# The "Battle" of Battle Ground, Territory of Washington, 1855

One hundred and sixty one years ago in a county named Clarke in the Territory of Washington stood two organizations both named Fort Vancouver. An older Hudson's Bay Company fur trading fort owned by the English and a newer American Army post that would someday be renamed Vancouver Barracks.

In November of 1855 only a few soldiers were at the American post because their commander, Major Raines, had taken most of the troops up the Columbia River to quell Indian uprisings and to protect the lives and property of both settlers and new immigrants arriving on the Oregon Trail. Concerned that he was understaffed, Major Raines had requested that the new territorial governor recruit two companies of volunteer civilian soldiers to supplement the U.S. Army forces for a period of 90 days.

The Honorable Judge Strong, a Yale graduate and an appointee of President Zachary Taylor to the Supreme Court of the Oregon Territory, was at that time in his private law practice. (He would eventually move to the Supreme Court of the Washington Territory). Judge Strong would answer the call for volunteers and become Captain of Company A, First Regiment, Washington Volunteers, and be stationed at the American Fort Vancouver.




Indian uprisings had been happening for years preceding this time and settlers often lived in fear of Indians. It was a time of forts and blockhouses where in moments of panic nearby residents could flee to a place of safety until the threat was over. The Indians lived in no less fear of the whites and diseases new to them had drastically reduced their numbers. In times of struggle and conflict both sides were known to participate in massacres that resulted in the total annihilation of the defeated group, including women and children.



October of 1855 marked the beginning of the Yakama Indian War. Fear and occasional panic swept communities near the Columbia. Although there was little history of violent conflict in Clarke County, there was plenty of worry and concern. Newspapers in Portland and Oregon City would fan these flames.

On October 26, 1855, about two weeks before the "battle" of Battle Ground, Judge William Strong in a letter to the editor of the Oregonian explained that settler anxiety about a tribe of Indians residing near the mouth of the Lewis River was unnecessary. An armed party of whites had on the previous day visited the Indians and found them to be peaceable and much frightened. There were not over thirty warriors in the group and they and their wives and children were taken to Vancouver and disarmed. He concludes, "I think there is now no danger to the settlements on the Columbia west of the Cascades . . . we need not apprehend harm to our families from them."

Some of the Indians that were relocated to be near the fort, perhaps in fear of harm from the whites and innocent of any crimes, resisted internment. On one dark night many quietly moved north to central Clarke County. Driven by speculation that the Indians might join the Yakama uprising, Captain Strong in charge of a mixed company of his own men and others (including the famous mountain man and peace commissioner, Doc Newell, and the French/Canadian voyageur, Isaac LaBelle), set out in pursuit of the Indians.

The volunteers and the Indians met at what would become known as "The Battle Ground." Savage hearts beat on both sides. Many of the volunteers under different leadership would within weeks of this event participate in the massacre of Indians of other tribes and some would die at Indian hands. Suspecting that internment might be unending the Klickitats had no wish to return to the fort, a poor substitute for their ancient home on the Lewis River. It was time to parley.

Despite all odds to the contrary, agreement was reached with Chief Umtuch for the Indians to return the next day. All seemed well until the Chief was found to have been mysteriously killed. One hundred and sixty one years of speculation has not identified the perpetrator of this foul act.

The "Ballad of the Battle Ground," written in 1914, credits Isaac LaBelle for his bravery in going among the grieving Indians to assure them that the whites had not committed the crime. Doc Newell was said to trust the Indians to return, but it fell to William Strong to make the decision to respect the Indians' need for time to honor their fallen Chief. To withdraw his troops with the expectation that the Indians would return voluntarily was the height of folly to many observers. The Oregon Argus would on November 17, 1855 report that one was ". . . but little acquainted with Indian character, when he takes their word for their future intentions . . ."




Skeptics at the fort were quick to criticize Strong's decision to disengage as cowardly, being far more willing to hear of bloody battles and dead Indians than peaceful resolutions. William Kelly would write to Acting Governor Mason that, "The Indians accuse the whites for killing him, and the whites say that it was the Indians . . . In any case it is bad, if they believe the whites have done it, they are bound to revenge, and if it was done by themselves it shows a most inveterate hatred to us . . . the results of his death was that the Indians have not returned yet." Women, at the fort, would mock the returning volunteers with the gift of a red petticoat to use as their "banner of courage."

