

Left Coast 08-05

Resting on the tip of a magnificent peninsula, the town of Port Gamble may very well be the quintessential New England village. The streets of this little burg are lined with lofty canopies of maple and elm trees and classic storybook homes.

Port Gamble's 110 residents often take the occasion to sit on their front porches and sample the aroma of briny sea breeze. Indeed, many homes have ocean views.

There are a couple of things that make Port Gamble truly unique. One of them is that it's located in the State of Washington and the other, that it was recently overrun by butternut and blue armies along with a horde of spectators.

Port Gamble's resemblance to New England Victorian style is no accident. Andrew Pope and William Talbot founded the town in 1853. They were businessmen who hailed from East Machias, Maine. They formed the Puget Mill Company - a logging and lumber firm. They built a mill and company town to their liking...and they liked the New England style.

Although the mill is gone, this is still a logging company town. So if you want to live here, you're likely going to have to rent a home from the company - what is now known as the Olympic Property Group (OPG).

OPG holds the town, which is also a National Historic Site. Additionally, they have 4,000 adjacent acres that is still logged.

A surveyor named Charles Wilkes christened the site, Port Gamble. Wilkes went about naming places after people and circumstances involving the War of 1812. Lt. Robert Gamble served aboard the frigate, USS President (one of five sister ships to the USS Constitution). Five days after war was declared, Gamble was wounded in an exchange with the HMS Belvedira.

The bubble of tranquility that is Port Gamble, was burst by the invasion of the Washington Civil War Association (WCWA). The WCWA and OPG collaborated to bring the War Between the States to the residents of the Kitsap Peninsula.

The WCWA formed in 1993 when Washington members broke away from the Northwest Civil War Council (an organization that operates primarily in adjacent Oregon). They have been going great guns ever since. Their membership fluctuates between 760 and 800, which is a pretty substantial number for a western organization.

Like other Civil War organizations in this part of the country, the WCWA has three components; Confederate, Civilian and Federal. They do have a slight tweak in the Civilian section. This section is broken into Northern and Southern sub-groups.

On the Confederate end, the brigade includes the following infantry units: 1st Louisiana, 4th Alabama, 7th South Carolina, 7th Tennessee, 15th Alabama and 26th North Carolina.

They boast three artillery units: Cobb's, Polk's Tennessee and Stanford's Mississippi Batteries.

They have two mounted cavalry units in the 14th and 43rd Virginia. Since the Federal component doesn't currently have a mounted unit, the 14th is spending the better part of their time galvanizing as the 1st US Cav. to keep things balanced.

The Cornfed contingent is rounded out with the 1st Confederate Engineers, CSA Medical Department, CSA Sumter/Marines and for the younger set, the cadets of the Virginia Military Institute.

Infantry for the Federal brigade is composed of the 3rd US, 4th US, 7th Wisconsin, 14th Brooklyn, 20th Maine, 28th Massachusetts, 76th Pennsylvania and 125th Ohio.

The Naval Detachment from the USS Tahoma supplies artillery service for the Union. This detachment also has marines who turn out as skirmishers or infantry as the needs of the brigade dictate.

The Yankee's also have the US Medical Department, Army of the Columbia Fife & Drum Corps and for those not yet old enough to take the field with a rifle, the Norwich Cadets. The cadets are generally attached to headquarters and serve as couriers. They also drill with the infantry, so when they "come of age," they're already well trained soldiers.

The WCWA set up within the Port Gamble town limits, with the Federals camping on the site of the old millpond. The Confederates were across the road in an open, park-like area. Civilians set up behind their military camp of choice.

The event got underway on Friday evening when the troops took to Port Gamble's main street for urban combat. The boys fought head to head on Rainier Avenue as well as maneuvering around and behind houses and stores in the hope of gaining the advantage of ambush and flanking.

"Guys were actually taking hits and falling on the pavement," remarked Howard Struve, the WCWA Event Coordinator. "It was a great fight – guys were lined up across the street from picket fence to picket fence. The guys loved it!"

And what of the spectators? Brian Eckerlie, who works at the Port Gamble Museum commented, "They were absolutely spellbound." So the evening battle will likely become a regular feature at this first year event.

The weekend battlefield bordered the town and included some very Peninsula Campaign style terrain. The field included a plateau, rolling hill and woods and ended up taking on a sort of a reverse Malvern Hill flavor.

Federal commander, John Persinger said that he and his troops really enjoyed the event. The only difficulty they encountered was on the field; "We attacked up hill all weekend and as we'd reach the crest, we'd run into the Confederate gun line and safety zone. So we had to deal with that, but it was a really good field."

On the other side, Confederate commander, Frank Starr was initially a little concerned; "We had our guns on a hill pointed at the town. These are all 1860's houses and buildings and I had noticed that they had a lot of original rolled window glass. I was afraid that the artillery would blow some of the glass out. Fortunately, that didn't happen. Our brigade was thrilled with the camping, the battles... Everything. We're really looking forward to going back next year."

The locals were energized about the event as well. The event drew at or in excess of 6,000 people. Julie McAfee, of the OPG remarked, "We do a lot of events here and this was the most fun we've ever had!" The owner of the general store said it was the best weekend the store had ever had.

Brian Eckerlie spoke with people from Arizona and the East Coast who were out here on vacation and decided to attend. Howard Struve chatted with folks from Jamaica and The Netherlands who turned out to experience the American Civil War.

Josh Farley and Tiffany Royal - reporters from the local newspaper (the North Kitsap Herald) turned out as Federal and Confederate soldiers (respectively). They filed first person stories about their experience written in the prose of the day.

To reach Port Gamble, drive 12 miles north out of Seattle and take the ferry across Puget Sound. Drive 9 more miles across the Kitsap Peninsula, or... visit their web site at http://www.experiencewashington.com/City_C178.html

The Washington Civil War Association seems to be about as close to a model organization as exists in reenacting. They hold about a half dozen Civil War events each year and they're also involved in any number of living history functions including parades. Take a look at their webs site at: www.wcwa.net