Steilacoom: A History

From the time pioneers first moved west, Steilacoom was a prosperous town established by early merchant Lafayette Balch with a port, wharf and store — a bustling hub for settlers fresh from treks over the Oregon and Naches trails.

But soon, transplanted Indiana lawyer John Chapman founded a competing townsite adjoining Balch's new settlement. Eventually, both towns merged into one.

Ideally located with three of the territory's five major roads running through it, Steilacoom also boasted a water-powered grist mill, and wagon shop.

Steilacoom is known as Washington's "Town of Firsts:"

- Port (1849)
- Post office (1852)
- First protestant church north of the Columbia River (1853)
- Incorporated town (1854)
- Territorial newspaper (1855)
- Public library (1858)
- Territorial jail (1858)
- Brewery (1864)
- Gas station and garage (1925).

Prior to the arrival of the railroad Steilacoom was a regional draw for summer visitors and residents as wealthy families flocked to the water for the summer months.

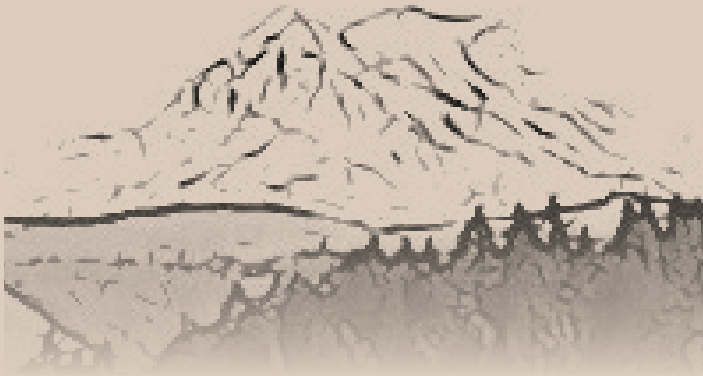
Today, Steilacoom is an active bedroom community whose residents respect the remaining architectural ties to its vibrant history. We hope you enjoy learning more about our town's past on this walking tour.

This project was funded with a Pierce County Preservation Grant.

A special thanks to the 2013 Steilacoom Preservation and Review Board and Steilacoom Historical Museum Association for the collaboration and collective history contributions to this brochure.

For further information please contact
www.TownofSteilacoom.com

For further historical information please contact the Steilacoom Historical Museum Association
www.SteilacoomHistorical.org



Historic Steilacoom

WALKING TOUR

LAFAYETTE BALCH

JOHN CHAPMAN

Steilacoom Historic Walking Tour Sites and Monuments

1 Northern Pacific Railroad Station — 1411 Commercial St. (1914)
The first train chugged through town on December 14, 1914. The railroad's lasting impact: severing the town from its waterfront forced demolition or relocation of numerous summer cottages.

2 Clendenin Cottage — 1810 Commercial St. (c. 1870)
One of the last reminders of the busy business district, it sat behind the family store, long gone by the turn of the century. The modest cottage has endured several changes to its original 'box-construction' structure.

3 Philip Keach Home — 1802 Commercial St. (1858)
Merchant Philip Keach built this elegant, late-colonial-style home for his bride-to-be. Featuring four fireplaces — and originally a slate roof — electricity and plumbing were added in the 1920s. In 1934, it was included in the Historic American Building Survey.

4 William Webster Home — 1706 Commercial St. (1854)
Considered the town's oldest surviving structure, this building served as a boarding house, general store (in the early 1900s), and a residence. Its box-construction walls reveal vertical 1-by-12 rough-sawn lumber of two overlapping thicknesses.

5 E.R. Rogers Home — 1702 Commercial St. (1891)
A pioneer merchant erected the grand 17-room Queen Anne-style mansion, only to lose it two years later in the "Panic of 1893." Named "Waverly Inn," it was a boarding house for many years before becoming a restaurant in the 1970s, and now, after an extensive remodel, an attorneys' office.

