

# *What's in a Name?*

## *John Swan and Swan Creek Park*

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### **Park History**

On the border between southeast Tacoma and the Puyallup Tribal Reservation is a 373 acre park named for the creek that runs through it. Swan Creek Park is going through the midst of a Master Plan update process this year, and the public had questions about the origins of the name. Most of the written history of the park focuses in the 1930s and '40s, when the city built housing for war workers in the greenspace along the south east edge of Tacoma. The Salishan neighborhood extended into what is now Swan Creek Park, with 1,600 units of housing built by 1943. The houses were never intended to be permanent residences, and in the mid- 1950s many of them were pulled down.

But how did the creek get its name? A rumor recently emerged that the park was named for an “Indian Agent” who interned Native Americans during the 1850s Treaty Wars. There was a man named John Swan who was put in charge of Fox Island when it was used to confine non-combatant native peoples during the period in question, but he was not the man for whom the park is named. Research indicates that Swan Creek was named for John and Jane Swan, Puyallup tribal members who lived nearby the land feature in the 1890s.

**[Author's note: since this article was first published, it has come to the author's attention that there is an additional source of the name “Swan Creek”. Per the book *Puget Sound Geography: Original Manuscript from T. T. Waterman*, (Lushootseed Press, Federal Way, WA, 2001), by Vi Hilbert, Jay Miller, and Zalmal Zahir, Swan Creek is a translation of a Lushootseed place name, Bəsxʷuqid, meaning “Place at the head of something, where there are swans,” referring to the area near the former Cushman School (pp. 251).]**

### **John Swan on the Puget Sound**

When the question first arose about the park name, initial research revealed one unavoidable fact: “John Swan” is a very common name.

In 1860, census records reveal two men named John Swan in the Tacoma/Pierce County area. One was from New York and one was a teamster from England. A Scottish John M. Swan also made his home in Thurston County around this time, settling in Tumwater and building up a community there.

In the 1870 federal census there are four John Swans in four counties: John Swan from Alaska, age 23, made his home in Jefferson County; 28-year old John Swan from Sweden lived in Oysterville, Pacific County; New York John Swan (age 49 and now listing his occupation as “logger”) in Pierce; and John M. Swan in Thurston County, the 47 year old Scotsman's precinct is listed as “Olympia Town”.<sup>1</sup>

Over the next several decades, immigration continues to bring new settlers to Washington Territory, and “John Swan” from Finland soon appears in state-wide records, along with “John Swan” from Pennsylvania, “John Swank” from Indiana, “John Swane” from Illinois, “John Swanson” from Wales, “John Swanson” from Sweden, and “John Swanberg” of Washington Territory (age 7 in 1885).

John Swan, farmer, laborer and logger from New York, disappears from the census record after 1870. John M. Swan, Scottish, continues to build his community in the Olympia area and becomes a prominent local figure. (He dies in Walla Walla in 1904).

It is not until 1887 that John Swan the “half-breed” appears on census rolls. On the King County census that year, “John Swann” born Washington Territory age 49 is enumerated from the “Indian Reservation” precinct. He is listed alongside other native peoples and officially marked “Indian half-breed” in the “race” category. “Jane Swan” is listed next to him. He next appears in the 1889 Pierce County census, listed as “John Swan” from Washington Territory, both he and his wife noted as “Indian half breeds”. Their professions are noted as “farmer” and “housewife” and the boxes checked indicate they were both considered “citizens of U.S. over 21 years of age” though no age was listed for them. These notes suggest they were trying to assimilate into white culture, though they hadn’t received formal English education.

An 1892 census of Pierce County lists also lists John Swan and Jane Swan as a farmer and his wife. This time they are recorded as aged 53 and 50 respectively, with the same particulars describing them as Native American and illiterate, yet considered U.S. citizens per census standards.

The only other John Swan who appears in the Pierce County section of the 1892 census is a John Swan of Finland (a 32- year old sailor), though there are several other “Swansons” and variations on the name from elsewhere.

