

LINCOLN-TIME LETTERS

Alexander Howard Meneely, a graduate of the University of Washington, is now completing his work for the Doctor of Philosophy degree at Columbia University, New York. The preparation of his thesis has required much searching among the manuscript materials in the Library of Congress. Coming upon some letters pertaining to a stormy chapter of Puget Sound history, he copied three of them for the *Washington Historical Quarterly*. These letters were written by Victor Smith to Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury Department in Lincoln's Cabinet.

As the frequently disturbed relations between the Secretary and the President were of national import, their causes have been studied by many who have written upon the period of the Civil War. One of the causes of ill feeling was the removal by President Lincoln of Victor Smith from the collectorship of Customs in the Puget Sound District. However, this case was so remote from the centers of interest and excitement that the general works do little more than mention it. The members of pioneer families in the Northwest will quickly recall the incidents on seeing these letters brought to light more than sixty years after they were written.

Hubert Howe Bancroft published his *History of Washington, Idaho and Montana* in 1890. Many were then living who remembered Victor Smith and his dramatic career on the Pacific Coast. Mr. Bancroft gleaned from them and from the newspapers of that time. He contends that Smith was unpopular from the first for three reasons,—he was a sort of treasury spy, he was an abolitionist and he plotted to remove the custom-house from Port Townsend to Port Angeles. He was accused of speculating in town lots at Port Angeles and before long an outcry was raised over the discovery of an apparent shortage in the collector's accounts. The letters show that Smith did not try to screen his dealing in land and Bancroft shows that he cleared up the defalcation charge by showing that it was simply a case of transferring \$15,000.00 from one fund to another. After writing the letters here reproduced, Smith went to Washington City to explain matters in person. Soon after he left Puget Sound. Captain J. S. S.

Chaddock of the revenue-cutter *Joe Lane*, arrived and installed Lieutenant J. H. Merryman as collector of customs. That was in June, 1862, and in August Smith returned in the revenue cutter *Shubrick*. Secretary Chase had acted on the suggestions in these letters and Congress had enacted a law removing the custom-house to Port Angeles. Smith's recommendation that the Government go into the townsite business was also carried out by a law. That law was applied alone to Port Angeles. When Smith returned in the *Shubrick* and was refused possession of the custom-house he prepared to attack Port Townsend. In that way he got possession of the papers, money and government property which he placed on the *Shubrick* until the custom-house was moved to Port Angeles. There he built a structure and rented it to the government. Nearby he built his residence. Both were suddenly crushed. Smith had again gone to Washington in an endeavor to straighten out his affairs. The stream near which his buildings stood was temporarily dammed by a landslide and in the evening of December 16, 1863, a wall of water fifteen feet high came crashing to the stream's mouth. Deputy Collector J. M. Anderson and Inspector William B. Goodell lost their lives. Mrs. Smith heroically rescued her four young children. The Smith home and fortune were lost. Two years later the element of tragedy was heightened when Victor Smith perished in the wreck of the steamship *Brother Jonathan*.

This record by Bancroft was, of course, familiar to Chase's latest biographer, Professor Albert Bushnell Hart, whose Chapter XII. deals with "Chase and Lincoln." The essentials of the Victor Smith case are there set forth including a renewal of the Secretary's offer to resign. Professor Hart says Lincoln went to Chase's house and afterwards told a friend: "I went directly up to him with the resignation in my hand, and, putting my arm around his neck, said to him, 'Chase, here is a paper with which I wish to have nothing to do; take it back and be reasonable.' I told him that I couldn't replace the person whom I had removed—that was impossible—but that I would appoint any one else whom he should select for the place. It was difficult to bring him to terms; I had to plead with him a long time, but I finally succeeded, and heard nothing more of that resignation."

Previous to that personal interview, Lincoln had sent Chase a letter. It is found in Nicolay and Hay's *Complete Works of Lincoln*, Volume VIII., page 270. The letter is dated May 8, 1863, and says: "I address this to you personally rather than

officially, because of the nature of the case. My mind is made up to remove Victor Smith as collector of the customs at the Puget Sound district. Yet in doing this I do not decide that the charges against him are true. I only decide that the degree of dissatisfaction with him there is too great for him to be retained. But I believe he is your personal acquaintance and friend, and if you desire it I will try to find some other place for him."

That other place seems to have developed from the Special Agency mentioned in these letters from Smith to Chase.

In the summer of 1908, nine years after his biography of Chase had been published, Professor Hart was a guest professor at the University of Washington. He was accompanied by his wife and his twin sons, then little lads of eleven. He and the boys accompanied a party to the San Juan Islands and spent the night on the summit of Mount Constitution. When the rest of the party returned, Mrs. Hart, who had remained at Seattle, carried on this conversation over the telephone:

"Where is my husband?"

"On the summit of Mount Constitution."

"Can he get back?"

"I hope so. He would not come with us."

