “Seattle was a naïve young town in 1864, with the smell of stump fires in its hair and sawdust in the cuffs of its trousers,” wrote author and historian Archie Binns. “When the citizens heard that President Lincoln had approved the charter of the Northern Pacific Railroad they believed that the path of progress was straight again and that it led through Snoqualmie Pass to their back door, where it would deliver wealth and a fabulous city.”²⁵⁴ The path would not, as it turned out, be straight or easy for the residents of Seattle.

Progress was intolerably slow. Seattle, along with the other communities eager for the miracle of rail, could do little but anxiously wait for a decision to be made. It took time for funds to be raised, for routes to be surveyed, and for lines to be built. Ten years passed, the Northern Pacific commissioners visited Seattle, but by July 1873 the final destination for the Northern Pacific line’s terminus had still not been selected. “The question as to the terminal point of the Northern Pacific Railroad on Puget Sound is now narrowed down for a decision between Tacoma and Seattle,” reported the *San Francisco Chronicle* in July 1873, “and the final decision is to be promulgated on the 15th instant.”²⁵⁵

With the announcement that the prized terminus would soon be awarded to one of the two settlements, each crowed their merits and dismissed the other as provincial and unsuitable for the honor of rail. The competition between Tacoma and Seattle was

²⁵⁴ Archie Binns, *Northwest Gateway: The Story of the Port of Seattle* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1943), 198.

²⁵⁵ *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 20, 1873.

reported throughout the United States. The Eaton *Democrat* reported that “a lively contest is going on for the Pacific terminus of the Northern Pacific Railroad.”²⁵⁶ The Hartford *Courant* noted that “the question of the terminus of the Northern Pacific railroad continues to excite the people of Puget Sound,”²⁵⁷ and the Pittsburg *Daily Commercial* informed its readers that “a very active competition exists among the towns on the Northern Pacific coast for the location of the western terminus of the Northern Pacific Railroad. The people of . . . Puget Sound are much excited on the subject. . . . The paper towns are especially worked up. Seattle offers, by way of donation, land and money estimated at \$1,000,000, and still adding.”²⁵⁸

The *Pittsburg Daily Commercial*'s report that Seattle had raised \$1,000,000 “and still adding” to attract the rail terminus was hyperbole, but the people of Seattle had raised a sizable sum and they certainly were making every effort to secure the terminus for their town. “It is difficult to recall, in the present temper of the West toward railroads, how eagerly they were courted a few years ago,” noted the haughty *New York Times* on July 14, 1873. “Something of the former feeling can be traced in the offer of the citizens of Seattle, Washington Territory, to the Northern Pacific Railroad to induce it to fix its terminus at that point. Seattle,” the editorial continued, “is a lively town on the shore of Puget Sound, and in 1865 had 450 inhabitants. Now its people propose to give the railroad company 5,606 acres of land, lots ‘worth’ \$492,000, and \$22,500 in coin.”²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ The Eaton *Democrat*, July 17, 1873.

²⁵⁷ Hartford *Courant*, July 8, 1873.

²⁵⁸ The Pittsburgh *Daily Commercial*, July 14, 1873.

²⁵⁹ The New York *Times*, July 14, 1873.

The Puget Sound *Dispatch*, then Seattle’s primary newspaper, reported on July 17, 1873, of the “TERMINUS EXCITEMENT” and noted that the people of Tacoma were “fearfully excited upon the terminus question” and “especially worked up.” The residents of Seattle were surely just as “worked up” as those in Tacoma. Quoting the Tacoma *Tribune*, the Puget Sound *Dispatch* noted: “Seattle is said to be getting fierce and despondent, and a Tacoma man in that town is hardly safe of his life.”²⁶⁰

Also, the same edition of the *Dispatch* reported that there had been “one of the largest meetings ever held in Seattle” to discuss the railroad. During the meeting the citizens committed a reported \$717,000 in land, bonds, and “gold coin” to induce the commissioners to select Seattle as the terminus. “Which is enough,” reported the paper in spirited jest, “to buy the whole of Pierce county, Tacoma and all.”²⁶¹ It was not, however, as it turned out, enough to persuade the commissioners to select Seattle as the site for the much-anticipated terminus.

“The Miserable Farce”

On July 14, 1873 the stunningly disappointing news arrived in a terse telegraph from the commissioners to Seattle’s founder, Arthur Denny:

Kalama, July 14, 1873

A.A. DENNY, SEATTLE

We have located the terminus on Commencement Bay.

