

San Juan Island

National Historical Park
Washington
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

American Camp: in war's dark shadow

American Camp really began on a grassy slope about 200 yards from the shoreline of Griffin Bay. That's where Capt. George E. Pickett and Company D, 9th Infantry landed on July 27, 1859. With the pitching of his first tent Pickett established an American military presence on San Juan Island that lasted 14 years.

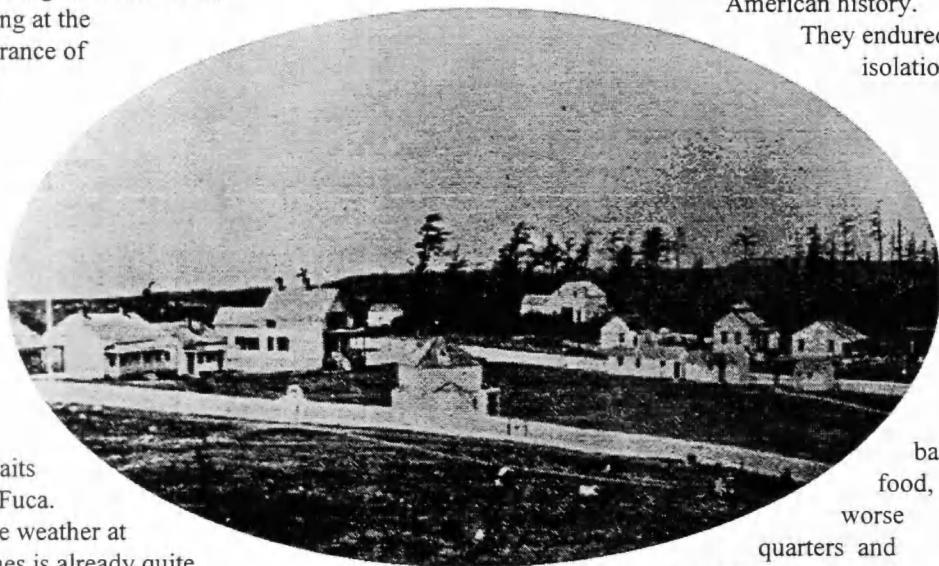
It wasn't until the August 10 arrival of reinforcements under command of Lt. Col. Silas Casey that the post found its permanent home. Casey decided to move after two stormy nights at Pickett's second camp. The Virginian had changed locations after only three days, perhaps in a quest for level ground but more likely because of the British naval guns looking down his throat. Casey was not impressed with the new site. "We are encamped in rather exposed situation with regard to the wind, being at the entrance of the

in the most commanding position at this end of the island, well sheltered in the rear and one side by the Forest and on the other side by a Commanding eminence," wrote Capt. James Prevost, commander of the H.M.S. Satellite.

As a deterrent, the post served its purpose until November when Lt. Gen. Winfield Scott and British Columbia Gov. James Douglas finally agreed to a peaceful joint occupation by a company from each nation until the boundary dispute could be resolved. Casey and the bulk of the troops departed, along with the artillery from the redoubt. One company remained.

And thus would the post continue through July 17, 1874. Eight companies from four regiments — all regular army and under command of 15 different officers — would man the post through some of the most tumultuous years of American history.

They endured isolation,

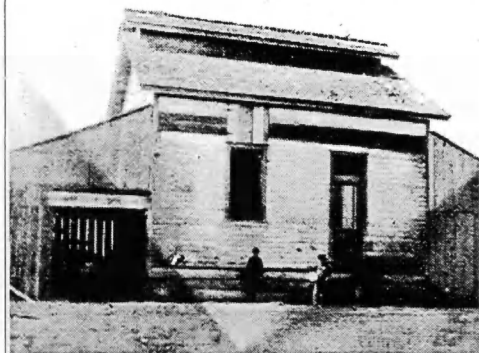


Straits of Fuca. The weather at times is already quite inclement."