The truth is that Professor Hart was simply fascinated by a view of historic ground around him—all the islands under dispute with Great Britain from the treaty of 1846 to the arbitration by William I. of Germany in 1872, but more especially the waterways in which Smith the friend of Chase had wrought a troubled chapter of history in the time of Lincoln.

One concluding item should be mentioned. In 1865, Arthur A. Denny, Washington Territory's new Delegate to Congress, took a bill to Elihu B. Washburne's desk appealing for help. Representative Washburne had been the friend of Mr. Denny's father and of Lincoln in the older Illinois hustings. Mr. Washburne looked up from his own papers—"Why, you don't expect to pass this bill in such a crowded session, do you?" and then, seeing the appeal in Mr. Denny's eyes he added, "Strike but hear!" He did hear, gave his help, the bill was passed. By it the custom-house was moved back from Port Angeles to Port Townsend.

These letters were found by Mr. Meneely in the Salmon P. Chase papers in the Library of Congress, Volumes 51, 252, and 53.

Private

Port Townsend, Oct. 5, 1861.

My Dear Governor

By this mail the Department will receive my final report as Special Agent, my resignation taking effect September 31st.

I have abandoned all thought of continuing to act as Special Agent unless you will allow me to do so *without* Salary so that I may retain the Office of Collector of this District in which I find unexpected opportunities for usefulness. The Com'r of Customs will inform you that I have reduced the Hospital Expenses in this District Three thousand per annum, Rent four hundred and twenty dollars, rations for Cape Flattery Light Five hundred dollars and if the Light Ho. Board will adopt my recommendations as to supply of oil in this District a minimum of Two thousand per annum will be saved in that item.

If, by any possibility you have been induced by the Delegate from this Territory or from my own previous communications, to contemplate my transfer from the Collectorship to a Special Agency I beg, so far as it is proper for me to express a desire that I may continue to serve as Collector of the Puget Sound Distirct. The Mr. Wilson who is named by Col Wallace for Collector is a person whom you would on no account entrust with the office if you were fully advised. Col. Wallace, our Delegate, is moving in this matter not out of opposition to myself but under the mistaken impression that I would prefer the Special Agency. I would like however, if desired by you, to do the special work of the Departments without Salary except the regular mileage and minimum per diem expenses—leaving a competent Deputy here during absence.

In the possible event of Mr. Wilson having been appointed I shall "hold on" until there has been time to hear from this letter.

If it is within your knowledge that my note falling due Oct 1st inst and payable at Bank of Ohio Valley Cinti [Cincinnati] was not promptly met by my Agent please arrange with the Com'r of Customs so that my official compensation can be drawn by my Cin'ti Agent, Mr. Nicholson, for payment of said notes—he has my power of Attorney. If proper and desirable please Authorize Valentine Nicholson to have possession of the House on Broadway.

In my final report as Special Agent under date of October 4th inst I have for reasons fully set forth therein, asked for permission to remove the Port of Entry for this District from Port

Townsend to Port Angeles a removal in itself fit and proper and one that should, for the convenience of shipping and every interest of the Revenue Service, have been made three years since. It is due to the great Confidence with which you have honored me to inform you that I have purchased in open market and at the full market price, for cash, twenty five acres of land at Port Angeles. I have engaged parties to set out fruit trees there and intend to make it, in any event, my permanent home. Slight as this interest is I tell you of it that it may have its proper effect in connection with my Official recommendation to fix that point as the Port of Entry. Port Angeles is wholly owned by five Proprietors who have legally and publicly bound themselves to limit their possible profits, at any time, to an aggregate of Fifty thousand or Ten thousand dollars each any excess over that sum (arising from the sale of lots) being secured to the town for roads, schools, churches, etc.

My greatest *personal* interest in the removal of the Custom House is to have a home during my term of Office, where there is fresh water and a school.

Everything connected with this proposition for a removal of the Port of Entry is clean and worthy of your approval. It is not fixed here by act of Congress but simply by a letter from the Secretary of the Treasury.

Second Lieut J. W. White, now commanding the Revenue Cutter "Davis" in this District is a loyal man of rare attainments as a Seaman, a Coast Surveyor and a Revenue Officer—if you knew him personally you would promote him to the Captaincy of the Cutter and Continue him permanently on this station. With his aid I am so bold as to believe we can make this the Model Revenue Collection District of the Coast.

My wife and myself are very much delighted with this country—its climate is most delightful.

You will say that "to a Shoemaker there's nothing like leather" when it is confessed that I have already contracted for a controlling interest and sole Editorial Conduct of the only newspaper in the northern part of this Territory—to be called the "Port Angeles Herald", devoted, of course, to the national recognition of Salmon P. Chase. Laugh at me as you will I must have the luxury of newspaper work—we shall be a state prior to 1864.

As Government is entitled to four pounds of mail matter by each "Pony" you would greatly expedite a letter to this remote

region by marking it for transmission by Pony. My Post Office Address is now "Port Townsend".