R.D. RICE

J.C. AINSWORTH

*Commissioners*²⁶²

²⁶⁰ “Terminus Excitement,” Puget Sound *Dispatch*, July 17, 1873.

²⁶¹ “Railroad Meeting,” Puget Sound *Dispatch*, July 17, 1873.

²⁶² Binns, *Northwest Gateway*, 203.

The news that the terminus would be located south, on Tacoma's Commencement Bay, was devastating for the people of Seattle. Three days later the Puget Sound *Dispatch* published the telegraph in its entirety. "This ends the miserable farce played upon the people of Seattle," wrote the bitter editor of the *Dispatch*, "and all others who confided in the honesty of the Commissioners, under the false pretence [sic] of the Northern Pacific Railroad Co. was not owned, controlled and run exclusively in the interest of the land ring—a combination more corrupt and more false to the trust reposed in them for the public benefit, than the Credit Mobilier of infamous notoriety."²⁶³

The commissioners' rejection of Seattle was not, however, a decisive blow. The Puget Sound *Dispatch*, in the very edition that reported the commissioners' decision, also announced "a meeting of the citizens of Seattle" that night, July 17, 1873, "to hear a report from the Committee appointed to negotiate with the Locating Commissioners, and to take such action as may be deemed best under circumstances." "Let there be full attendance" encouraged the *Dispatch*, "Come one, come all." The *Dispatch* then made a special appeal to "the LADIES" who were "respectfully invited to attend the meeting" as was "every man, woman and child in Seattle."²⁶⁴

"Seattle's Opportunity"

During the meeting on July 17, just three days after Arthur Denny received the telegraph, the people of Seattle decided just how they would make lemonade from the

²⁶³ "The Land Ring Triumphant," Puget Sound *Dispatch*, July 17, 1873.

²⁶⁴ "Railroad Meeting," Puget Sound *Dispatch*, July 17, 1873.

lemons that the rail commissioners had left them. The front page of the next week's Puget Sound *Dispatch* reported on "SEATTLE'S OPPORTUNITY."

The largest and most earnest meeting of citizens ever assembled in this town, convened at the Pavilion on Thursday evening to consider the situation of [f] Seattle in view of the fact that the terminus Railroad had been located at Tacoma, after this town had been invited by the locating Commissioners to propose terms for the location here, and had pledged in cash, lands and real property values, the sum of \$717,000 for that purpose. The whole assemblage, representing almost the entire population of the town, seemed actuated by an entire unity of sentiment, and the determined purpose to defend and maintain the natural advantages which had given their town the commercial supremacy upon Puget Sound; and to this end, all who had subscribed to make up the munificent sum offered as a conditional donation to the Northern Pacific Railroad, not only expressed their willingness to devote the same to public improvements for the benefit of Seattle, but many of our largest property holders proposed to increase their subscriptions and pledge the balance of their possessions to depend their investment. The Committee appointed by the citizens to conduct the negotiations with the Locating Commissioners, after making their report, which was accepted by the meeting as conclusive of the zeal and the ability with which they had conducted the negotiations, submitted a plan for an incorporated company upon the capital basis of the sum already subscribed, with such additions as may be obtained to the same, to construct a railroad from this city to the Columbia river to connect with the Walla Walla and Wallula railroad now in the course of construction, with the ultimate view of a connection with the Union Pacific Railroad, thus forming a direct route to the East; and to protect the transportation business of Seattle upon the Sound and the Pacific ocean. This proposition was unanimously adopted by the meeting, & a large number subscribed the articles of incorporation.²⁶⁵

Unwilling to allow the Commission's decision to ruin their hopes, and with a new plan in place, the people of Seattle went to work. On July 31, 1873 the Puget Sound *Dispatch* announced, "it was unanimously resolved to inaugurate work on the railroad on 1st May, by pic-nic, in which all are invited to participate."²⁶⁶

Nine months passed as the residents of Seattle raised funds and continued to plan the construction of their own rail spur to connect to the transcontinental line. Then on May Day 1874, the town of Seattle began work on their railroad. A week later, on May 7,

²⁶⁵ "Seattle's Opportunity," Puget Sound *Dispatch*, July 24, 1873.

²⁶⁶ Puget Sound *Dispatch*, July 31, 1873.

the *Dispatch* reported on its front page about the “exhilarating and animated scene” that the work party provided.

The day had opened gray and rainy, but despite the weather the people of Seattle, starting as early as five in the morning, traveled “on foot, on horse-back and in vehicles” the three miles to the “initial point” of the rail line at the “south bend of the Duwamish Bay.” The *Comet*, a steamer out of Seattle, was loaded with “about 75 men and a large number of women,” and set off for the worksite at about nine in the morning, only to be “stuck on the [mud] flats, half a mile from shore.” Stranded the *Comet* remained, with its crew and impatient passengers, until a change in tide some six hours later dislodged it from the mud at three in the afternoon.

