

A Brief History of the T.G. Richards Building

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Introduction

In 1857, the Hudson Bay Company had shipped 800 ounces of gold to the San Francisco mint, and once the word spread, an obsessive migration was on. In the spring and summer of 1858, the frontier settlement of Whatcom on Bellingham Bay experienced a frenzied surge in population that came with the monomania of a gold rush. Thousands of gold seekers, estimated at 23,000 by sea primarily from California and 8,000 by land largely from the eastern Washington Colville gold fields, poured into the town on their way to the gold fields along Canada's Fraser River. Beginning at Whatcom, a trail was cut through the dense fir and cedar forests that thrived at the base of the rugged Fraser River canyon, and optimistic promoters billed the gateway town as "the next San Francisco." Merchants were quick to take advantage of the miners' business, noting the fortunes that had been made by provisioners during the California gold rush just a few years prior. In fact, many of the prospectors rushing into Whatcom on their way to the Fraser gold fields were veterans of the California rush. Most of them were Americans or the opportunistic mix of nationalities that made up the Forty-Niners—Australians, Chinese and hard rock coal miners from England, Wales and central Europe.

Construction

Among the very first entrepreneurs to move from San Francisco Bay to the future city of Bellingham was the partnership of Thomas G. Richards and Company, intent on establishing a commercial base at Whatcom. This organization consisted of Thomas G. and Charles E. Richards, brothers; and John G. Hyatt, all of San Francisco.

Whatcom County tax rolls from 1857 record the Richards brothers as owners of property valued at \$10,000, a considerable fortune in territorial days and a clear indication that this group was among the first wave to arrive. Thomas Richards apparently contributed a majority of the capital to the new business in Whatcom, although he never came north. Charles was the junior partner and manager of the store. John Hyatt was a clerk for them and had a stake in the business as well.

Their “brick warehouse” was built on the tide flats where Whatcom Creek met the sea at the foot of the hills overlooking Bellingham Bay, Fort Bellingham, and Whatcom County’s first industrial enterprise, the pioneering Roeder-Peabody sawmill. Alonzo M. Poe was the original surveyor of the property, which was part of Russell V. Peabody’s donation land claim. Peabody was the partner of Henry Roeder in the sawmill venture.

On July 5, 1858 the deed selling “lot number twelve in block five... having a front on E and Centre Street” was recorded for a payment of \$600 to Mr. Peabody. About this time, the company bought the middle plot of land between Centre and D streets, where they built a wood framed store building from which to sell goods while the brick structure was being constructed. It was here that Hyatt became the town of Whatcom’s second Postmaster, and “provided a hundred boxes, at private expense, for the accommodation of the public.” He continued in this position until January 1, 1860. The Post Office was later transferred to the Richards Building, where it remained until January, 1873.

The July 24, 1858 issue of The Northern Light newspaper published the first account of the construction of the brick building. It was noted that a load of bricks had arrived from San Francisco for the Richards partnership, and that they “are clearing ground for the erection of a two story brick store and banking house.” The publisher of the newspaper had an excellent vantage point to observe the progress of this task, as The Northern Light was headquartered directly across the street from the new store. From a note in Howard Buswell’s papers found at the Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, it is likely that the person who actually built the new store was a man by the name of James Alexander, better known later for his exploits on Whidbey Island.

In the July 31, 1858 edition of the paper, it was reported that the “two story brick building of T.G. Richards & Co., commenced a week ago, is progressing finely. The walls have gone up some six or eight feet, and have received the joist for the first floor. The iron shutters and doors are on the ground, so that no delay will be occasioned in carrying the edifice forward to speedy completion.”

On August 28, 1858, The Northern Light further recorded that the building was nearly finished - “The fine two story fire-proof brick building of T.G. Richards & Company on E Street is so far completed as to require only a few finishing touches to render it fit for occupancy, and will be inaugurated by the reception of a stock of groceries and provisions in a few days.”