On August 22, Casey ordered his growing force (now 450 men) to pull up stakes and relocate to the north slope of the ridge just north of the Hudson's Bay Company barns — once home to the pig that strayed and started the whole mess two months before. Casey ordered large, conical Sibley tents shipped from Fort Steilacoom to the new site which Casey deemed, "a very good position for an entrenched camp." The tents would supplement the clapboard buildings Pickett had already shipped over from Fort Bellingham, among these the hospital, barracks, laundress and officers' quarters. The veteran colonel also ordered Corps of Engineers 2nd Lt. Henry Martyn Robert — later to achieve fame for his *Rules of Order* — to start work on a earthen fortification on the ridgetop east of the new camp with a commanding view of both strait and bay. Meanwhile the British riding at anchor in Griffin Bay were nothing short of impressed with the colonel's enterprise.

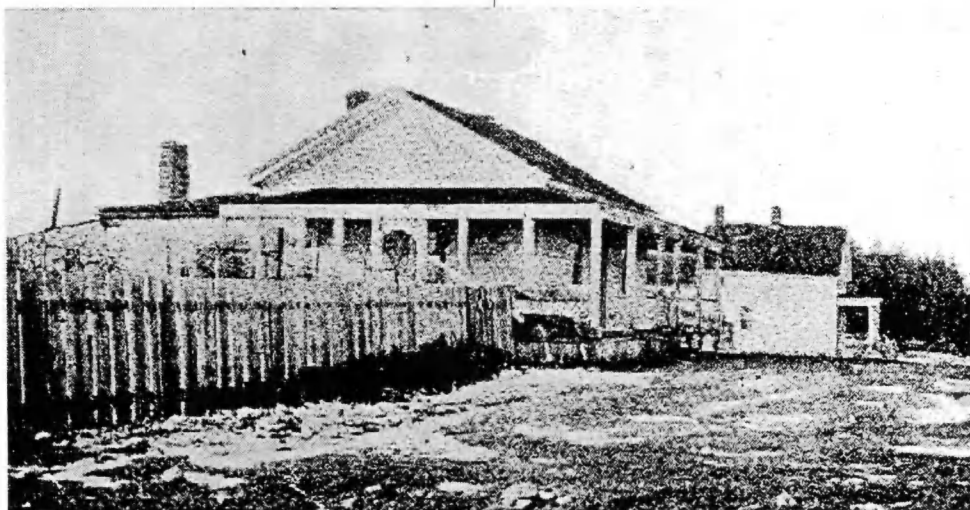
"(Casey's camp) is very strongly placed

bad food, worse quarters and crushing boredom. Some soldiers were willing to risk company punishment — such as carrying a 40-pound log around the post all day — to numb themselves with the rotgut whisky of old San Juan Town. Some committed suicide. Some took "French leave" (deserted). But most endured and by so doing contributed to the legacy of peace we celebrate today.