“By 9 o’clock the town was almost completely deserted,” reported the *Dispatch*, “nearly every store, shop, saloon, and other places of business were deserted.” The crowd, estimated by the *Dispatch* to be 1,000 men and women, set to work. The men “wielding the axe, pick, spade, mattock, and wheel-barrow,” and the women serving in the “culinary department.”²⁶⁷

After a day of hard labor the people of Seattle examined the fruits of their efforts. Their accomplishment—clearing “but a few feet less than one mile”—was remarkable, astonishing even the “most sanguine” in the group. “Tall trees, two feet in diameter at the but[t], were rooted out and cleared from the track as if carried away by a tornado.” The track was completely “cleared, grubbed and graded, [and] ready for ties.”²⁶⁸ Beyond the physical work that had been completed during that one feverish day of labor, there was

²⁶⁷ Puget Sound *Dispatch*, July 31, 1873.

²⁶⁸ Puget Sound *Dispatch*, July 31, 1873.

another, perhaps greater benefit to the “pic-nic,” and that was the “inestimable moral effect” the work party had on all those present. The people of Seattle, although faced with disappointment and disadvantage, had rallied themselves around a common cause, and were better for it. They had flocked to the worksite as if “to the sound of the last trumpet,” and had found there, mingled amongst the mud and sweat, their city’s salvation. “Friday, May 1, 1874,” concluded the article in the *Dispatch*, “will never be forgotten by any of the present inhabitants as the most remarkable day in the annals of the town.”²⁶⁹

Despite the delays, Seattle’s work to build a railroad helped to build the city. As Seattle founder, Arthur Denny’s granddaughter, Roberta Frye Watt noted in her personal recounting of Seattle’s early years, “Seattle was growing because of its expectancy of the railroad, and in doing so was developing itself into a shipping and commercial center of strength and stability.”²⁷⁰ The Civil

War led Congress to support the development of transcontinental rail, and this support led the people of Seattle to expect and plan for a railroad in their community.

Ultimately this expectation, although initially dashed by the rail commissioners, led the people of

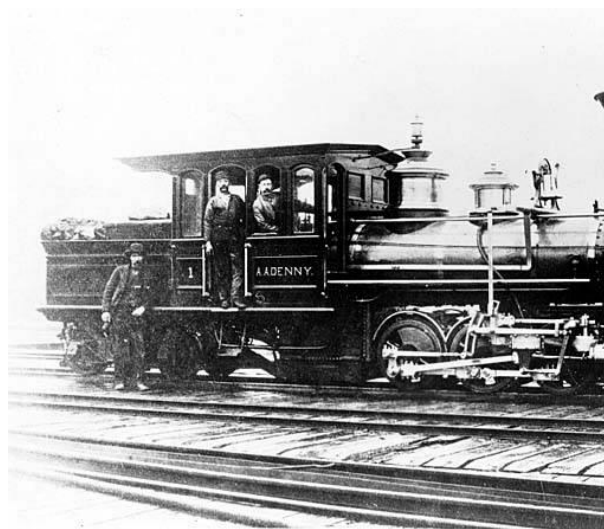


Figure 4.1. Seattle’s first locomotive, the A.A. Denny. University of Washington, Special Collections.

²⁶⁹ Puget Sound *Dispatch*, July 31, 1873.

²⁷⁰ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 358.

Seattle to a rainy picnic and work party on the shores of the muddy Duwamish River, where they, in only one day of cooperative labor, cleared and laid out the first mile of rail.



Figure 4.2. *Bird's-eye View of the City of Seattle, 1878.* Note the railroad in the lower righthand corner. University of Washington Special Collections.

From its auspicious start on that rainy day in 1874, when the whole town turned out to clear the site for the first ties and rails, Seattle's railroad grew. The line made its way first southeast, to the coalmines in Newcastle—providing fuel for locomotives and steamships, and bringing economic growth for Seattle. Finally, after more stalls and obstacles, Seattle's railroad connected to a spur of the Northern Pacific line in 1883. Seattle, at last, was a stop on a transcontinental railroad—the city would never be the same. The railroad brought prosperity and economic growth to the town through the 1880s, and beyond. Seattle grew and developed as a commercial center on Puget Sound and, as its residents had predicted in the 1850s and 1860s, Seattle became the most notable city in Washington, outpacing Tacoma in its quest for regional importance, influence, and industry.