The ad which the company ran in that same issue read:

*T.G. Richards & Company
Having completed their new fire-proof
Brick Warehouse, are now prepared to carry on a
Storage and Commission Business.*

Cash advances made on consignments and goods stored in our warehouse.

These first accounts refer to the building as a “warehouse” and not altogether as a store. Richards and Hyatt continued the mercantile business in the wood framed building until lack of customers made it unprofitable to continue at two locations. Greater value during the gold rush was realized by providing secure port-side storage for goods headed to the gold fields and for the probable returning gold.

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The Bricks

The origin of the bricks for the building has intrigued historians for decades. One often told story was that they came around the Horn from Philadelphia on the bark Ann Perry and brought to Bellingham Bay on July 16, 1858. In 2006 while working on a Save Our History grant, a researcher discovered that the name of the bark was spelled wrong. Her true name was the Ann Parry with a remarkable history as a trader and whaler beginning in 1825. More astonishing, she arrived in San Francisco from Salem, MA on December 30, 1849, seven years before she brought the bricks. She stayed in San Francisco until November, 1858 when she made a trip to Bellingham Bay.

Ann Parry was owned by Captain George Chase of San Francisco who owned many ships. His son-in-law, William B. Bourne, was an investment banker who may have invested in the Sehome Mine. When word of the gold rush on the Fraser River in present day Canada broke out, the Ann Parry was already in the area. In June, group of shippers chartered her as part of their Pioneer Line. The Ann Parry left in the company of several other ships and steamers for Victoria and Bellingham Bay around June 25. She carried, according to a notice in the Alta California's Shipping Intelligence, 100,000 bricks and 73 barrels of lime. But who made the bricks?

While students studied the bricks during the Save Our History project, a brick sample was sent to Dan Mosier, a geologist and historian in San Francisco. He was knowledgeable about early brick makers in the town. Initial study pointed to Nagel, one of the most famous brickmakers in the area, but it wasn't until 2008 that scientific analysis was able to match the brick to known clay pits in San Francisco. A lucky break a few years later gave the historical society a chance to test a real Nagel brick fragment. The courthouse brick was a 97% match. Having a building made from Nagel brick is significant. Fort Point, an important military installation, is made from Nagel bricks. The entire building is said to have cost the company \$8000 in gold to construct. Its sturdy brick form was the first masonry building constructed on Puget Sound and a distinct symbol of permanence amid the hasty wooden gold rush town of Whatcom before the Civil War.

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The Whatcom Building Boom & Bust

The boom in Whatcom went bust almost as soon as it had begun and the architectural gesture in brick became a dead end investment for its original builders. British Columbia Governor Douglas decreed that all miners headed to the Fraser River must stop in Victoria on Vancouver Island and

pay for a permit before being allowed into the Canadian gold fields. This left Whatcom out of the path to the gold fields, and the stream of gold seekers quickly faded away. In the words of newspaper editor William Bausman as he left for San Francisco in the fall of 1858, “Whatcom has gone in, and the (Northern) Light has gone out” and “Nearly all the best buildings were taken down and carried to Victoria, leaving the two story brick, built by Richards and Hyatt, standing as the solitary monument of departed grandeur.” During the boom, lots were expensive and hard to obtain; after the miners faded away, it is said the owners had problems even giving them away!

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Early Businesses in the Building

Charles E. Richards and John G. Hyatt continued business in the building until 1861. There were many transactions recorded during this time, dealing with selling fractions of shares of ownership in the building and business back and forth. The tangle of confusing transactions suggests that given the shortage of gold and currency, property shares became the daily barter among the residents of Whatcom. As an example, on January 12, 1859, Charles sold to John “one half part of the one-third part of the lot and buildings” for the sum of \$1000.

During this time, Richards and Hyatt both married Native American women from the local tribes. Charles wed a Nooksack woman named Annie, and fathered one, if not two children. John married Emma, a Lummi woman, and fathered a son, John G. Hyatt Jr.

