

## THE ARTISTIC VIEWS OF GUSTAVUS SOHON

Images of Colonel George Wright's Campaign of 1858

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Hostilities broke out in earnest between tribal groups on the Columbia Plateau and the United States Army in 1858. The primary contributing factor was the defeat of Colonel Edward Steptoe and his small force at a site that today lies on the outskirts of Rosalia, Washington. Most of the fighting took place on May 17th of that year. In that engagement nine soldiers were killed and 40 wounded when confronted by members of the Palouse, Walla Walla, Coeur d'Alene and Spokane tribes.

The United States government saw the engagement as a threat to American development of the region. In response, a force was created under the leadership of Colonel George Wright. Operations began in July and by mid August Wright was intent on reestablishing American hegemony in the region. Two key sites were the scene of confrontation between the army and the Indians—"Four Lakes" and, to the north, "Spokane Plain." Although competent narratives document the campaign in literature, only a few illustrations remain depicting events that occurred during Wright's offensive. These are in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution, the Washington State University Libraries, and the Library of Congress. Until recently, the latter collection, which is the most extensive, was still in private ownership.

These magnificent items show the campaign from a different perspective. All of these materials were drawn by Gustavus Sohon, whom Hazard Stevens referred to in the biography of his father Isaac Stevens as the "Clever Sketcher." Sohon created his images in three different formats. Some were watercolors, some were ink drawings, and the remainder were pencil sketches on either plain or tricolored paper. Together, these views show the landscapes through which the troops moved, the sites of several fights, a river crossing, and the sad location of "Horse Slaughter camp," near Liberty Lake, Washington.

### **Gustavus Sohon**

The artist behind the scenes was a humble and talented man. Sohon was an immigrant from Tilsit, Germany who came to the United States in 1842. In the early 1850s he elected to join the army. Upon his enlistment he was ordered west and eventually was stationed at Fort Steilacoom. From 1853 on, Sohon witnessed and contributed to major events in the history of the region—especially in eastern Washington and the northern Rockies. Sometimes he worked as an explorer under the command of Isaac Stevens or John Mullan. On other occasions he worked as an interpreter or artist. His life in this role was enhanced by his association with Isaac Stevens during the famous treaty expedition of 1855. This service is well-documented by the 65 portraits he created, which are now among the Washington State Historical Society's collections.

Sohon resumed his relationship with Lieutenant John Mullan in Colonel Wright's campaign and later during construction of a military wagon road between Fort Walla Walla and Fort Benton, better known as the Mullan Road. In this latter instance, Sohon was a topographer. His map-making was complemented by assorted duties including reconnaissance and artwork. His Northwest tour of duty concluded in 1863, and the remaining portion of his life was, ironically, spent selling shoes. He died in Washington, D.C., in 1903 at age 78.

### **The Rosalia Engagement**

On May 6, 1858, Steptoe began his expedition to investigate the killing of two men on their way to mining fields near Fort Colville. The expedition was poorly equipped. Compounding this problem was inadequate training either in equipment or military tactics. Little danger was anticipated. By May 16 Steptoe's small force had reached a site just south-southeast of today's Rosalia. Here he encountered 800 to 1,000 angry Native Americans who were better equipped and trained than Steptoe's men. A brief conference was held between the chiefs and Steptoe in the evening hours. Steptoe advised the chiefs that his intent was to move to Fort Colville. By morning Steptoe had elected to retreat to Fort Walla Walla as it was obvious that tribal authorities were unconvinced of his peaceful intent. Attacks began at eight o'clock in the morning. Several officers were killed in short order. By noon the engagement focused on a hill and its western slope, which descended to the bottom created by Ingosman Creek. Steptoe is generally criticized for not managing the engagement well. "He arranged his men in a circle around the supplies and remaining animals. His dragoons were not performing well as skirmishers, and the howitzers were ineffectively handled," according to Wright's biographer, Carl Schlicke. When night fell Steptoe's position was very weak. Left to his own way of thinking, he probably would have elected to fight again the next morning. Instead, he was convinced by his officers to retreat under the cover of darkness toward safety at Fort Walla Walla. This was accomplished successfully.

From the standpoint of history, Sohon's image, which shows the engagement from the Indian's position, is the only known presentation of the battle. Overall, the artwork displays intimate and accurate details of the fight and the surrounding landscape. In the foreground one sees Nez Perce people quietly engaged at the campsite, smoking a pipe. In the background, Colonel Steptoe's position is surrounded by attacking men. The Rosalia area landscape rendered in the watercolor closely resembles that of the present day.