6 Town Hall — 1717 Lafayette St. (1930)
This neoclassical-style building is the town's focal point, used for Town Council, Planning Commission, and Preservation and Review Board meetings, as well as local events. Large historical pictures are on public display.

7 Bair Drug & Hardware —1615 Lafayette St. (1895)
Druggist W.L. Bair, opened this first storefront on Lafayette Street. Now owned by the Steilacoom Historical Museum Association, it has been a pharmacy, hardware store, post office, soda fountain, and restaurant.

8 Oberlin Congregational Church — 1515 Lafayette St. (1903)
Reusing timbers from the earlier Methodist-Episcopal Protestant church constructed in 1853, this building became home to the Steilacoom Tribal Museum after the Oberlin congregation moved to a new location in 1961.

9 Gardner Home — 1514 Lafayette St. (1870)
Listed in town records as a barber and fruit grower, Frank H. Gardner — an African American — lived in the house with its distinctive red-and-white barber pole for many years. It became the Oberlin parsonage in the 1950s.

10 Rigney Home — 1510 Lafayette St. (1885)
In 1849, Irishman John Rigney arrived at Ft. Steilacoom as a soldier. He built two homes in Steilacoom: this one for son John Jr. — and the Henly Home, built in 1886 on Starling St., for daughter Marcella and her husband.

11 Wolf Schafer Home — 302 Pierce Street (1875)
Pierce County treasurer when Steilacoom was the county seat, Wolf Schafer was also an entrepreneur whose successful brewery later became the Iron Springs Hotel. His home's small second story floor-level window was called a "skylight."

12 Bradley Home — 105 Frederick St. (1906)
Constructed on a pivotal spot at the terminus of State Historical Road No. 1, and later the street car line, the house has many distinctive architectural features including the turret with its "witch's cap," varied ceiling designs, and a state-registered cellar well.

13 Captain Black Home — 702 Lafayette St. (1860)
The Gothic Revival Style house was built for Captain Black, master of three ships. The ornate bargeboard under the gable is a single piece of wood 2-feet wide spanning 40 feet. Much of the house is original with a contemporary addition.

14 Latham Home — 614 Lafayette St. (1861)
Originally owned by Susan and John for more than 40 years, the building has evolved over the years. Even additions and modifications have become historic, telling the story of how a modest residence grew to meet the needs of its families over a span of 150 years.

15 Nehemiah Bartlett Home — 607 Lafayette St. (1870)
Mr. Bartlett built this house just before his wedding to Laura Belle Downey, a traveler on the first wagon train to traverse the Naches Pass in 1853. It was later used by Dr. McCutcheon, who converted the dining room into an office and raised the roof over half the house to create two bedrooms.

16 Armbruster Home — 514 Martin St. (c. 1870)
Also called "Vine Cottage," this house has a cedar shiplap interior that has never been painted and a full front porch that reflects French influence on early American architecture. The house was carefully restored in 2006.

17 Frericks Home — 311 Martin St. (1890)
The Frericks arrived in 1890 from Europe. D.G. was a tailor and Dora had been a pastry chef to a Czar. She was called "the pastry lady" for her habit of treating sick children with cookies. This modest house includes Victorian elements and originally had a grand view of Puget Sound.

18 Charles McCutcheon Home — 300 2nd St. (1905)
Initially called "The Glen" but later referred to as "Sunny Crest," Glenn Orr built this house for Dr. Charles McCutcheon. In 1927, the house became home to his nephew John T. McCutcheon, a Washington state senator.

19 Claussen Home — 410 1st St. (1883)
This spartan two-story wood structure, with a magnificent view, was built by a young minister from Maine, Arthur Burnell, first to officiate at the newly formed Oberlin Congregational Church. Around 1890, the Claussen family purchased the home.

20 Barber Home — 102 Montgomery St. (c. 1889)
This "American farmhouse"-style home was erected using large boulders for the foundation. Significant additions in the late 1990s altered the original simple plan.