C.C. Finkbonner was also connected to the enterprise during this time. He is listed in The Northern Light as a competing merchant across the street from the Richards building. However, it is also possible that he came to Whatcom as a clerk for Richards and Hyatt, as Roth’s “History of Whatcom County” suggests. Edward Watson, an associate of William Bausman who came north with him to start The Northern Light, remained in Whatcom and worked for Richards and Hyatt for a time. It is a certainty that during the time he was stationed at Fort Bellingham, George Pickett had occasion to visit the building, as his home is still located close by up the street.

Mr. Richards was the majority owner in 1861 when the partnership seems to have dissolved, with John Hyatt selling his share of the building to Richards for \$2000 and his share of the merchandise inside of it for \$3000. Richards continued the store operation along with a venture into coal mining, buying the old Morrison Donation Claim with Seth Doty. The pair spent \$40,000 trying to make it profitable, although the attempt was unsuccessful. The small settlement of Unionville with a wharf, store house and coal chutes owe its short existence to this venture. Charles also bought sheep and cattle. He is mentioned in Henry Roeder’s diary on the occasion the two met up on their way to the gold fields in the north, both bringing meat on the hoof to hungry miners.

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The Courthouse Years

On May 6, 1863, with the Civil War raging in the east, the county government purchased the brick building for use as a courthouse. Prior to the purchase, the first and second courthouses had been log buildings considered shabby and undignified even in their day. The move gave Whatcom County the first brick courthouse in Washington Territory, a distinction that lasted until the coming of the railroad in the 1870s. As he was short on cash, the county issued warrants worth \$2000 to Richards as payment for the brick building. Being short on cash himself, he in turn sold them to William Moody for between 20 to 40 cents on the dollar. In Sheriff James Kavanaugh's diary from that time, he records August 28th as being the date that "C.E. Richards has sold the remains of everything in his store." On that day, Richards also wrote out a power of attorney to Kavanaugh to handle his coal-mining claim in Unionville. It appears that he left the area, and Kavanaugh and C. Finkbonner remained to handle his affairs. His wife and child(ren) were left behind to fend for themselves. His wife, Annie, was later noted in Phoebe Judson's "A Pioneer's Search for an Ideal Home" as the only Indian she knew of to commit suicide in this area. Her children were raised in the Nooksack village near Lynden, and, after church-sponsored college in Boston, her son Jack Richards became a noted industrialist in the East.

Of John Hyatt's fate, it is known that he took part in the territorial government starting in May, 1861. County records also show John Hyatt as a witness in May 1863 on a deed concerning Charles Richards in Whatcom County. After that he disappeared, perhaps drawn back to the war in the east. Whatever the case, his family was left in Whatcom County, an all-too frequent occurrence during that time. His wife, Emma, later married James H. Taylor, the hardy pioneer who helped build the schooner General Harney on the shores of Bellingham Bay, and they settled on a farm in Marietta. The Taylor family still has descendants in this area.

John Jr. lived out his life on the farm in Marietta and took care of his mother in her later years. Emma was buried in the Lummi Tribal cemetery. Her son lived until 1934, dying on October 15 at the home of his half-sister in Bellingham. He was cremated; an internment place is not known. He was a member of the Spiritualist church at that time; if there are any records to be found from that group, more might be known of his activities in later life.

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The Jail Years

During its years of service as the seat of county government, the Richards Building provided offices for the county treasurer and assessor as well as serving as the county jail. Henry Roeder, Edward Eldridge, and many other founders of the community frequented the building. Roth's "History of Whatcom County" lists many officials who held positions with the county government and who would have occupied offices in the courthouse. During a period of economic recession, the courthouse was described as being "now full of goods seized on attachment and on orders of execution." The courthouse was a polling place when elections were held, and a perusal of the pages of Roth's book reveals many heated political campaigns and discussions. The building also sheltered commercial interests, one being a drug store run by Dr. A.W. Thornton. The Bellingham Bay Mail, begun in 1873 by James Powers, was published in a corner of the building. In a later

interview, Powers recalled that “I would work an occasional prisoner on the press.” The jail was located on the bottom floor, and had held such local scalawags as “Dirty Dan” Harris, imprisoned for killing a man in a brawl. It appears that in 1875, the building underwent some repairs, and the floors were then partitioned into various offices. In February of 1877, repairs were made to the lower floor, and in January 1879, the county commissioners decided to build a separate jail to alleviate overcrowding in the brick building.