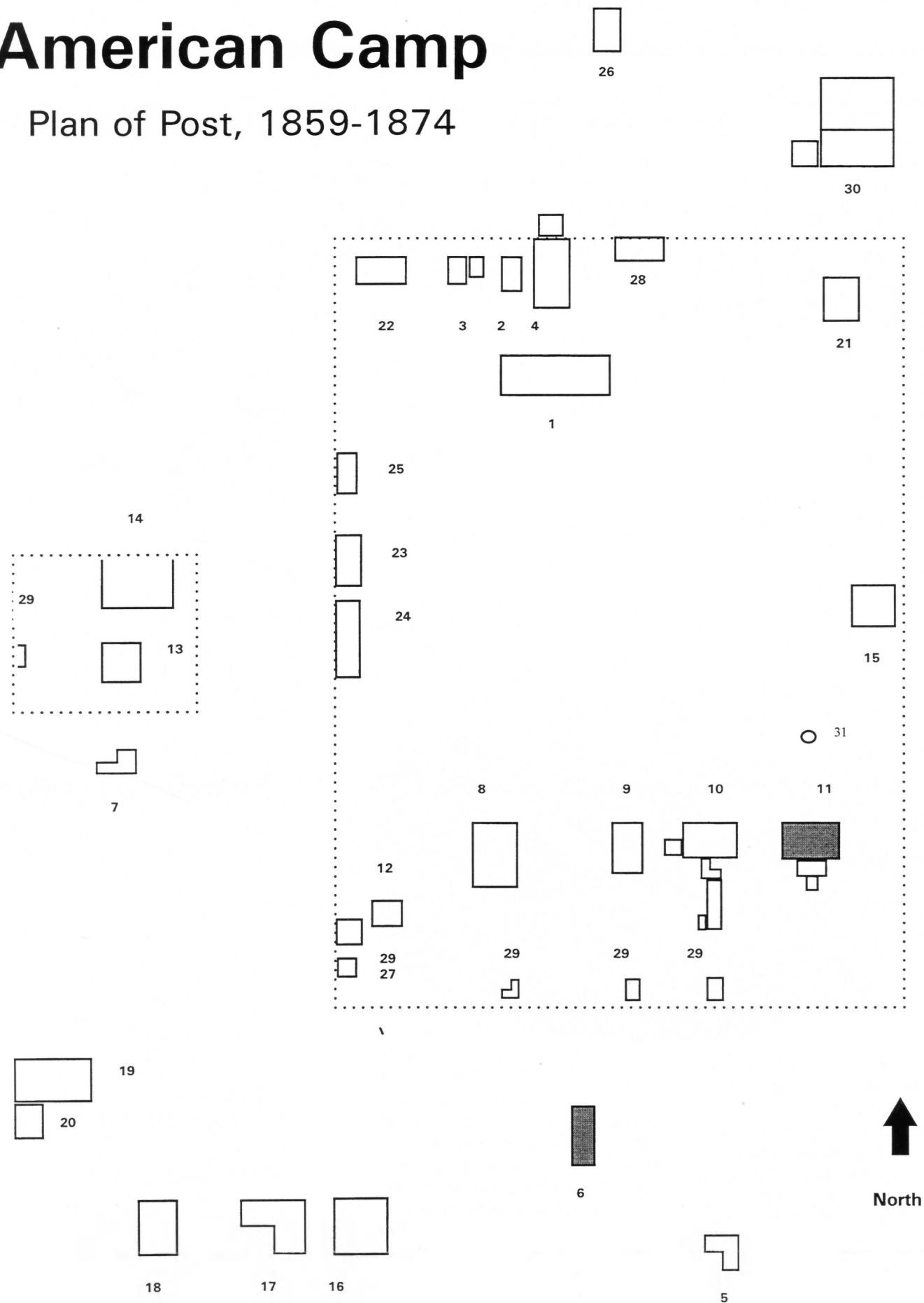
The Forgotten Post

Lack of funds and pure neglect at times insured that American Camp changed little over 14 years. At left, is the camp as it looked about 1863. Most of the buildings, including the blockhouse, were shipped over from Fort Bellingham by George Pickett. Above is the hospital Pickett first erected at Spring Camp, then moved to the new camp in August 1859. Below is a 1903 photograph of the Officers' Quarters Pickett built in 1860 from Fort Bellingham lumber. It is one of only two buildings still standing on the site. The Fort Bellingham structures, and the buildings constructed on site over the years, did not hold up well. In fact, conditions grew so bad that by 1867 the post commander begged for a new barracks roof. The original roof had been constructed of green lumber and "it has now become rotten — almost uninhabitable, and irreparable." The officers didn't have it any better. The two middle structures in officers' row (at left in oval) were "shells, battered on the inside, and owing to the exposed position of the garrison, extremely uncomfortable and cold." One commander was "compelled to allow the carpenters to sleep in the carpenter shop and stable hands in the stables." The Secretary of War denied all requests for improvements.



American Camp

Plan of Post, 1859-1874



Key to Structures

- 1. Barracks
- 2. NCO Mess House
- 3. Bake House
- 4. Messroom/Kitchen
- 5. Laundress Quarters
- 6. Laundress Quarters
- 7. Laundress Quarters
- 8. Officers' Quarters
- 9. Officers' Quarters
- 10. Officers' Quarters

- 11. Officers' Quarters
- 12. Adjutant's Office
- 13. Hospital (ward)
- 14. Hospital (offices)
- 15. Blockhouse (jail)
- 16. Commissary Stores
- 17. Quartermaster Stores
- 18. Blacksmith Shop

- 19. Barn and Stable
- 20. Granary
- 21. Carpenter Shop
- 22. Bake House
- 23. Quartermaster and Commissary Office
- 24. Orderly Room and School

- 25. Company Storage
- 26. Bath House
- 27. Telegraph Office
- 28. Wash House and Shoemaker Shop
- 29. Woodsheds and Outhouses
- 30. Cemetery
- 31. Flagstaff



Existing Structures