21 Independent Church — 415 Union Ave. (1913)
This building was dedicated as a church on August 10, 1913 by Reverend Joseph Bowron. Born in England, he become a Congregational minister, serving at Oberlin Church 1906-1910, then at the U.S. Penitentiary at McNeil Island before forming the Independent Church.

22 Neil Henly Home — 1307 Starling St. (1886)
John Rigney built and gave this house to his daughter, Marcella, and her husband Neil Henly. Both men served as town leaders for many years. Although the house has been extensively altered, if you look closely you can see the original form of the more modest house.

23 Albert Whyte House(s) — 1302 Starling St. (1895)
Originally one of four almost identical houses called the "Four Apostles" built by Colonel Albert Whyte, it shares modest simple-design Victorian embellishments with its companions. Sadly today only three houses remain standing.

24 Packard Home — 1315 Nisqually St. (1900)
This house is designed to take advantage of sweeping views from its hilltop perch. The house has also been called "Bonnie Brae."

25 Wiliam Fannin Home — 703 Olympia St. (1875)
A monument commemorating the historic Old Military Road to Olympia sits directly across the street from this house built for William Fannin, a Commercial Street pharmacist. The wrap-around porch likely indicates his financial success.

26 Immaculate Conception Catholic Mission — Nisqually & Main Streets (1855)
This mission church was originally constructed at Ft Steilacoom, used by the area's military personnel and Native Americans. Moved to Steilacoom in 1864 and later placed on the National Register of Historic Places on its own merit, it's still in use.

27 Hughes Home (upper) — 308 Main St. (1890)
This house and its neighbor were built by James Hughes using simple, easy-to-erect styles. Its pointed window detail became common in town.

28 Hughes Home (lower) — 306 Main St. (1890)
Another James Hughes creation, this house is basically a cube form with an added kitchen wing, having lost the porch that used to span the front of the house. Both houses are excellent examples of the 19th century's starkly simple, utilitarian architecture.

29 Miles West Home — 211 Puyallup St.
This clapboard house — with a long columned porch, trio of dormer windows and many-paned window facing the Sound — encompasses the original log home from the 1850s. Mr. West was a working blacksmith and justice of the peace during the town's early days.

30 Nathaniel Orr Home — 1811 Rainier St. (1857)
This wonderfully intact house was built by Nathaniel Orr, a wagonmaker, fruit grower, and carpenter. Initially, the structure housed the wagon shop on the first floor with living quarters above. Renovated in 1868 into a home after his marriage, Orr moved the wagon shop just downhill from the house. The Steilacoom Historical Museum Association purchased the property from Nathaniel's son, Glen, and operates it as a house museum. It was named one of "Save America's Treasures" in 1999.

31 Albert Balch Home — 1614 Rainier St. (1858)
Built by Lafayette Balch for his brother Albert, this simple cottage still reflects pioneering construction, including adzed woodwork and hand-turned balusters while retaining many original touches such as the tall windows with their original glass. It was restored in 1974.

Monuments

- **A** Log house used in Indian war and for the first school
- **B** Methodist Church – first Protestant church in Western Washington
- **C** Washington State Historic Road No. 1
- **D** First Courthouse north of the Columbia River
- **E** First Territorial and County Jail
- **F** Steilacoom-Olympia Road
- **G** Chamber's Mills on Steilacoom River