Chapter V

“Thought Projecting Engine”

“‘Know all men by these presents,’ that the long sought and often promised printing machine which proposes to grind out a GAZETTE for the people, is now *bona-fidly* established in the town of Seattle,” announced the *Seattle Gazette* in its first edition—at the height of the Civil War—on December 10, 1863. Like so much else in Seattle in the first decades of its existence, the *Gazette* was influenced in no small part by the events that so wholly engulfed the rest of the Union. Much of “the first number of the first paper ever printed in Seattle,” along with subsequent editions, was dedicated to “WAR NEWS,”²⁷¹ and the editor reminded readers, “For the latest war news see the first page of this paper.”²⁷²

The *Seattle Gazette* was, in fact, the second paper to have been printed in Seattle. Four months earlier the *Washington Gazette* was published there, but only managed to print one edition before failing. “It is now time this section of country have an advocate, an exponent, a medium through which its great advantages, natural and acquired, may be made known, and whereby a portion of the thousands of immigrants now wending their way to the Pacific coast in search of new home and new fields of labor, may find out the desirable spot to settle upon, develop, and upon which to grow rich and prosperous,” declared the first and only edition of the *Washington Gazette*. “In short,” it continued,

²⁷¹ “War News,” *Seattle Gazette*, December 10, 1863.

²⁷² *Seattle Gazette*, December 10, 1863.

“King county, Seattle and vicinity want a newspaper—that best and cheapest promulgator of all sorts of useful information.”²⁷³ Like the *Seattle Gazette* that came after it, the “useful information” that the *Washington Gazette* reported was largely war news, with roughly half of the paper dedicated to “THE CAVALRYMAN’S STORY,” “SINGULAR SPECTACLE IN BATTLE,” and other war related material.

The War generated the public interest stories that held the community’s attention and provided support for the paper. Without this support, the *Gazette* would not have gained the readership it had in its early days. While the War provided the impetus for the establishment of both the *Washington Gazette* and the *Seattle Gazette*, the papers served as a civilizing force in the little town of Seattle. “A project of this kind is general in its usefulness,” claimed the *Gazette*, “and will repay every man in the community tenfold for the investment.”²⁷⁴ With the hometown pride so common in the competition between settlements on Puget Sound in the 1850s and 1860s, the editor claimed that “no community in this Territory is more deserving of [a newspaper] or better able to support it,” and that with a successful newspaper Seattle could “claim with certainty a bright and promising future.”²⁷⁵

Seattleites viewed themselves as superior to their neighbors on the Sound, and were certain of their town’s eventual ascent to commercial and cultural importance in the region and country. When the *Seattle Gazette* went to print in late 1863, the people of Seattle already prided themselves on the sophistication of their settlement, even at a time

²⁷³ “To the Public,” *Washington Gazette*, Seattle, W.T., August 15, 1863.

²⁷⁴ “To the Public,” *Washington Gazette*, Seattle, W.T., August 15, 1863.

²⁷⁵ “To the Public,” *Washington Gazette*, Seattle, W.T., August 15, 1863.

when there was little to justify such pride. In December 1863, Seattle had just celebrated its twelfth anniversary. The town remained small, having been dealt a nearly fatal blow during the Indian War eight years earlier. The first wave of “Mercer Girls” would not arrive for another five months, and the Territorial University had opened its doors for the first time only two years earlier, and could still hardly qualify as a university, as it served mostly as a grammar school for young frontier children because there were not any university-age students who were capable of passing the university entrance exam.²⁷⁶

Congress had just passed the Morrill Act a year before the *Gazette*’s first edition appeared, funding higher education in Western states and territories for the purpose of strengthening the Federal Government’s influence in the West. That same year, 1862, Congress also passed an act funding the construction of the Northern Pacific Railroad and a transcontinental telegraph line. And while the promise of a railroad excited the residents of Seattle, it would be several more years before it arrived in the town, and then only after substantial obstacles.

Nevertheless, despite setbacks, Seattle continued to grow and develop with considerable effort on the part of its ambitious residents. Although the town was small, it was growing in both population and importance. Believing that their settlement would become the principal city in the territory, Seattle’s founders set to work building the trappings of civilization in anticipation of eventually growing into them.

The *Gazette* was the latest proverbial feather in Seattle’s cap, and was seen as a “thought projecting engine,”²⁷⁷ and as yet another sign of the inevitability of the city’s

²⁷⁶ The University’s first graduate, Clara McCathy, did not receive her degree until 1876, a full 15 years after the University had opened.