Very respectfully,

Victor Smith

Hon. S. P. Chase

Port Townsend Oct 29 1861

Sir:

I beg your notice of the following abstract of matters in previous letters lost in Overland Mail.

I. If my note at Valley Bank, Cin'ti. [Cincinnati] was not promptly paid, draw on me at Sight through Wells Fargo & Co.

II. If first of above notes was not paid please instruct your Assistant to advise me how to subscribe five thousand dollars, for myself and friends, to the "National loan" in quartelry payments *here*.

III. The Port of Entry was temporarily placed here, pending examination for a harbor nearer the Ocean and closer to the "throat" of Straits De Fuca, by letter of Secretary Guthrie.

IV. The fit place for the Port of Entry for this District, as demonstrated in my Report, as Special Agent, of Oct 3d inst. is at Port Angeles, and I ask the authority of a letter from yourself to locate it at Port Angeles—at least temporarily.

I stake my reputation upon the wisdom of this Change. There are no interests, worthy of attention at Port Townsend to be injured by the removal. There are here only a few temporary unplastered, (for the most part), tenements without a School-house, a church, a Black-Smith shop or an Industry of any kind.

I have an inchoate interest equal to one fifth the unimproved part of the Port Angeles town site—if this is objectionable command me to sell it peremptorily and place proceeds, with the U. S. Marshals certificate, to credit of the U.S.

V. The Revenue Cutter "Davis", on this Station, is rotten. She cruises, in good weather, at a monthly expense of sixteen hundred dollars, and upwards.

Will you trust my judgment in favor of the following plan to get a small steam Revenue Cutter here?

Allow me to lay up the "Davis", discharge all but two of the Crew which, with the two competent and working Officers—White and Selden—will perform all the useful Service now done by the Condemned Schooner; this would reduce expenses to \$213.34 per month at present rates of Compensation. Direct Comptroller or Com'r of Customs to allow my quarterly requisi-

tions for Revenue Cutter Service, as heretofore, to be accounted for. Out of the difference between \$214.34, and present Expense, amounting to, say, \$1386.66*. entrust Lieut White and myself with the building of a Small, plainly furnished steam Propeller of 200 tons burthen which we can accomplish in two years with jealous regard for efficiency of the Revenue Service in the meantime.

Or, give me the U. S. Rev. Cutter "Joe Lane," now worse than useless at San Francisco, and we will in one year, out of the Saving as above, convert her into a serviceable Propellor.

We should need the bulk of the "Jeff Davis" here to assist in the above practical undertaking.

Honor us with this mark of your confidence and we cannot fail to reflect honor upon your Administration in so far.

We like the Country exceedingly and find ways to be useful to the War even here. Caroline assures you of her grateful remembrance and of her pride in your sustained position. Tommy insists on sending word to Governor Chase that he remembers your direction, at Linwood, to "stand up straight".

Yours truly,

Victor Smith.

Hon. S. P. Chase,
Secy of the Treasury.

* 1386.66 per month.

Port Townsend Dec. 4, 61.

My dear Governor:

Major Goldsborough, brother of the Commodore, hands you this and will, *in marvellously few words*, state why our Port of Entry should be at Port Angeles, situated in the narrowest part of the Straits of Fuca opposite Victoria and in the track of every vessel coming into this District.

The Custom House (rented) temporarily at Port Townsend by virtue of a letter from Secretary Guthrie under an act of Congress authorizing the President to designate a location.

If, for want of time to examine the subject, you are not pleased to pass upon the question of location, will you authorize me to enter and clear at Port Angeles under date of Port Townsend I being responsible that no confusion shall occur thereby? The bi-monthly steamers from San Francisco to Victoria never touch American soil in this Territory because of the awkward location of our Port of Entry—they would always touch at Port Angeles to the great advantage of the American side.

All the varied interests of New Dungeness, Port Discovery, Bellingham Bay and all the Country in and East of Whidbey Island suffer seriously from the wretched location of our Port of Entry.

All interests now accomdated at Port Townsend would be *better* accomodated at Port Angelos.

The opposition of the Puget Mill Company at Port Gamble (Teckalet) is personal to myself the Manager of that Company being angry that I was appointed Collector in place of Henry S. Hilson, his son in law whom you would not appoint if you knew him.

The Commander of the Revenue Cutter on this station joins me in stating that the only proper cruising ground of the Revenue Cutter is that which has the line from Port Angelos to San Juan Island for the base of review and inspection.

I hope to hear that you are pleased with the reduction in Hospital and other expenses in this District. If the amount of our requisitions could be forwarded within the quarter for which made I could reduce expenses much lower and could remit a volunttary contribution to the war fund, from this District, of one hundred dollars per month. The Light Ho. Keepers have had no pay for ten months—the Hospital none for six months.

I would like authority to remove the Hospital to Port Angelos should I be allowed to reside there pending a fuller examination of the claims of that place as a Port of Entry.

Respectfully

Victor Smith

Hon. S. P. Chase.