

SIERRA PREQUEL – THE LIBBEY YEARS, PART TWO

Family Legacy

Almost 200 years prior to the birth of early Whidbey Island pioneer Samuel Libbey, John Libbey, Samuel's 5th great grandfather, crossed the Atlantic from his home on the English Isle of Thanet. In those years, Thanet was known as the United Kingdom's "Star of the Sea." His ship landed in 1637 at the fledgling colony of Maine, a wild place where survival was far from guaranteed.

Establishing a homestead in the former French stronghold known as "Acadia," and enduring hunger, extreme weather, and the myriad of wars that took place over generations gives evidence of the Libbey family qualities that would serve Libbey descendants well in the untamed Pacific Northwest.

Over the River and Through the Woods

Although there is conflicting information regarding the timing of his arrival on the island, it appears that Samuel and his brother-in-law, Benjamin Barstow, briefly parted company in early 1853. Samuel's journal entries document a short stay in "Oregon Country" as he headed north. Whether it was to re-provision, or to earn additional money before continuing his journey, Samuel found himself in picturesque St. Helens, Oregon, working at a mercantile. One of the last stops on the Lewis and Clark expedition, (1803-1806), St. Helens was a busy hub whose claim to fame at that time was that it was the terminus for the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, a contractor responsible for transporting mail to the Pacific Coast from as far away as Panama.



Mount St. Helens as Samuel Libbey may have seen it – pre-eruption

Perhaps gazing at a very different version of the Mount St. Helens than the one we know today, Samuel wrote that he sold "knuts and candy, knick-knacks and trinketts" during his stay. Little did he know that this newfound sales and merchandising experience would be called upon in the coming months.

SIERRA PREQUEL – THE LIBBEY YEARS, PART TWO (CONTINUED)

The Garden and Granary of The Pacific Northwest

In order to entice settlers to the west, Congress enacted a number of laws in those years that provided land to homesteaders if they were willing to clear the land, plant crops, build homes, and reside there continuously for a certain number of years. A husband and wife could claim as many as 320 acres (160 acres each). An early Washington Historical Society Quarterly published in 1908 quoted a still-living homesteader who said Whidbey Island had been advertised as “the garden and

granary” of the Pacific Northwest. Free, fertile land, coupled with the idyllic descriptions of early settlers who wrote to relatives to encourage them to emigrate, served as effective marketing tools to make Whidbey a popular destination.



Map of Samuel Libbey's 1853 homestead, highlighted in pink

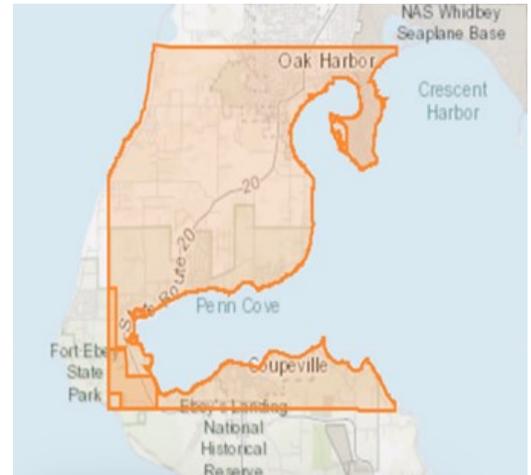
After his June 1853 reunion with Benjamin Barstow on the island, Samuel began searching for a suitable piece of land to homestead. Barstow had claimed 311 acres that included much of the south-western portion of Penn Cove, including the area at the head of the cove that would become the settlement of Coveland, and later, San de Fuca. He opened the first trading post on the island at what would later be named “Barstow’s Point,” now the site of the current Captain Whidbey Inn.

More of a grower than a merchant, Libbey was looking for land he could farm. Much of the prairie land west of current-day Coupeville had already been claimed by early pioneer families with familiar names - Ebey, Alexander, Crockett, Engle, Terry, and Hill. Samuel ultimately claimed 320 acres mostly north of Point Partridge on the west side of the island.

SIERRA PREQUEL – THE LIBBEY YEARS, PART TWO (CONTINUED)

The Talented Mr. Libbey and His Sons

Samuel Libbey had a tremendous amount of work to do to make his homestead a home, but his family loyalty was apparent as he worked at the Barstow trading post through the remainder of 1853 and into 1854. Tragically, Captain Barstow drowned in Puget Sound while returning from a supply trip to San Francisco in mid-1854. His homestead was deeded to Samuel's wife, Sarah Ann (Barstow) Libbey, making the Libbey's land holdings one of the largest on the island at that time.



Map of Benjamin Barstow's homestead highlighted in pink

It is obvious that Samuel had many skills and was held in high esteem among his fellow settlers. By 1857, he had been elected as the Island County Auditor, all the while continuing to work on his homestead and farm. After finally completing his home, his wife and sons, George and Joseph arrived in 1859.

In the ensuing years, Samuel continued his public service, and was elected as Island County Treasurer, Coveland School District Clerk, Postmaster, and was appointed to the Island County Elections Board for multiple terms. He was also a good neighbor, and boarded prisoners for his friend and fellow homesteader, Sheriff Hathaway. With the acorn not falling far from the tree, Samuel's son, Joseph Barstow Libbey, served as Island County Treasurer and Auditor between 1879 and 1892. Grandson, Howard Wayne Libbey, and great-grandson, Joseph William Libbey, both served as Island County Auditor, the latter for 36 years.

The American philosopher William James once said, *"The great use of life is to spend it on something that will outlast it."* While Samuel's white clapboard farmhouse still sits stubbornly atop the hill overlooking many of our homes, its aging façade standing firm against the backdrop of the Sound and the mountains, it appears his true legacy has been his influence on the physical and cultural development of Whidbey Island. Samuel Libbey and his descendants can be credited with helping to make our island the Pacific Northwest's "Star of the Sea."