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ANOTHER BEREAVEMENT LEAVE: THE SAD 1858 JOURNEY TO VIRGINIA

The tragic 1851 childbirth death of George Pickett's young wife Sally and their infant at desolate Fort Gates, Texas and his long journey home with the bodies is well known. He undertook a similar trip in 1858 to grieve for another young wife.

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After completing court martial duty in Florida, 31-year-old Captain George Pickett and Company D joined the rest of the new Ninth Infantry at Fort Steilacoom, Washington Territory in March, 1856. The South Puget Sound's short Treaty War was winding down with the assistance of the earlier arrivals armed by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis with new improved weapons no one else yet had. The 1849 fort was the government's first permanent presence on Puget Sound, but despite its strategic importance, Pickett found a fort that was still a simple log outpost with no stockade to separate it from the growing village of Steilacoom or anyone hostile.

Captain Pickett and Company D would not be stationed at Fort Steilacoom with the rest of the regiment because he finally had his first independent command. His first lieutenant was Mississippian Robert Hugh Davis, the Secretary of War's ne'er-do-well nephew. A year older than Pickett, he was a political appointee with no prior military service. Though nothing warranted a first lieutenantcy, the appointment was a last ditch effort to get Robert into some kind of career by his uncles Jefferson and Joseph Emory Davis. The junior officer was young Ohioan James W. Forsyth, fresh from West Point and a family friend of influential Senator (and shortly

to be Secretary of State) Lewis Cass. The three were a diverse mix of personalities, political connections and American subcultures.¹

Pickett's orders were to establish a fort at Bellingham Bay over 100 miles north to guard Whatcom County's settlements and the Coast Salish villages. First Nations raiders from hundreds of miles north were deadly threats to the bay's people who persistently begged the government for protection. Once just an occasional menace before nearby British Fort Victoria was built on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, for more than a decade these aggressors paddled south for weeks every spring in their 70-foot ocean-going canoes. They frequently killed Coast Salish men, enslaved women and children, and stole the smoked salmon for the next winter. Attracted by seasonal work and new white settlement along the fringes of the Salish Sea and northern Puget Sound, they started to kill settlers and were determined to continue their terrifying raids. The U.S. Army meant to intervene and permanently stop them.

The three army officers entered a social environment quite unlike that of their home regions. In 1856 and for many years to come, there were virtually no young unmarried Euro-American women in the isolated new settlements of Whatcom County and many other places. Nearly every prominent man who sought to form a family married one of the young native women of similar stature in their own communities. While lower class men and women might have had more casual liaisons, young upper class Coast Salish women were chaperoned and subject to arranged marriages into power and wealth similar to the customs of white elites in the East and South. Community leaders with native wives included the governor of British Columbia, much of the Washington Territorial Legislature, businessmen, county commissioners, sheriffs, and at least one Fort Steilacoom officer. Pickett's local friend, Virginian E.C. Fitzhugh,

was the coal mine manager and largest employer in the Territory, and despite his elite upbringing in Stafford County had followed suit.

Within about 18 months, all three officers followed the prevailing pattern. They entered tribal custom marriages with high status women. The leaders, with their own agendas, matched their daughters (with their assent) to suitors they perceived as rich and powerful, and imposed all the usual obligations of labor and gifts on the new husbands. Davis' wife Caroline and other witnesses said that the military couples also contracted "legal" civil marriages, but at the time there were territorial laws against cross-cultural marriages. The local justice of the peace seems to have avoided the exorbitant fines by not recording such marriages he performed. Admittedly, this also gave an "out" to a husband who wanted to end his relationship easily, though this did not happen with Davis and Pickett. Unfortunately, the omission also is a missed opportunity for today's researchers and the Pickett family to discover Mrs. Pickett's personal and "white" names.²