²⁷⁷ *Seattle Gazette*, December 10, 1863.

future greatness. The printing of the first paper was not, however, without challenge. “After considerable vexation and delay owing to a want of mechanical assistance in fitting up and arranging our printing apparatus,” wrote the editor of the *Gazette*, “we are enabled to present the public with the first number of the first paper ever printed in Seattle.” The first edition was humble in length and tone, or as the editor admitted, “It is neither so large as a barn door nor the *London Times*; but it is the best we can offer for a beginning, and is, we trust, sufficient for the time and place.” Despite its modest start, the *Gazette*, like so many other Seattle institutions, saw itself as a harbinger of greatness. “It may be confidently expected,” predicted the *Gazette*, “that not many moons will wax and wane until among the institutions of this thriving place may be counted a newspaper as respectable in size and appearance as any in Washington Territory.”²⁷⁸



Figure 5.1 The first edition of the *Seattle Gazette*, December 10, 1863. Washington State Library.

Beyond the public appeal of reporting Civil War news to the residents on Puget Sound, the *Gazette* was also intended to be a mark of civilization, and to foster culture. “Newspapers,” proclaimed the *Gazette*, “are progressive institutions and aid in the development of countries, building of cities, etc., they are a public benefaction and deserve the unanimous support of every member of society.”²⁷⁹ The idea was to print the paper even before there was a clear need for it, in the hopes that the community would

²⁷⁸ “To All Whom It May Concern,” *Seattle Gazette*, December 10, 1863.

²⁷⁹ “To All Whom It May Concern,” *Seattle Gazette*, December 10, 1863.

embrace it, support it, and become more civilized in so doing. With a newspaper of its own, Seattle would be seen as a settlement worthy of the press—a town where things were happening, news was made, and all was reported in the paper. This was not, the residents of Seattle insisted, just another logging town on the frontier. Instead, it was a respectable town with a bright future. For success, however, the *Gazette* would need widespread community support.

“The little metallic [sic] a, b, c’s are clicking and talking,” reported the *Gazette*, “and will continue to click and talk from the second story of the building adjoining Mr. Yesler’s store, as long as the necessary fuel to keep steam up and the machine in motion, shall be forthcoming from the good people of Seattle.” The first issue of the *Gazette*, in an oft-repeated refrain, encouraged readers to “send in . . . the subscription price as speedily as possible.”²⁸⁰ Convinced that the newspaper would keep them abreast of happenings in the states, and most importantly of the ongoing war, and also convinced that it would set their town apart from others in the Territory—solidifying their future greatness—the people of Seattle enthusiastically supported it.

The residents of Seattle were inexplicably convinced of their own future greatness, and the *Gazette*, as a reflection of the people, echoed this belief. “The time is near at hand when we are to have at least one important city on Puget Sound,” claimed the *Gazette* in its first edition, “We have an abiding confidence that Seattle is to be that place.” Seattle, however, would not become great without continued growth and development. “We want roads, bridges, wharves, schoolhouses, churches, printing-offices, and population,” declared the *Gazette*, “It takes all these to make towns, cities,

²⁸⁰ Seattle *Gazette*, December 10, 1863.

and prosperous people, and the more numerous they are, in a country naturally capable of sustaining them, the better it is for the whole and each constituent part of the community.”²⁸¹

The *Gazette* continued, with occasional interruption, “to publish a newspaper in Seattle for the common benefit of the whole people,” and continued to be a civilizing force in the community. By 1865 the *Gazette* had changed hands but its purpose, to help civilize Seattle, remained unchanged. We “endeavor to make the GAZETTE a first-class newspaper,” wrote the paper’s new editor, “devoted to the dissemination of general intelligence, and especially to the advancement of Seattle. . . .”²⁸² Years later, Roberta Frye Watt noted that Seattle’s first newspaper “boosted [the pioneers] civic ambitions and enterprises.”²⁸³ It was, in a sense, an institution that caused those in Seattle to view themselves and their town in a different light—to see themselves as more civilized.

“The Wires Are Up”

The newspaper was not the only civilizing form of communication established in Seattle as a result of the Civil War. In 1862 Congress had passed a bill supporting the establishment of both transcontinental railroad and telegraph lines. Telegraph technology was a priority of the wartime government, and residents in Seattle clamored for the placement of telegraph lines in their community. News and correspondence from the states took several weeks to arrive by boat to isolated Seattle, and residents recognized

²⁸¹ *Seattle Gazette*, December 10, 1863.

