[Who is that Street, Steilacoom?](#)

Have you ever looked at a street sign and wondered who owned the name first? Why did that person end up on the map? *Who is that street*? With the help of Joan Curtis of the Steilacoom Historical Society (see *"sources"* below), today's WA-List looks at the signs in Washington's oldest city and tries to answer some of those questions.

Steilacoom was patched together in three parts — the fusion of three different men's plans. Those parts are still visible in the layout and names of the town's streets.

The city's organized past got going in early 1851, when ship captain Lafayette Balch filed a plat (i.e., a plan of streets) for his land claim on a timbered Puget Sound hillside. He called the place Port Steilacoom and used it as an outpost for harvesting Northwest timber and delivering it to the California Gold Rush city of San Francisco. A few months later, John Chapman established Steilacoom City less than a mile to the west. To this day you can see the rival towns on a map by paying attention to the angles of the roads. Chapman's streets are aligned north-south and east-west, while Balch's run diagonally in line with the shore. The two men soon realized the benefits of merging their competing interests into a single town of Steilacoom, and sewed their two sets of differently-angled roads together with a Union Street.

Meanwhile, Balch's neighbor to the east was a man named Lemuel Bills. Like Chapman, Bills laid out his streets along the four principle compass points, creating another set of angled intersections with Balch. Today the three sets of hillside streets blend together, bending slightly as you drive or walk from one old townsite to the next.

But what about the names on the signs? Where did they came from? Who *are* those streets?

SELECTED STEILACOOM STREET NAME ORIGINS

West side of the city: John Chapman's Steilacoom City

- **Champion Street**. Origin uncertain. Do you have a suggestion?
- **Gove Street**. Capt. Warren Gove was an early settler. Just across the channel from the west end of Gove Street is Ketron Island. Capt. Gove tried but failed to claim the island as his own.

- **Jackson Street**. This may have been named after Andrew Jackson, the 7th US President, but I'm more swayed by the argument (suggested by both Joan Curtis and Lou Dunkin) that it was for John R. Jackson, an early judge in the Washington Territory. John Chapman, the lawyer who platted Steilacoom City, attended the 1851 Cowlitz Convention, where he was called upon to draft the first document calling for the creation of what would become Washington Territory. The issue arose earlier that summer at Judge Jackson's home, which served as a superior court. Jackson later signed the [Monticello Convention](#) which directly led to the territory's establishment.
- **Martin Street** was given its name in honor of Abner Martin, another early settler and hotel-keeper in town.
- **Montgomery Street**. There were two early settlers named Montgomery, but which one inspired the street sign: John or Thomas? We don't know. Dunkin believed it to be Thomas, a captain at Fort Steilacoom.
- **Wallace Street**. William H. Wallace (1811-79) attained the highest political offices of any Steilacoom resident. He served as the fourth governor of Washington Territory (1861) and the first governor of Idaho Territory (1863-64). He's also the only [governor buried in](#) Lakewood.

Central part of the city: Lafayette Balch's Port Steilacoom

- **Adams Street**. The name is likely a nod to John Adams (1735-1826), the 2nd US President (1797-1801)
- **Balch Street**. Capt. Lafayette Balch is considered the founder of Steilacoom. There are two streets in his honor: one bears his first name and one has his last.
- **Chambers Street**. If you live in University Place, you have already encountered Thomas M. Chambers. An early settler, Chambers built the first gristmill in the area and later served as a judge. His name is attached to the creek upon which he built his mill, the bay the creek empties into, and now the adjacent Chambers Bay Golf Course, soon to host the US Open.
- **Diggs Street**. Capt. Diggs was a sea captain in Lafayette Balch's employ. Joan Curtis told me that he set the speed record of his day: six days from Steilacoom to San Francisco. She and Dunkin have yet to find the captain's first name. I found records for a Capt. William H. Diggs sailing in and out of San Francisco during that era, but haven't been able to verify that it's the same man.
- **Euclid Street**. The road is probably named for the Greek father of geometry — how many Euclid's are there? — but that's not certain. Even if it *is* true, no one knows why. I might venture that a captain's love of navigation and geometry inspired the choice, but that's purely my speculation.
- **Frederick Street**. Origin uncertain.
- **Lafayette Street**. One of the busiest roads in Steilacoom today was given the first name of the town's founder Capt. Lafayette Balch. He lived where Lafayette and Balch intersect.
- **Pierce Street**. Whether this street was named for the county (which was established about the time the city was laid out) or for Franklin Pierce (the president who inspired the county's name) is not known. But what's the difference? Dunkin offers yet another

possibility: B. Pierce lived in town in 1858, and was a charter member of the library association.