Though the other two couples lived in the fort's green-shuttered officers' quarters, the Picketts went home to a two-story house the locals built for him uphill of the cabins and mill that started Whatcom. The house was complete with protective stockade and tall log "safe house" as well as a small stable for Pickett's horse. These defensive measures were consistent with what would be logical additions for Pickett to obtain permission to live outside the fort's stockade. He and Fitzhugh were under personal death threats from the raiders but the locals wanted to enjoy Pickett's genial company, and his residence lent a permanency to Whatcom.³

By April 1857 Mrs. Pickett was pregnant and gave birth on New Year's Eve to a baby boy with big soulful eyes. Like most Southern men of the time, Pickett was probably not in the birthing room. More likely, he was nearby imbibing New Year's Eve whiskey. The local

midwife, experienced and motherly German settler Maria Roberts, probably attended and there might have been one of the native midwives there as well. For her part, Mrs. Pickett probably wanted nothing to do with a man in the room interfering with what all indigenous women saw as a natural female event. The emotional and sensitive officer must have been fearfully anxious that this childbirth could result in another tragedy. When this baby survived, he named him after James Tilton, the friend and territorial official he chose to be the godfather. ⁴

All accounts say that Mrs. Pickett died within a few months of Jimmie's birth. It has been assumed that she died from the childbirth, but there was another threat involved, one that the stockade and safe house could not protect against. She could not have given birth at a worse time for her and her baby.

That winter, the Lummi and Samish were short of food due to the raids and an inadequate salmon run. When two major epidemics struck the villages, E.C. Fitzhugh (in his additional role of local Indian agent) convinced the people to gather in three nearby longhouses. There the country physician's son could distribute food and medicine. Unfortunately, the unfamiliar flour and sugar he gave them were inadequate nutrition for weakened people used to a lean protein winter diet of salmon and shellfish augmented by preserved vitamin-rich berries. ⁵

Influenza had entered the area in October, causing sporadic deaths. By the time Jimmie was born, a true epidemic raged up and down the inland sea. Fitzhugh reported many deaths, especially children from what he thought was the influenza's final stage. Yet, there were other symptoms that made him think it was an odd type of whooping cough that every child in the longhouses had contracted. Some adults, particularly elders, had symptoms that included severe constipation and a paralysis of the tongue that halted speech. Despite the best efforts of Fitzhugh

and his assistant agent, he held little optimism for the period that stretched ahead after Mrs. Pickett gave birth. ⁶

Another unfamiliar disease then appeared and spread to Whatcom County that winter. Whidbey Island's Indian agent reported it as a kind of fatal rheumatism that paralyzed a patient's limbs. Victims suffered intensely from the pain, lingered long enough to become emaciated, then died. He knew of few who recovered. ⁷

Fitzhugh and others never mentioned any epidemic affecting the settlers, but large numbers of the afflicted native people were just down the hill from the Pickett home. Nursing mothers, infants and elders were always those most vulnerable to winter-spring epidemics in native communities. It is possible that Pickett barred all of his wife's friends from climbing the staircase to visit her, but it is likely that someone visited after the birth who appeared healthy but was incubating one of the diseases, even one of a non-native carrier. Once contracted, either the whooping cough or the fatal rheumatism could kill within a few days.

Lelah Edson, author of the most accurate account of the Pickett story, wrote that Mrs. Pickett died "some months" after the birth, which suggests that William Walter (later Jimmie Pickett's second foster father) told her the new mother did not die of the birth directly. Three months after Jimmie's birth, Fitzhugh reported 27 deaths. Mrs. Pickett died during the height of the fatalities, probably never completely recovered from childbirth and particularly vulnerable to diseases she had never experienced. The town buried their friend's wife in the community cemetery. ⁸

Captain Pickett applied for bereavement leave on April 17, making his wife's death probably between mid-March and mid-April. Though it was quickly granted, he stayed in Whatcom until June waiting for confirmation from San Francisco and probably caring for his

infant with help from friends who also had babies. The story that he sent the boy to his native grandparents has little credibility given how white fathers handled such situations. They wanted their children cared for and raised in Euro-American homes. When the Fraser River Gold Rush began that spring and thousands of raucous and brawling gold miners poured into beach encampments, it was not a safe environment for a baby. Pickett abandoned his home and moved back to the fort, almost certainly having his son cared for by Mary Forsyth or another fort wife.⁹