²⁸² “Resumed,” *Seattle Weekly Gazette*, Seattle, W.T. August 6, 1864.

²⁸³ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 300.

the importance of establishing a more reliable and a quicker means of communication. The new telegraph technology offered that means, and the people of Seattle happily embraced it.

“The wires are up,” the *Gazette* excitedly announced on October 25, 1864, “and the line will be in operation in a few days.”²⁸⁴ The excitement over the impending arrival of the telegraph was palpable. Residents of Seattle knew that the telegraph would bring with it new opportunities to communicate rapidly with the rest of the nation. No longer would the people of Seattle be isolated from the rest of the country; no longer would they have to depend on the unreliable “canoe express”²⁸⁵ for mail and news, as they had for years. Seattle was entering the 19th century, and the telegraph promised to usher in a new era of connectedness for the little community.

“At one o’clock on Tuesday last, 25th Oct. the telegraph wires reached Seattle,” reported the *People’s Telegraph*, a special supplement of the *Gazette*, “but no communications were received until the next day.”²⁸⁶ Roberta Frye Watt recalled that on October 26 “a cannon was fired to celebrate the completion of the Western Union Telegraph line to Seattle.”²⁸⁷ The celebration was not only because Seattle had established yet another important civilizing institution, but also because it was one of the few towns on Puget Sound with a telegraph, giving it an advantage over other towns in the region and making it the envy of rival settlements. The *Walla Walla Statesman*

²⁸⁴ “Telegraphic,” *Seattle Weekly Gazette*, Seattle W.T., October 25, 1864.

²⁸⁵ Denny, *Pioneer Days*, 48.

²⁸⁶ “First Dispatch to Seattle,” *People’s Telegraph*, Seattle, W.T., November 8, 1864.

²⁸⁷ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 301.

reported with a hint of resentment, “The town of Seattle, W.T., has now telegraphic communications with San Francisco, &c.”²⁸⁸ but also optimistically that “Walla Walla may urge her claims [for a telegraph] before—*many years!*”²⁸⁹ And the *People’s Telegraph* reported with pride that it would “supply the inhabitants of Freeport, Port Blakely, Madison, Teekalet, Ludlow, Snohomish, Utsalady, Townsend, and all other places with which the telegraph does not connect, with the latest news,” and that “[t]he Telegraph will neither connect with nor be subservient to the interests of any other publication.”²⁹⁰ Seattle’s monopoly on the telegraph was further promoted on the second page of the *People’s Telegraph*. “This place,” bragged the paper, “for some time to come, will be the point to which the people of the northern and western parts of the Sound must look for the latest news.”²⁹¹

With a weekly newspaper and telegraph service Seattle was quickly becoming the center for news and information on Puget Sound. Seattleites prided themselves on their connection with the rest of the country, their access to current news, and their distinction among other towns on the Sound.

²⁸⁸ “Telegraph Lines,” *Walla Walla Statesman*, Walla Walla, W.T. November 4, 1864.

²⁸⁹ “Telegraph Lines,” *Walla Walla Statesman*, Walla Walla, W.T. November 4, 1864.

²⁹⁰ “The Telegram,” *People’s Telegraph*, Seattle, W.T. November 8, 1864.

²⁹¹ “To The Public,” *People’s Telegraph*, Seattle, W.T., November 8, 1864.

Conclusion

When Seattle was founded in November 1851, its future was dubious. Arthur Denny and his fellow founders certainly believed that their homestead claim held great potential even naming the new settlement “New York” as a hopeful prediction of its future greatness, but there was little to hang such audacious hope on. Seattle was, in its first two decades, an unremarkable town with a scant population of unrefined loggers. The town’s only industry, logging, proved to be an economic driver, but offered little opportunity for sustained economic growth. Additionally, logging attracted only a certain kind of settler to the Seattle—interested in profits, detached from hearth and home, more commonly found in a tavern than a church, and male—hardly the kind of settler who would improve the culture of a town, nor set it on the path to regional importance.

One of the foremost obstacles standing in the way of the founders’ dream of an illustrious city was the lack of population. When the Denny Party of twenty-four arrived at Alki Point there was little reason to believe that the population would increase any quicker in Seattle than it had elsewhere on Puget Sound. Between 1851 and 1855 the settlement did grow, especially after Henry Yesler’s saw mill opened in 1853, growth, nonetheless, was slow and did not include women. Then, in January 1856, Seattle was dealt what many at the time supposed to be a fatal blow. The Indian War, or “Battle of Seattle” as it is often referred to, while only leading to the deaths of two settlers did cause significant property damage in Seattle and, more seriously, damaged Seattle’s reputation. No longer was Seattle viewed as a safe settlement with a promising future. Pioneers who

had hoped to settle in Seattle simply made other plans, while many of those who survived the attack moved away in favor of the apparent safety in Olympia, Portland, or elsewhere. As a result, Seattle's population decreased and remained modest for the next decade.