It made small difference that the Indians, still innocent and bound only by their word, would return as agreed.

The story continues ▶

The Argus would report that: “Some think that Judge Strong should have brought the Indians back, nolens volens; others think it would have been a foolish sacrifice of human life to have engaged the Indians . . .” The seeds of an enduring controversy were well sown and speculation about who killed Chief Umtuch and where he was secretly buried would liven discussion while a place called Battle Ground began to appear on the early maps. The original site was somewhere east of Battle Ground Lake.

At this time Major General John Wool, commander of the Pacific Department of the Army, arrived to take personal command of Fort Vancouver. Wool, a tough army regular, veteran of the war of 1812, and second in command during the Mexican war, was not known to take advice from civilians on how to run the Army. He was also of the opinion that volunteer civilian forces were often just intent on exterminating the Indians, could rarely tell friend from foe, and did much more harm than good.

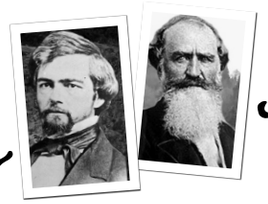
Wool was not alone in his harsh observations of the work of volunteer groups, although the settlers lauded them for providing them protection from the Indians. General Phillip Sheridan, then a Lieutenant and also based at Fort Vancouver, would describe in his memoirs the massacre of a friendly Indian family at the Cascades on the Columbia and his despair at the killing of innocents.

Strong  Wool

General Wool would berate Major Rains for having asked for civilian support and would find him a new job in California. History records no criticism of Judge Strong from him. In fact, he must have found the Judge’s solution appropriate and non-typical of the volunteers, but nevertheless he told him and the other volunteers that their enlistments would be terminating early. Wool had no use for civilian volunteers in his Army. Hence Company A would disband having served only 63 days.

Captain Strong would appeal to General Wool to allow his company to serve out their enlistments by escorting Governor Stevens to safety. Stevens was caught in the field, and threatened by the Yakama hostilities. Wool would decline his request. Wool and Stevens had a strong dislike for each other that would continue for the time that both were in the Oregon and Washington Territories.

Governor Stevens would quickly recreate Washington civilian volunteer troops, this time reporting to him. A new volunteer company would be formed in Clarke County, lead by Hamilton Maxon, Strong’s second in command. Many men from the disbanded Strong company would join Maxon and they would see immediate action in the Puget Sound area. They would participate in the massacre of Indians and some would be casualties of the fighting.

Stevens  Newell

The fate of the Western Klickitats is but sparsely reported. Indian Agent A. Townsend wrote that when he took charge of the White Salmon Indian Reservation in September of 1856 the Indians in his charge included the Lewis River Klickitats and went on to explain that: “ . . . it became necessary, on account of the fears of the whites, and to prevent intercourse with those who professed friendship with the hostile forces, to keep them closely confined on the reserve at Vancouver; during which time a large number of their horses and other property . . . was destroyed.” Agent Lansdale also reported from White Salmon in 1858 that: “They have lost most of their horses under surveillance of the military; they became very poor . . ..” The newer Yakima Reservation replaced the White Salmon reservation on March 8, 1859. The Klickitat tribe was merged into the Yakama nation and is today not recognized by the federal government as a distinct tribal entity.

Judge Strong in an interview 23 years after the incident at Battle Ground offered the observation that: “In such a trouble the Indians are more scared than the white men; and they would keep out of the way if you would let them . . ..” He would seem to be in a position to know.

The memory of the battle of Battle Ground continues in the name of a city in central Clark County, Washington, and in a tale where peace won out against all odds to the contrary.



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# The Battle of Battle Ground



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## The "Battle" of Battle Ground Territory of Washington, 1855

Years ago in Clarke County, Washington Territory, there were two installations named Fort Vancouver—an abandoned English Hudson's Bay Company fur trading post and a newer American Army post, later to be renamed to Vancouver Barracks.