In the week before Pickett left, he purchased a Whatcom lot which he never sold, perhaps with the intention to set it aside for his son's future, as had the townsite owner for his own half-Sumass son. Pickett bought half-interest in two speculative lots, then gave Lt. Forsyth authority to sell for a quick gold rush profit.¹⁰

Running from the pain of losing a second wife, the lonely and grieving widower left Whatcom on June 1, 1858 on board the small steamer *Pacific* for the three day trip to San Francisco. There Pickett caught another vessel for Panama to traverse the isthmus and board an Atlantic steamer. He disembarked on the New York City docks in July. As a former cadet at West Point Academy up the Hudson River, he had been there a number of times and knew the city's diversions. From the Metropolitan Hotel, Pickett wrote to the War Department on July 21 for a leave extension to six months which was granted two weeks later. Though the willingness of the army brass to freely extend a leave to such length seems overly generous today, it was not unusual in the antebellum army. The War Department used them to induce highly trained officers with war experience to stay in the army during years of few promotions, lackadaisical wage delivery and abysmal living conditions on most of the frontier.¹¹

George Pickett had already written to his Aunt Olivia Johnston at the family home in Richmond to let everyone know he would be home after the 21st. On top of his widowhood, he

faced entering a home now without his father who died a few months after George established Fort Bellingham. The death of his second wife had been his fourth deeply personal loss in seven years.¹²

After Olivia told Dr. Blair Burwell (fiancé of George's sister) of the impending arrival, he wrote to "Jenny." She was away with her mother in the Blue Ridge community of Rockbridge Baths. She claimed to be suffering from "fatigue of mind and body," but in truth the mineral spring resorts that dotted the hills bordering the Shenandoah Valley were a summer hangout for Richmond's elite. There they could escape the summer heat, socialize, and "take the waters." Though Burwell informed Jenny and her mother of George's imminent arrival, they did not go home immediately. Apparently unaware that her brother had been recently widowed, Jenny's concern focused on the house empty of their father's presence and she asked Burwell to spend as much time with George as possible.¹³

Soon, Burwell let Jenny know that he was spending considerable time with George in Richmond. From her resort, Jenny planned a trip to New York for the three of them, but then cancelled it. Blair wrote to her that he did not think George was disappointed, but really just wanted to be at home with his mother and sister in private.¹⁴

In the only known record of Pickett's demeanor after his wife's death, Burwell then noted that George looked "lonesome and weary." Burwell thought that it was the sudden lack of "excitement and bustle which he has been so long accustomed to in a new country." He observed that George remained "generous and affectionate" and was seeing many friends in his family's absence. Burwell addressed fears that Jenny seems to have expressed in an earlier letter that her brother wanted to return to the army more than he wanted to see her. He reassured her that George's sadness did not mean he cared for them less and that her brother loved her "tenderly."

Pickett's depression seems to have been difficult for his family to understand since he had not been home among family and friends for several years. Burwell was under the somewhat erroneous impression that Fort Bellingham was a very exciting post, or else he just wanted to give Jenny an acceptable explanation. Apparently, Pickett did not tell his mother and sister that he had just lost his second wife, at least during the early part of his visit. For an elite Southerner to reveal to female family members that he had married a non-white would be a major personal revelation. "miscegenation" was illegal in Virginia as well as culturally unthinkable. However, he told Jenny at some point because in 1861 he designated her to serve as the protector and family connection to Jimmie if he were to be killed in the war.¹⁵

Pickett spent the autumn with his family but left weeks before the Christmas holidays in order to report back at Fort Bellingham on time. He arrived in Washington three days after a formal inspection found his post well-run by Lieutenant Forsyth in his absence. [See Endnote 1]Pickett formally reported in on January 14, 1859. He was ready to enter a new phase in his fatherhood and unbeknownst to him then, a near-war over a dead pig only months later.¹⁶