Despite setbacks and slow growth, however, Seattle's residents remained convinced of a bright future for their town. Surely, they reasoned, Seattle was destined for greatness. All that was required to achieve their audacious vision of a bright, prosperous, and cosmopolitan future, they believed, was to build in their town the trappings of society or *civilization*. Then, as a self-fulfilling prophecy, society would grow up into the institutions they had built and their town would become *civilized*.

Optimism of visionary town fathers alone, however, as ardent as it may be, does not build cities. If Seattle were to succeed it would need sustained population growth. And if Seattle was to become anything other than a logging camp it would have to attract a certain *class* of immigrants; the kind who would not only augment the numbers of the town but who would also bring with them a positive influence on the cultural development therein. With this in mind, Asa Mercer, and others, recognized an opportunity to recruit just the kind of emigrants Seattle needed. Hundreds of thousands of men died during the Civil War, leaving countless women orphaned or widowed. The Civil War also ravaged the textile industry in New England, leaving thousands unemployed. So just at the moment that Seattle was in need of quality emigrants, the Civil War provided them.

Taking advantage of the Civil War's devastation of New England's textile industry and the desperation of the women who worked in it and who, in many cases had been orphaned or widowed by the war, Seattle solved its dual problems of stagnant

population growth and lack of women. The Mercer Girls greatest impact, however, was not the increase in population, but rather the culture they brought with them. All but one of the emigrants married and started families. As Seattle founder, Arthur Denny's granddaughter wrote, "The uplifting and stabilizing effect of this emigration of New England women to Puget Sound cannot be overestimated. Their influence was felt throughout the state. From these two group of women, known as 'the Mercer girls,' sprang many of Washington's most substantial families."²⁹² With tradition, manners, and culture being taught in the home, Seattle's "substantial families" influenced the cultural development of the whole city. The Mercer Girls also became teachers—and one, Lizzie Ordway, even became a superintendent—and educated students not only in reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also in the sensibilities of New England. Beyond teaching the younger generation the Mercer Girls were involved heavily in the development of Seattle in other ways too. Many became actively engaged in the suffrage movement, setting Seattle on a progressive path of women's rights.²⁹³ Other Mercer Girls founded chapters of the Red Cross, participated in the cleanup of Seattle's sordid "skid row," opened libraries, and supported Seattle's first hospitals among other civilizing institutions and programs. Without the influence of the forty-seven women who came to Seattle to escape the fate that the Civil War had dealt them, the city would have developed in vastly different ways.

Undoubtedly, emigrants would have continued to arrive whether or not the Civil War took place, but the intrepid girls who came to Seattle from Massachusetts, bringing

²⁹² Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 323.

²⁹³ Seattle became the first major American city to elect a female mayor, Bertha Knight Landes, in 1926, who won the election with a campaign slogan of "municipal housecleaning."

with their New England culture, education, and sensibilities, would not have come except for the fact that the Civil War had robbed them of opportunity back home. As orphans, widows, and unemployed textile workers—all as a result of the Civil War—they agreed to come to Seattle because they simply were out of options in New England.

Similarly, once the Civil War came to an end in 1865, veterans of the conflict looked West for new opportunities. With the defeated South in shambles and with increased scarcity of jobs, many Confederate veterans decided to move West where there were livings, and in some cases fortunes, to be made in mining, homesteading, railroading, and ranching. Similarly, Union soldiers, in many cases, found that the life they had prior to the war was gone. Families had been destroyed, jobs had evaporated, homes and lands had been lost, and the future for many seemed bleak. With limited opportunities in the East many opted for a new life in the West. By the 1880s some six hundred veterans were living in and around Seattle, bolstering the economy and shaping the culture of the growing city.

A city needs more than just population, however, to be successful and prosperous. Civil War policies also helped to create civilizing institutions and provided opportunities for continued development in Seattle. The town founders and promoters—Denny, Yesler, Mercer, Bagley, and others—dreamed of future greatness for Seattle when others saw only muddy streets, dense forests, and smelly tidelands. These ambitious men leveraged every opportunity that the Civil War afforded them as they built the city of Seattle. With prophetic vision they took full advantage of the circumstances, and doggedly pursued institutions, policies, and activities that would change the course of development for their city.