In November of 1855, only a few soldiers were at the army post because their commander, Major Raines, had taken most of the troops up the Columbia River to quell Indian uprisings and to protect the lives and property of both established settlers and new immigrants arriving on the Oregon Trail. Concerned that he was understaffed, Major Raines requested that the newly-appointed territorial governor recruit two companies of civilian volunteer soldiers to supplement the U.S. Army forces for 90 days.

The Honorable Judge William Strong, a Yale graduate and newly appointed to the Supreme Court of the Oregon Territory by President Zachary Taylor, had a private law practice. Judge Strong answered the call for volunteers and became Captain of Company A, First Regiment, Washington Volunteers. He was stationed at Fort Vancouver.

Indian uprisings had been happening during preceding years, leading settlers to fear Indians. In moments of panic, residents fled to forts and blockhouses for safety until threats were over. The Indians lived in no less fear of the Whites. Whites brought new diseases, which had drastically reduced their numbers. Amid struggle and conflict, both sides participated in massacres.

October of 1855 marked the beginning of the Yakama Indian War. Fear and panic swept through communities near the Columbia River. Newspapers in Portland and Oregon City fanned the flames of distrust.

About two weeks before the Battle Ground confrontation, Judge Strong's *Oregonian* letter-to-the -editor explained that the settlers' anxiety was unnecessary concerning a clan of Klickitat Indians living near the mouth of the Lewis River. He explained that armed Whites had visited the Indians and found them to be peaceable, but frightened. About thirty disarmed warriors and women and children were taken to an encampment near Fort Vancouver. He concluded, "I think there is now no danger to the settlements . . .we need not apprehend harm to our families from them."

Some of the Indians were inclined to resist internment. One night, after a visit from a recruiter for the Yakima conflict, many Indians quietly moved north from the fort into central Clark County. Upon the discovery, Captain Strong, now in charge of the new militia, set out in pursuit of the Indians. He was accompanied by famous mountain man and peace commissioner, Doc Newell, and the French-Canadian voyageur, Isaac LaBelle,

The volunteers caught up with the Indians on a prairie that eventually became known as "The Battle Ground." Recently, that site was identified as Mankas Prairie, an Indian campsite east of Battle Ground Lake. On an 1858 survey map, it is shown as one of several prairies along the ancient Klickitat Trail, which connected the lower Columbia area with Yakima. The overtaken Indians suspected that any internment near the fort might be permanent and had no wish to return. It was time to parley.

Despite all odds in favor of the contrary, agreement was reached between Capt. Strong and Chief Umtuch. The Indians promised to return the next day with assurance of safety and promise of provisions for the approaching winter.

All seemed well until . . . the chief mounted his horse to tell two of his outlying guards that peace had been made. The chief was then shot! For years his untimely death was one of history's mysteries.

Then, recently, two interviews of Indian eye witnesses to the incident, revealed that one of the Indian guards accidentally shot their chief. The interviews were recorded sometime before 1924 by noted historian, Lucullus McWhorter. The scouts heard peace-declaring gunshots and saw a horseman racing toward them. They assumed that fighting had begun and this was a fleeing soldier. One story has been repeatedly told that the chief and Strong had exchanged clothing as a symbol of agreement; the chief was known to appreciate fine clothing. Most likely, the Indians did not confess because of distrust in the White man's justice.

Isaac LaBelle bravely approached the grieving Indians, giving them assurance. Doc Newell trusted the Indians to return as promised, but William Strong had to make the decision to respect the Indians' need for time to honor their fallen Chief Umtuch. The withdrawal of Strong's troops with expectation of the Indians' voluntary return, seemed like folly to the Vancouver area residents. *The Oregon Argus* reported on November 17, 1855 that one was ". . . but little acquainted with Indian character, when he takes their word for their future intentions"

Skeptics quickly criticized Strong's decision as cowardice and were more willing to hear of bloody battles and dead Indians than peaceful resolutions. William Kelly wrote to Acting Governor Mason: "The Indians accuse the whites for killing him, and the whites say that it was the Indians . . . In any case it is bad; if the Indians believe the whites have done it, they are bound to revenge, and if it was done by themselves, it shows a most inveterate hatred of us . . . the results of his death were that the Indians have not returned."