### **John Swan and Fox Island**

The New York John Swan who settled in Washington Territory staked a claim on McNeil Island, and operated a small trading store along what is now Ruston Way. He and a partner had a fishing business there, and frequently hired Puyallup Indians for short-term labor projects.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1850s, Governor Isaac Stevens sought to formally clear the way for new settlers and wrote treaties to confine the native peoples to reservations. In late 1855, violence erupted as a band of Native American warriors resisted the treaty agreements for their fundamental inadequacies, and Chief Leschi led a desperate effort to save his peoples’ way of life. White settlers and soldiers were killed, as were Native American warriors and families. While the skirmishes were going on, the governor ordered the U.S army to round up non-combatant “friendly Indians” from the Medicine Creek treaty tribes and move them to a reservation “for their own protection” from riled up settlers. Over 800 men, women, and children were confined on the island , and although they were promised provisions, clothes, blankets, food and tools to farm the land there, illness and deprivation were prevalent over the 11-month period of internment.<sup>3</sup>

John Swan had a positive relationship with the Puyallup, and Territorial Indian Agent Michael T. Simmons asked Swan act as manager of Fox Island and oversee operations there. Thus, the entrepreneurial settler stepped into a “sub- Indian agent” role from November 1855-February 1856 during the war. Swan advocated on behalf of the Native Americans as best he could, continually requesting additional resources to care for them and was in communication with U.S. Army commander Colonel Casey of Fort Steilacoom regarding leniency. At Swan’s request, Dr. William F. Tolmie of Fort Nisqually visited the island several times in order to bring medicines and treat the ill.<sup>4</sup>

In January 1856, Leschi came over to the island and “captured” Swan. The band had come to ask Swan to help them, and talk to the U.S. Army on their behalf. A few days later Leschi, his men, and some of the interned Native Americans had fled, leaving Swan unharmed. After Leschi was captured and put on trial for the murder of a man during the conflict, Swan testified on the chief ’s behalf, protesting his innocence of the charges laid against him. After two trials and a lengthy appeals process, Leschi was sentenced to death, despite the protests of Swan and prominent members of the community including Colonel Casey of Fort Steilacoom, and Dr. Tolmie of Fort Nisqually.<sup>5</sup>

John Swan appears in local court records in the 1870s in matters related to property disputes, but he does not have any official involvement with the native peoples again.

## Swan Creek

Pierce County records indicate that John Swan of Steilacoom and McNeil Island died in 1879, but research has yet to reveal what, if any, connection he has to John Swan of Washington Territory, “half-breed” tribal member.

Maps of the Puyallup Reservation do not provide names for all the small tributary creeks that flow into the Puyallup River and the Tacoma harbor of Commencement Bay, but they do indicate the locations of allotments from the 1890s.<sup>6</sup> The allotment map from 1892 shows the claims belonging to John Swan, located near the present location of the creek for which today’s park is named. Although property records regarding the ultimate distribution of this land are still to be found, it presents a strong case for the source of the name “Swan Creek.”

John and Jane Swan are buried in the Puyallup Tribal Cemetery, not far from the final resting place of Chief Leschi. John’s headstone bears the death date of 1905. His wife Jane passed away in 1923.

Research into the lives of John and Jane Swan is on-going, and additional articles are planned on the fascinating story of the many John Swans of Washington Territory. Stay tuned!

## Endnotes

1. The 1854 Pierce County census has John Swan, farmer age 35, from “NY” (New York). This same John Swan (Farmer from New York) appears in the 1857 Pierce County census age 38. In the 1860 census, John Swan from New York is a laborer, age 36. In 1871, Mason County census records show John Swan from New York, age 44, working as a lumberman. “John Swan,” 1870, U.S. Federal Census, Pierce County, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington State Archives, Digital Archives, <http://digitalarchives.wa.gov>.
4. Herbert Hunt, *Tacoma: It’s History and its Builders, A Half-Century of Activity* (Tacoma: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1916), 34.
3. Cecilia Svinth Carpenter, *Tears of Internment: The Indian History of Fox Island and the Puget Sound Indian War* (Tacoma, WA: Tahoma Research Service, 1996), 58.
4. SuAnn M. Reddick and Cary C. Collins. “Medicine Creek to Fox Island: Cadastral Scams and Contested Domains.” *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, vol. 106, no. 3, 2005, pp. 374–397. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/20615557](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20615557).
5. The Olympia newspaper *Pioneer and Democrat* account of the trial of Leschi includes transcriptions of the court testimonies. John Swan describes Leschi’s visit to the island, and testifies that “[he] was in [Leschi’s] power there 36 hours- and was not tied.” (per the March 27, 1857 edition of the newspaper). <http://digitalarchives.wa.gov>.
6. Allotments were individual claims distributed to certain members of the Native American tribes during periods when Reservations were broken up by the U.S. government.

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