Recognizing the important role that educational institutions could occupy in the development of their town, and using the Morrill Act as justification, Seattleites established a university. There was no natural need or demand for a university at that time, regardless the people of Seattle built one—out-of-place as it was on the newly cleared hill above the small town on the frontier—which they anticipated the town would grow into with time. The Territorial University of Washington, Seattleites reasoned, would attract an educated class—of both professors and pupils—to Seattle, and would consequently shape the character of the town.

Despite its slow start—Thomas Sommerville²⁹⁴ reported in 1870 that “The University is a pretentious edifice, but boasts at present of only one professor and a limited number of pupils.”²⁹⁵—the founders saw it as a harbinger of future greatness, and their vision, with time, would come to full fruition. Or as respected pioneer and chronicler, Ezra Meeker noted in 1921, “There are a few things that the people of this state have reason to be proud of. But more worthy of praise and more lasting in its effects than any of these, is the great University which was given birth in the little water-front village of Seattle only sixty years ago, and which has grown in that short space of time to be one of the largest and most important seats of learning in the land.”²⁹⁶ Indeed, the University—a product of the Civil War—had a transformative impact on Seattle and helped to develop the little community into an educated metropolis.

²⁹⁴ Thomas Sommerville was a journalist who wrote for *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* and visited Washington Territory in 1870 and wrote a public interest story detailing his experience.

²⁹⁵ Sommerville, “The Mediterranean of the Pacific,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, September 1870, 491.

²⁹⁶ Meeker, *Seventy Years of Progress*, 86.

The railroad, and the economic opportunity it brought, was also the result of Civil War policies. With the need to strengthen the Union and to connect East and West, the United States Congress made transcontinental railroads a priority in 1862. Seattle did not, it turned out, receive the rail line it had expected. Nevertheless, the anticipation of a railroad was enough to help develop the town. “Seattle was growing because of its expectancy of the railroad,” noted Roberta Frye Watts, “and in doing so was developing itself into a shipping and commercial center of strength and stability.”²⁹⁷ The promise of a railroad had a profound impact on Seattle. “The lands for miles around [Seattle] have been bought by speculators, divided into lots, and auctioned off,” reported Thomas Sommerville in 1870. “Nine months ago there were not more than 500 people in it, now there are 1000.”²⁹⁸ The incredible growth in Seattle—doubling in only a matter of a few months—was attributed to the anticipation of the arrival of the railroad, and certainly had an impact on the development of the city. Even when the Northern Pacific Railroad commissioners chose rival city Tacoma as the site for their terminus, Seattle had already benefited from their misguided belief that they would be the site of the terminus. Instead of depending solely on the Federal Government to provide a railroad—and instead of retreating into hopelessness when it failed to do so—the people of Seattle pooled their resources, their time, and their labor to build their own rail line—essentially creating their own luck. As a result, Seattle was positioned to become a shipping center. Business increased, which led to sustained expansion and progress.

²⁹⁷ Watt, *4 Wagons West*, 358.

²⁹⁸ Sommerville, “The Mediterranean of the Pacific,” 490.

Finally, the establishment of the *Gazette* in Seattle in 1863, as a vehicle for reporting war news, and the arrival of the telegraph a year later, which was a wartime imperative of the Federal Government, connected Seattle, which had to that point been remote and isolated, with the rest of the country. The paper and the telegraph distinguished Seattle as a cosmopolitan center on Puget Sound, and set it apart from other towns and villages in the area. The *Gazette* also served as a way for Seattleites to promote their town, to advertise their business ventures, and to assert their influence.

Whether the building of a railroad, the founding of a university, the establishment of a newspaper, or the recruitment of cultured immigrants, the people of Seattle overcame the odds, as they took full advantage of the opportunities that the Civil War gave them. They did not equivocate when it came to the future of their town, and even when others saw only a logging camp at the edge of a dense forest, Seattleites saw the foundations of a great city and worked to build it.

The Civil War, as the most traumatic event in American history, had a profound impact on the United States. The war cost the Federal government perhaps in excess of \$5 billion. Some 620,000 men died of injuries sustained in battle, of disease, or as prisoners of war. Farms, towns, and cities were razed or burnt. Civilians in both the North and the South suffered famine, unemployment, homelessness, disease, and death. The very existence of a united collection of states was threatened. The Constitution—only a scant seventy years old—was tested as never before or since. Yet, despite the death and devastation caused by the Civil War, Seattle, far removed from the fighting, benefited from it. The Civil War brought population growth, the founding of institutions, and the development of infrastructure, and thus it *civilized* Seattle.

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