Women at the fort mocked the returning "empty-handed" volunteers with the gift of a red petticoat to use as their "banner of courage." The captain graciously accepted the "flag" and flew it.

The Indians, still innocent and bound only by their word, returned as agreed. Still, the controversy remained. *The Argus* reported: "Some think that Judge Strong should have brought the Indians back, *nolens volens*; others think it would have been a foolish sacrifice of human life to have engaged the Indians ."

The chief 's burial site livened discussion and speculation while a place called Battle Ground began to appear on the early maps— somewhere east of Battle Ground Lake. According to the McWhorter interviews, there were two "burials." The first, if not both, were above ground. The corpse, wrapped in tulle leaves, was placed on a high platform supported by strong sticks. The first ceremony, was at Mankas Prairie. A 1915 *Oregonian* news clipping quoted the chief's niece, Wahl-La-Luk's remembrance of her uncle's burial. As a powerful medicine woman, her duty was to lead a line of young

maidens in circling the corpse as they chanted a poetic lament. The second burial, a year later, was near Woodland on the Lewis River. Another interesting aside story about the Umtuch family was Wahl-La-Luk's baptism at the fort and the attendance of Chief Umtuch in his full regalia.

What happened to the volunteer soldiers? Major General John Wool, commander of the Pacific Department of the Army, arrived to take personal command of Fort Vancouver. Wool, a tough army regular, veteran of the war of 1812 and second in command during the Mexican war, was not known to take advice from civilians on how to run the Army. He was also of the opinion that volunteer civilian forces were intent on exterminating the Indians, could rarely tell friend from foe, and did more harm than good. However, settlers lauded the volunteers for providing protection.

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General Wool berated Major Rains for having asked for civilian support and found Rains a new job in California. Wool records no criticism of Judge Strong. In fact, he must have found the Judge's solution appropriate and non-typical of the volunteers. Nevertheless, he terminated him and the other other volunteers ahead of schedule. Hence, Company A was disbanded after serving only 63 days.

Meanwhile, Governor Isaac Stevens was caught in the field, and threatened by Yakama hostilities. Captain Strong appealed to General Wool to allow his company to serve out their enlistments by escorting Governor Stevens to safety. Wool declined the request. Wool and Stevens strongly disliked each other during the time they were in the Oregon and Washington Territories.

Governor Stevens quickly recreated the Washington civilian volunteer troops, this time reporting to him. A new volunteer company was formed in Clark County, led by Hamilton Maxon, Strong's second in command. Many men from the disbanded Strong company joined Maxon and saw immediate action in the Puget Sound area. There, they participated in the massacre of Indians and some volunteers became casualties.

And the Indians? The fate of the Western Klickitats is sparsely reported. Indian Agent, A. Townsend, wrote that when he took charge of the White Salmon Indian Reservation in September of 1856, the Indians in his charge included the Lewis River Klickitats and went on to explain that: "it became necessary, on account of the fears of the Whites, and to prevent intercourse with those who professed friendship with the hostile forces, to keep them closely confined on the reserve at Vancouver; during which time a large number of their horses and other property . . . were destroyed." Agent Lansdale reported from White Salmon in 1858: "They have lost most of their horses under surveillance of the military; they became very poor." The newer Yakima Reservation replaced the White Salmon reservation on March 8, 1859. The Klickitat tribe was merged into the Yakama nation and is today not recognized by the federal government as a distinct tribal entity.

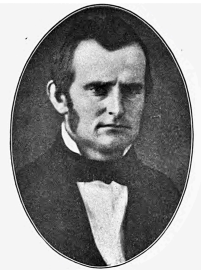
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Although the City of Battle Ground and Battle Ground School District may be misnomers, celebration can be made that Peace won against all odds.



# The Rest of the Story of

# Battle Ground



Judge, Captain, Peacemaker, William Strong



Niece of Chief Umtuch Wahl-Wa-Lux



Nephew of Chief Umtuch and his successor, Spencer

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