

The Strange Customs of Victor Smith

Chapter 3: A Second Look at “The Second National City”

By John Kendall

The first national city? Washington, D.C. -- that’s easy

The second national city? Port Angeles, Wash. -- that’s complicated, and based on misunderstandings anyway.

June Robinson was a prolific local historian who went to the sources for her research. In 2002, she wrote:

“Lincoln established a military and naval reserve in Port Angeles and Ediz Hook on June 19, 1862, meaning the land was owned by the federal government and could not be sold or settled.

“The words ‘second national city’ were never coined by Lincoln in anything he said or wrote.

“Congress revoked the military and naval reserve status of Port Angeles and other cities across the United States in March 1863.

“The land south of Fourth Street was returned to reserve status from 1863 to 1890, but then Port Angeles residents convinced Congress to again reopen the land for settlement.

“But also in 1890, on the basis of the military reserve designation, the term ‘second national city’ was coined by the Port Angeles Board of Trade. It was an inducement to attract settlers.

“At least nine other townsites in Western Washington contained similar federal military reserves at one time or another. Port Angeles’ was the largest.”

And, no, the “second national city” status did not mean that a remote outpost in a remote corner of a remote territory was literally the second U. S. capital – a fallback capital if, during the Civil War, Confederate forces ever got close enough to Washington, D. C., to force a Union retreat to Port Angeles?

When the port of entry was moved to Port Angeles in 1862, the community’s hub was the customs house, marine hospital and wharf at the mouth of what is now Valley Creek. Vessels stayed in the harbor only long enough to complete their business at the customs house, a newspaper noted.

Once the reserve was established, no one could profit from land sale within the reserve. The boundaries were the shoreline on the north, including Ediz Hook; Ennis Creek on the east; what is now Ocean View Cemetery on the west; and what is now Lauridsen Boulevard on the south.

On March 3, 1863, the law now allowed the government to sell land to raise money for the Civil War.

Before any sales, such land had to be surveyed. In Port Angeles, the map was approved in November 1863. On May 4, 1864, 30 sales were recorded yielding \$4,570.25 – not enough to cover survey costs. The underwhelming response continued until the land rush of 1890.

A widespread, dependable marine transit system and a railroad had not yet reached the region.

But what had reached the remote region during the Civil War was fear – that Britain, controlling Vancouver Island, might attack along the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Also, that Confederate privateers – pirate ships flying the rebel flag – might attack other vessels at sea or a remote port such as Neah Bay.

Local histories do not mention these factors, but it is plausible that Smith, Lincoln or the War Department had these fears in mind when the military and naval reserve was created specifically for Port Angeles on June 19, 1862. Was it a warning – however hollow – to British naval forces at Esquimalt on Vancouver Island?

Britain siding with the Union was never a sure thing during the early days of the Civil War. Official British policy was to remain neutral.

But that was not Gov. James Douglas's style. As the lead official on Vancouver Island and the queen's representative, he had already worried about thousands of Americans coming through the port of entry at Victoria on their way to goldfields beginning in 1858. Douglas maintained order during the gold rush and asked the British Colonial Office to provide more assistance. Two warships and troops responded.

While some gold seekers may go home, a dead pig could mean war.

In 1859 an American farmer shot and killed a British farmer's pig on the jointly occupied San Juan Island. Successful diplomacy meant that the pig was the only casualty. International boundaries were established there in 1872.

Douglas wrote his superiors that since the U. S. had no defenses in Puget Sound, the Royal Navy "might occupy Puget Sound without molestation." Why not send two regiments of troops, he argued, "there is no reason why we should not push overland from Puget Sound and establish advance posts on the Columbia River, maintaining it as a permanent frontier." Nothing came of it.

The British on Vancouver Island were figuratively rattling their sabers to scare off any feared American threat, while some Olympic Peninsula residents, like Smith, feared a British invasion. But capturing the vessel *Shubrick* – the marine mainstay of Smith's customs operation – would be a definite blow to U. S. morale and commerce along the Strait.

The incident "became the subject of a plot that was reported in so many versions that the truth has been obscured," wrote one historian.

Around 1863, Confederate agents may have waited until the *Shubrick* was in Victoria when they would overpower the crew and convert the U.S vessel to a Confederate privateer. Some versions have Confederate accomplices aboard even before the vessel left a U. S. port. In Norman's telling, if the

Shubrick became a privateer, then it would allow “the Confederate government to complete devastation of our whaling fleet, then partially destroyed by the *Shenandoah*,” the deadly privateer that stalked the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific oceans and the Yankee whaling fleet in the Bering Sea. Whatever happened or didn’t, the *Shubrick* never became a privateer.

After the Civil War, things quieted down. Port Angeles became “The Gate City,” “The Gateway City” or “Jewel in the Olympics.”

In 1924, the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution dedicated a stone marker now on the front lawn of the Museum at the Carnegie, 207 S. Lincoln St. The inscription honors Lincoln ordering the reservation, which resulted in “making Port Angeles the Second National City.” That seems to be the only official recognition of that designation in the city.