- **Powell Street**. Origin uncertain.
- **Rowell Street**. Origin uncertain.
- **Starling Street**. I began this list assuming Starling was named for the common black bird, but Joan Curtis corrected me. The street honors E. A. Starling, an Indian agent. As a birder, I should have known better anyway: the European starling didn't even exist in North America until a Shakespeare fan famously let them loose in 1890 — decades after Steilacoom's street appeared.
- **Washington Street**. Like Pierce, we're not sure whether this is named for the president or the territory that was named for him. Take your pick.
- **Wilkes Street**. Lt. Charles Wilkes led the US Exploring Expedition around the world and made the Northwest a point of interest in 1841. He spent a few months mapping and naming landmarks and watermarks throughout Puget Sound. He even held the first ever Fourth of July celebration west of the Mississippi just south of Steilacoom.

East side of the city: Bill's Addition

- **Blaine Street**. Dunkin and Curtis both suspected this road honors James G. Blaine (1830-93), a US secretary of state and one-time presidential candidate.
- **Cincinnati Street**. You'd probably guess Cincinnati was named for the Ohio city. No! Cincinnati was one of Lemuel Bills' three sons, each of whom earned a street in Steilacoom. His wife Lydia did not.
- **Galloway Street.** Galloway was probably among the relatives of Lemuel Bills, according to Curtis.
- **Garfield Street**. James A. Garfield (1831-81) was the 20th US President (1881).
- **Harrison Street**. Joan Curtis believes the road was named for a relative of Lemuel Bill. I'd hold out some thought for it being named for Benjamin Harrison, the 23rd US President. Points in his favor: (1) he signed Washington's statehood papers and (2) Harrison and Blaine are adjacent streets befitting a president and his secretary of state.
- **Lexington Street**. If you're thinking of Lexington, MA, site of the first battle in the Revolutionary War, then Lemuel Bills has fooled you again! Lexington was one of his sons.
- **Marietta Street.** Lemuel Bills had many relatives and he was fond of placing their names on his street map. Curtis believes this was one of them.
- **Rigney Road**. Rigney was the name of a prominent family in early Steilacoom**.**
- **Roe Street**. Harrison Roe married the daughter of Lemuel Bills and was immortalized on the street signs because of it.
- **Shepard Street**. Curtis believes Shepard may have been another relative of Lemuel Bills. Dunkin credits the street to Lt. A. Shepard at Fort Steilacoom.
- **Stevens Street**. Isaac I. Stevens (1818-62) was Washington Territory's first governor (1853-57)**.**
- **Worthington Street**. Worthington, like brothers Cincinnati and Lexington, was a son of Lemuel Bills.

*To those original three parts of Steilacoom, we add a late 20th century residential addition. The **Madrona** neighborhood sports a number of first names (members of the developer's family). It also includes the following names specifically chosen for their historical value, all of which had been overlooked (or unknown) at the time of the other developments.*

- **Bonney Street**. The Bonney family was prominent in early Steilacoom. Sherwood and Lyman Bonney helped build the Steilacoom stockade during the Indian War of 1855-56, and William P. Bonney, who was born in the stockade, later became secretary of the Washington State Historical Society and wrote the definitive early history of Pierce County.
- **Byrd Drive**. Andrew Byrd changed the local landscape. In 1853, he built a dam adjacent to his mill on Chambers Creek. The waters backed up and flooded the pond that had been there, converting it into a large lake. It was originally called Byrd's Lake, but Lake Steilacoom is the proper name today.
- **Heath Court**. Joseph T. Heath was a self-exiled Englishman who became one of the first settlers in the Lakewood and Steilacoom area. After his death, his land became part of Fort Steilacoom.
- **Ira Light Street**. Joan Curtis told me this name was a mistake. It should have been named E. A. Light, an early settler, but the developer got it wrong.
- **Leschi Drive**. Leschi (1808-58) was a chief in the Nisqually tribe. He was unjustly convicted and hanged in 1858.
- **Pickett Street**. Have you heard of Pickett's Charge? It was a unsuccessful assault on Union lines that was considered the turning point of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863. It was led by Capt. George Pickett who served at Fort Steilacoom before the Civil War.
- **Tolmie Court**. Scottish-born William F. Tolmie (1812-1886), had been in the Northwest for twenty years by the time the Hudson's Bay Company made him chief factor of Fort Nisqually (a British outpost near Steilacoom) from 1855-59.

NOTE: This is not a *complete* list of Steilacoom streets. We focused on personal names from the early days, and left out more recent, numbered, lettered, and descriptive street names.

SOURCES: This list could not have been completed without the assistance and previous research of Joan Curtis of the [Steilacoom Historical Society](#), who kindly sat for an interview at the Nathaniel Orr home. Previous research had also been done by Lou Dunkin who published some of her findings in the *Steilacoom Quarterly*. I also consulted *History of Pierce County Washington* by W. P. Bonney, 1927. Other facts and dates that made it into this list were supplied by my younger self. I grew up in nearby Lakewood and explored the early history of the area for several years.

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