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

22

23

24

26

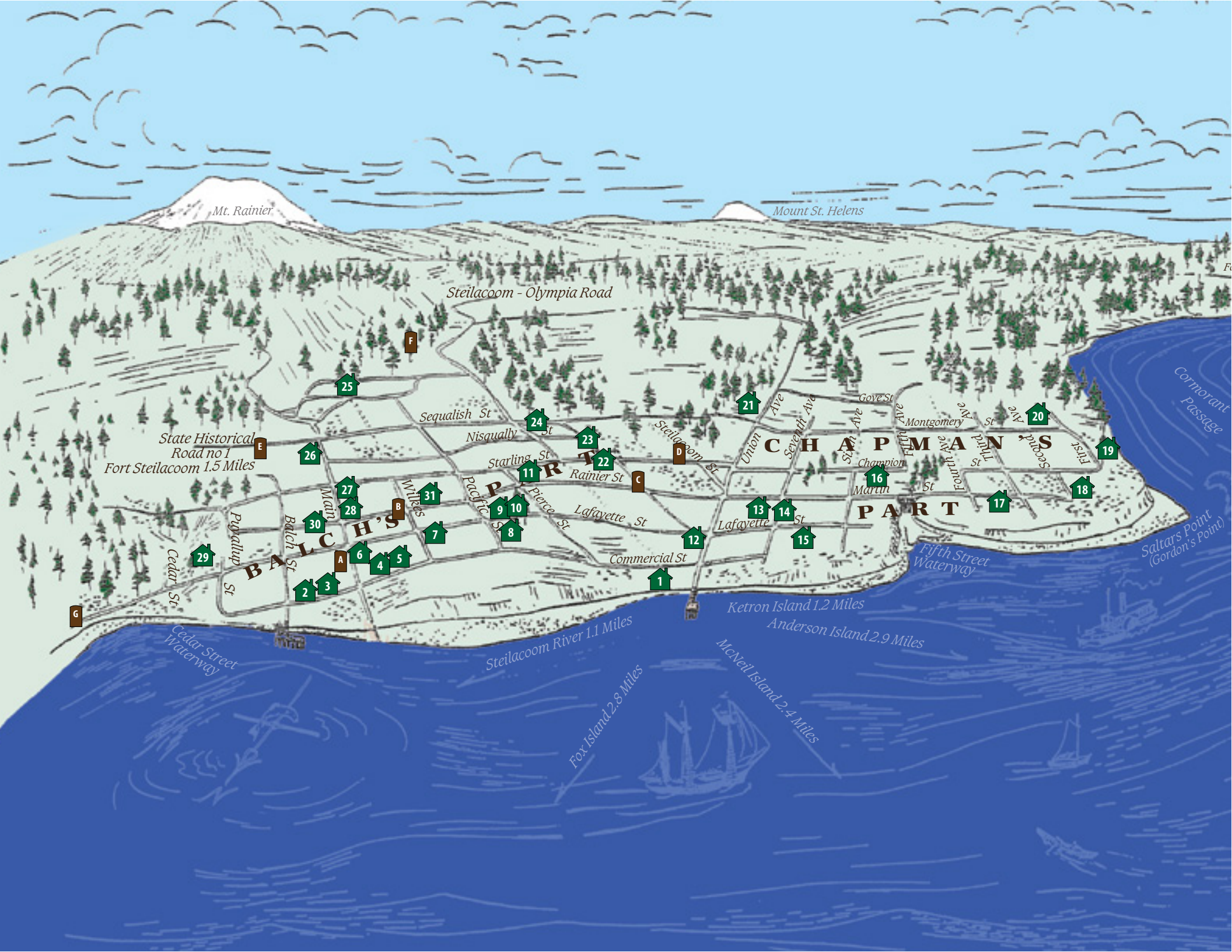
27

28

29

30

31


Mt. Rainier
Mount St. Helens
Steilacoom - Olympia Road
State Historical
Road no 1
Fort Steilacoom 1.5 Miles
Sequalish St
Nisqually St
Starling St
Rainier St
Lafayette St
Commercial St
Pierce St
Pacific St
Wilkes St
Main St
Balch St
Pugallup St
Cedar St
Union Ave
Seventh Ave
Sixth Ave
Fifth Ave
Fourth Ave
Third Ave
Second Ave
First Ave
Gove St
Montgomery St
Champion St
Martin St
Steilacoom St
BALCH'S PART
CHAPMAN'S PART
Cormorant Passage
Saltar's Point (Gordon's Point)
Fifth Street Waterway
Cedar Street Waterway
Steilacoom River 1.1 Miles
Ketron Island 1.2 Miles
Anderson Island 2.9 Miles
McNeil Island 2.4 Miles
Fox Island 2.8 Miles