¹ Davis resigned from the army a year later in an argument with Pickett over a duel challenge he issued to E.C. Fitzhugh after an accusation of cheating in a card game. He stayed in the area as a deputy sheriff, saloon owner and then homesteader. A Confederate Army major in the Civil War, he spent most of it in isolation at Johnston's Island Prison after his capture just before Vicksburg. Forsyth became an aide to General Phillip Sheridan for the rest of Sheridan's career. He later took over General George Custer's former unit and was the commander of the Massacre of Wounded Knee in 1890.

² The fine on an officiant was \$500, about \$5000 today. Caroline Davis Kavanaugh, series of interviews in the *Anacortes American*, 2/1927; Lelah Jackson Edson, *The Fourth Corner*. Whatcom Museum of History and Art, 1968, p. 116. Her information about a civil ceremony probably came from her 1904 interview with William Walter, second foster father of Jimmie Pickett.

³ The original configuration of Pickett's home was recently discovered by local historian Janet Oakley and is a significant change from previous beliefs about it. S.F. Baker, Engineer. "City of Whatcom, Bellingham Bay." Engraving in *Hutchings California Magazine*, v. 3, #2. August, 1858. Vault Periodical Collection, California History Room, California State Library. Sacramento, California.

⁴ George E. Pickett Bible, James Tilton Pickett Collection. Washington State Historical Society. Tacoma, Washington.

⁵ E.C. Fitzhugh to Michael T. Simmons, Territorial Indian Agent, 1/5/1858. Tulalip Papers, WSU Library Special Collections.

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- ⁶ Robert Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence: Introduced Infectious Diseases and Population Decline Among Northwest Coast Indians, 1774-1874*. University of Washington Press, 1999. p. 20.
- ⁷ Robert C. Fay, 6/30/1858. *Annual Report*. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, p. 240. Copy in Western Washington University Ethnohistory Collection. Bellingham, Washington.
- ⁸ Edson, p. 110; E.C. Fitzhugh report to Michael Simmons 3/1858. Copy in WWU Ethnohistory Collection.
- ⁹ Special Order #68, Fort Bellingham Post Returns. May, 1858. Records of the War Department, Office of the Adjutant General. Microfilm copy at Washington State Archives, NW Region. Bellingham, Washington.
- ¹⁰ Whatcom County Deeds B, p. 96-97. 5/24/1858; Deeds B, p. 94. 5/24/1858; Auditor's Book A, p. 88-9. Filed 6/2/1858. All in Whatcom County Auditor's Records, Washington State Archives, NW Region.
- ¹¹ Fort Bellingham Post Returns, June 1858; E.W. Wright, ed., *Lewis & Dryden's Marine History of the Pacific Northwest*, Portland: 1895. P. 67; Passenger list of the *Pacific* in *Alta California*, 6/9/1858; Lesley J. Gordon, *General George E. Pickett in Life and Legend*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. P. 88.
- ¹² Dr. Blair Burwell to Virginia Pickett, 7/21/1858. Virginia Burwell Pickett Papers, Earl Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Virginia.
- ¹³ Virginia Pickett to Blair Burwell, 7/21/1858. Virginia Pickett Burwell Papers; Gregg D. Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond*. University of Georgia Press, 2000. P. 63.
- ¹⁴ Blair Burwell to Virginia Pickett, 8/4/1858. Virginia Pickett Burwell Papers.
- ¹⁵ James Tilton to Catherine Collins, 8/8/1861. Copy in Edson, p. 117.
- ¹⁶ Colonel Joseph Mansfield, *Report of the Inspection of Fort Bellingham*, 12/28/1858. Copy from the National Archives collections; Timeline by Howard Buswell 7/27/1955 from his research. Howard Buswell Papers, Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, WWU.