The site of Chief Leschi hanging

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Historical records left behind indicate it was likely the middle of what is now a Lakewood residential street

By PETER CALLAGHAN — peter.callaghan@thenewstribune.com

Every other street in the small development of midcentury modern homes off Steilacoom Boulevard has a name you’d expect in such a suburban setting – Oakridge Drive, Weller Road, Briggs Lane, Fairway Drive. Briggs, for instance, was the developer, and Fairway commemorated the previous use as a golf course.

But Scott Stoddard, who had recently purchased a Cliff May-inspired ranch-style home in the development called Fairway-at-Lakewood, wondered about his street – Leschi Road Southwest. Not knowing much about his new neighborhood, and being interested in history, Stoddard started to look around, run Internet searches and visit locations identified in those searches.

One was a nearby shopping center, mostly indistinguishable from many others in our first suburb. A Dollar Tree, a used book store, the ubiquitous nail salon. But under a large tree in the otherwise concrete expanse is a large stone marker with a weathered message etched into the stone.

“Leschi
Chief of the Nisquallis
Martyr to the vengeance
Of the unforgiving white man
Was hanged
300 yards S.E. from here
February 19, 1858”

The inscription goes on to say that the stone was placed by the Pierce County Pioneer and Historical Society 50 years ago.

“Leschi was a square-built man, and I should judge would weigh about one hundred and seventy pounds. He was about five feet six inches tall. He had a very strong, square jaw and very piercing, dark brown eyes. He would look almost through you, a firm but not a savage look.”

Charles Grainger, executioner

Stoddard knows of my interest in local history, having designed pages containing columns I’ve done on the Murray Morgan Bridge restoration and the Tacoma totem pole. He told me his theory that the gallows erected for the hanging was likely just a few doors down from his own house.
The story of Leschi is one of the most important and most fascinating in Washington state history and still resonates 155 years after his death. Michael Sullivan, Tacoma's former historic preservation officer, calls it “our great Shakespearean tragedy.”

In 1854, territorial Gov. Isaac Stevens designated Leschi and his half brother Quiemuth to negotiate for the Nisqually Tribe the document that would become the Medicine Creek Treaty. While some contemporary reports say Leschi signed the deal with an "X," that is in dispute. There is little disagreement, however, that once he understood the terms forced upon the 12 tribes in the region, he found them abhorrent. Most of the Nisqually Tribe’s traditional land was taken for white settlers, and a small reservation was carved out on a heavily wooded bluff overlooking Puget Sound without direct access to the Nisqually River.

Leschi led about 300 troops against the U.S. Army and territorial militia in a series of skirmishes over the next two years. One of those confrontations occurred Oct. 31, 1855, at Connell Prairie in what is now east Pierce County. That is where A.B. Moses was killed.

“He did not seem to be the least bit excited at all, and no trembling on him at all – nothing of the kind, and that is more than I could say for myself. In fact, he seemed to be the coolest of any on the scaffold.”

Charles Grainger

After failing to win a negotiated settlement, and after months of hiding, Leschi eventually decided to surrender to Army officers. He was kept at Fort Steilacoom while awaiting trial. Quiemuth, however, after surrendering to Stevens himself, was murdered in the governor’s office during the night.

Seeking revenge for what he considered a revolt, Stevens had Leschi charged with the murder of Moses. Leschi’s defense was that he wasn’t at the scene of Moses’ death, but even if he had been, the death was an act of war and couldn’t be punished as murder.

The first trial ended in a hung jury, with pioneer settler Ezra Meeker among those voting to acquit after the judge told jurors that if they determined the death of Moses was an act of war, they could find Leschi not guilty.

A second trial, without that key jury instruction, ended in a conviction and a death sentence. Antonio Rabbeson, a witness to the skirmish in which Moses died, had testified at both trials that he saw Leschi there.

The U.S. Army at Fort Steilacoom was strenuously opposed to the trial and the sentence. To the officers, the battles came in the midst of a war, and any deaths were not murders but casualties. After trying to thwart the sentence, the Army turned Leschi over to a band of deputies from Thurston County. But because the military officers forbade the carrying out of the sentence on fort property, the execution was carried out a mile away.

“He bowed to the spectators, prayed silently for several minutes, and spoke for the last time. He said he had made his peace with God and desired to live no longer. He bore no malice to no man save one, upon whom he invoked the vengeance of heaven.”

Murray Morgan, “Puget’s Sound”

But where, exactly, was the execution carried out? Over the decades the landscape has been altered repeatedly. A golf course was on the ground in the first third of the last century. Then came the housing development. Stoddard found a few descriptions of the locations from witnesses.

“A scaffold had previously been erected about a mile easterly from the fort, without the limits of the military reservation, in a sort of bowl-shaped depression in the prairie,” wrote Meeker in “The Tragedy of Leschi.”
The editor of the Pioneer and Democrat described the site as being “in a low gulch in the prairie.” In “Puget’s Sound,” Murray Morgan calls it a “gentle valley on the prairie a mile east of Fort Steilacoom.”

Two photos taken some years later, one including Meeker and another featuring historian W.P. Bonney, show the territory as being at the lowest spot of a natural amphitheater, grass-covered with a few deciduous trees on the ridge in the background.

Standing in the middle of Leschi Road, thanks to the low-lying ranch houses that make up the development, it is possible to imagine the scene depicted in the historic photos. The driveway of a house recently sold or the roadway just in front seems the most likely spot.

No marker commemorates the scene.

“I felt then I was hanging an innocent man.”

Charles Grainger

Leschi’s refusal to accept the first reservation, though it led to the Indian wars and his eventual death, won his people a slightly better deal with a larger and better-placed reservation.

The Medicine Creek Treaty, once a symbol of shame and defeat for the tribes forced to accept its terms, became something else when federal courts ruled that the provisions regarding fishing and hunting rights gave the tribes the right to half the catch. It is now the centerpiece of both their economies and their cultural life.

In 2004, the Washington Senate passed a resolution proclaiming Leschi’s conviction and execution as an injustice, declared him a “great and noble man” and endorsed a move to have his conviction overturned by the state Supreme Court.

Though it lacked jurisdiction over cases prosecuted before the state was admitted to the Union, then-Chief Justice Gerry Alexander convened a “Historical Court of Inquiry and Justice” to re-examine the case. After a mock trial before seven judges, including two active Supreme Court justices, Alexander declared the verdict: “Chief Leschi should not have been tried for the crime of murder.”

In 1895, Leschi’s body was exhumed from a secluded spot off the reservation and reburied within its boundaries. It was moved again in 1917 to the Puyallup Tribal cemetery. A large tombstone identifies Leschi as “An Arbitrator Of His People.” It is that site that is commemorated by his tribe, many of whom can claim descendancy from the last chief of the Nisquallies.

The tombstone contains this inscription:

“Judicially murdered, February 19, 1858, owing to misunderstanding of Treaty of 1854-55. Serving his people by his death. Sacrificed to a principle. A martyr to liberty, honor and the rights of people of his native land. Erected by those he died to serve.”

“Leschi died manfully, without fear or faltering, had his last words calmly given, but put to shame, if they have any feelings, those who have persecuted him and sought his death.”

Editor of “Truth Teller,” a local pamphlet distributed prior to and after Leschi’s execution

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