Yet, the image presents a mystery. Was it created while the engagement was in progress or at a later date? Usually Sohon drew what he observed when he was at a location, frequently dating his works. In this case, the authors are inclined to argue that it was a reconstruction, based on two considerations. First, John Mullan and his men were asked to visit the battle site as they accompanied the Wright expedition the following September. The battlefield was mapped and the bodies of the officers exhumed. It is very likely that Sohon, Mullan's friend and military subordinate, accompanied him in this solemn task. Since Sohon was a qualified topographer, his surveys certainly yielded the data required to create a realistic landscape. Second, some Nez Perce were actually at the battle, and several were killed. Sohon was a friend of the Nez Perce, who greatly admired his artistic skills and integrity. Consequently, they may have provided additional details not available in a topographic site survey four months after the event. It is possible though unlikely that this was made by Sohon at the time of engagement. He was no longer a member of the military at that time, having been discharged in 1857. Since he

frequently visited the Nez Perce, they may have invited him to accompany their group on a visit to the hostiles. Compounding the problem is the acknowledgment that the Nez Perce persuaded their colleagues to let Steptoe escape. In any event, if Sohon was actually there, he placed himself in a very awkward position, not to fight with the army was an act akin to betrayal or treason—which could have jeopardized his life. Since Sohon left no diary, and other documentary material has not verified this explanation, there is no way to satisfactorily answer the question of personal observation except to conclude that the image was a reconstruction.

### **Snake River Crossing**

The threat posed by an uprising motivated the army to send 2,200 regulars to the Pacific Northwest. About 20 percent of these were ultimately placed under the immediate command of Colonel Wright at Fort Walla Walla. Typical of the Columbia Plateau in mid August, the weather was hot and dry. With about 670 men and 800 animals, Wright began his expedition on August 7. By August 18 the entire force had reached the south bank of the Snake River at the mouth of Tucannon Creek. Here, an earlier contingent under the command of Captain Keys had built a small, basalt rock fort. They named this complex Fort Taylor in honor of the officer killed on the Steptoe battlefield.

The purpose of the fort was to guard the Snake River crossing. The river at this location was about 275 yards wide and its waters were deep and cold. Subsequently, Wright's men were obliged to build boats to ferry men and equipment across its depths. Most of the animals were forced to swim. Plans were made to ferry the contingent across on August 23. A large storm traversing the plateau curtailed the crossing of the Snake until the 25th. By the 27th the crossing was completed and the expedition moved northward across "the Palouse."

Sohon created a page-size pencil drawing on plain paper to document this episode in Wright's campaign. Horses, men, and boats are shown crossing the river while the livestock are swimming. In the background the outline of Fort Taylor is etched. Surrounding the fort on the banks of Tucannon Creek are the stark, bleak cliffs created from lava flows on the plateau. The Library of Congress has in its collection simple map sketches showing in greater detail the course of Tucannon Creek. Today the site has been flooded as a consequence of a dam on the Snake River. Where yesterday a simple river existed with its galleria vegetation, today there is a high railroad trestle, the steel girders of a highway bridge, and a large waterfront marina bounded by the grass and state park buildings on the Snake's northern bank.

### **The Battle of Four Lakes**

Access to drinking water and grass for feeding animals was critical to the success of a military expedition. Anticipating these needs, hostile Indians carried out a scorched-earth policy. They set fire to the surrounding grasslands—not an unreasonable maneuver, but it failed to deter Wright and his force. The company reached the edge of the Spokane Plain in late August. Wright was attacked late in the afternoon on August 31 as he and his men were camped on the margins of Medicine Lake. On the morning of September 1, seeing a large force collecting on the hillside east of his position, he elected to attack shortly after nine in the morning. Even though he was outnumbered, his greater firepower and thoughtful attack were responsible for eventual victory which was attained by two in the afternoon. In the process, about 50 Native Americans were killed and a greater number wounded. None of Wright's men were killed.

The authors have recently discovered a map showing both the Four Lakes and Spokane Plain engagements. The map itself is a printed product created after Wright's expedition. Using colored inks, Mullan or one of his staff superimposed on the map the positions of the Native American and expedition forces. Now we have both a visual and a cartographic display to document verbal accounts of the engagement.

While recuperating from the September 1 engagement, Native American leaders took the opportunity to regroup their forces. By now they had become aware of the army's improved weaponry. If they approached any closer than 600 yards, they were in great danger of being killed or injured by Minié balls and improved rifles, carbines, and muskets.

### **The Spokane Plain**

On September 5, 1858, Wright again elected to move his force northward across the Spokane Plain. To their right, over 500 Indians gathered to attack the column from its front and right flank. Wright countered the move by creating a mile-long defensive position manned by infantry. The Indians set fires in hope of nudging the soldiers from their positions. This tactic almost worked, but Wright elected to attack before being frightened away from his defensive line. Artillery was employed, which greatly outmatched the simple weaponry of the Native Americans. They gradually retreated into the pine forests that covered the edge of the plain and its rapid descent onto the Spokane River basin and Latah Creek.

Sohon made several portrayals of the fight. The first study was drawn in pencil on plain paper, which is now part of the collection at the Smithsonian, having been donated by Elizabeth Sohon, one of the artist's daughters. A more finished drawing on tricolored paper was created later. In this colorful rendition, the military position dominates while in its midst the smoke created by the grass fires wafts across their position. The fact that Wright ordered the infantry into a linear formation is seen in each of Sohon's drawings illustrating the battle, thus confirming the narrative and cartographic record of the engagement.

After the battle on the Spokane Plain, no further combat took place during Wright's expedition. He and his men camped on a small plateau overlooking the western bank of the Spokane River, then headed along the southern shore of the river as they moved inland. Along the way they captured goods and livestock either poorly protected or abandoned by a people in flight. Near the place known today as Liberty Lake, Wright confiscated over 800 horses.

### **Spokane Falls and Horse Slaughter Camp**

During Wright's brief stay on the placid banks of the Spokane, Gustavus Sohon had the opportunity to scout around the region looking for sites of interest. He came upon the great falls of the Spokane River and made magnificent ink sketches of it. One of these is now in the collections of Washington State University. A simpler drawing was retained by Sohon's descendants and later donated to the Library of Congress. Raging torrents of water descend over basaltic rocks in Sohon's image. The authors recently visited this site at the same time of year that Sohon made his drawings. Instead of a roaring waterfall, we were presented with a few trickles of water moving over dark basaltic rock; drought combined with electrical power needs had removed the flow from the scene sketched by this talented artist.

The disposition of the 800 horses posed a problem for Wright's command. To the Native Americans, who highly prized these animals, they were a source of wealth. To the army they were a symbol of their adversaries' mobility and potential threat. Under these circumstances, the command elected to slaughter the horses, much to the chagrin of observers watching the process from hillside positions. Sohon drew the scene in ink as the process evolved. The image was drawn on a page-size piece of paper in pencil. He noted the place and the date: "Horse Slaughter Camp, Sept. 9th, 1858; 800-900 horses killed."

### **Cataldo Mission**

One additional image was drawn by Sohon during the expedition. From Horse Slaughter Camp, Wright's force moved toward Lake Coeur d'Alene and over the pass that John Mullan later named "Fourth of July." Their destination was Cataldo Mission, southeast of the pass, which they reached on September 13. A council was held there that officially and effectively terminated the conflict between the army and Native Americans in this sector. A treaty was signed on September 17, 1858.

Here Sohon created a pencil sketch of the mission, which displays an architectural rendition of the mission as seen from the east-northeast. The lines are precise and drawn with great confidence. On the east side of the building Native Americans are shown carrying out assorted tasks. That place is now the site of a different building, which was used as housing for mission workers. Coeur d'Alene (or Cataldo) Mission is regarded as Idaho's oldest standing structure.

Since supplies for the campaign were diminishing, Wright turned his command toward Fort Walla Walla. They moved southwest from the mission toward the southern end of Lake Coeur d'Alene and the Palouse. En route to the fort they camped on the banks of Latah Creek at a place called "Smyth's Ford."

On September 24 Qualchin, a Yakama chief, not knowing that he had been summoned, innocently came into camp at nine o'clock in the morning, and by 9:20 he was hanged. Wright convicted him for crimes committed against whites in eastern and western Washington during a three-year period. The next day six more Native Americans were hanged out of a group of fifteen held accountable for their acts. For this reason, Latah Creek is known by some as "Hangman's Creek."

By October the command had reached the Snake River, across from Fort Taylor. On October 5 they entered the confines of Fort Walla Walla. By this time an additional trial had been held along the Palouse, resulting in the execution of four more Native Americans. At Fort Walla

Walla, after a military funeral for officers and men killed on the "Steptoe" battlefield, an additional court martial was convened, resulting in another three hangings. Thus, the Wright expedition was, by its own definition, a success. In effect, it subdued the plateau peoples. Sohon's images provide graphic details of Wright's brutal campaign.

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