About 1888, the building was pronounced unsafe for further county business, and governmental offices were moved to the opera house. A new courthouse at G and Ellsworth streets was finished in 1890, bringing to an end a quarter of a century’s use of the brick building as the Whatcom County seat.

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City Regrade

About this time, the tide flats area surrounding the building was partially filled in and the streets running up the hill were graded to a regular incline. The grade change brought the level of E Street up to the second floor of the building and a new entry was configured out of the northeastern most upper window. The upper sections of the old ground floor doors were exposed at sidewalk level, and access to the former first floor was provided through the back (southeast) doorway. A pitched gable roof was also framed in timber over the original flat roof.

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Organizations That Used the Building

The brick building stood mostly vacant until about 1895 when it was leased (purchased in 1903) to the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.), a Civil War veterans organization that also included the Women’s Auxiliary (W. R. C.). Its members included such illustrious citizens as J.J. Edens and Ellery Rogers, and included veterans from many different northern states.

By that time, the building was already recognized for its historical associations to the territorial era, Washington having become a State in 1889, and was seen as an appropriate home for the fraternal organization. For the next 30 years, the little hall housed the memories of Civil War soldiers growing older, telling and retelling their stories of war and glory until there were too few to meet.

The James B. Steadman Post #24 of the Grand Army of the Republic occupied the building until 1922, when it was sold to Jasper M. Riddle, a local road and sidewalk construction contractor. Many sidewalks in Bellingham still bear his name etched into the concrete poured long ago. Mr. Riddle gave the building to a lodge named the “Junior Order of American Mechanics,” whose members were not junior in age and had little to do with mechanics. The organization had its lodge meeting room in the upstairs (street level) floor, where Mr. Riddle’s grandson Bill Brooks

remembers it smelling like “cigar smoke and spittoons.” The lower floor was used as a dining room for the occasional meal that followed the meetings.

Then, in 1934, during the initial years of Depression-era federal employment programs, the Survey of Historic American Buildings selected the structure for documentation as an important historical place. It was the first building selected in the North Puget Sound region, and is enrolled with the survey number HABS WA-39-W-3.

Later, the Jehovah’s Witness church held services in the building, and continued to use it through the 1940s and early 1950s.

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Akers Family Ownership

The more current history of the building, key to its eventual preservation, began with Carl and Nickie Akers who purchased the building in 1955 from the church group. Through the years the Akers Taxidermy shop had been a familiar icon to Whatcom County sportsmen. After their business outgrew the Richards Building and moved in 1969 to the School of Industries Building at 1303 Astor Street, the Akers rented the Richards Building out to a woodworking shop and several pottery studios. In 1969, the counterculture newspaper, Northwest Passage, began publication in the building, beckoning back to the Bellingham Bay Mail newspaper launched from the building in 1873. During the Vietnam war era, Bellingham was a terminal for the underground railroad assisting young men evading the draft by going to Canada. The newspaper and artists operating out of the building were directly involved in the anti-war effort and the address became associated with alternative political activities and counterculture enterprises. The building also was used as a retail and outdoor equipment rental shop named Base Camp until that company outgrew it and built a log building just to the west.

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Acquisition by WCHS and Restoration

Carl and Nickie succeeded in listing the building with the Washington State Historical Register. In 2000, the Akers family expressed their intention to turn the building over to the public or non-profit ownership, specifically the Whatcom County Historical Society, so it could be restored and preserved. In 2001, a Territorial Courthouse Taskforce was formed to develop recommendations for the eventual preservation of the building. In 2003, the T. G. Richards Building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In October of 2004, the building was gifted to the Whatcom County Historical Society and restoration of the historic landmark began.

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As the history of the Pacific Northwest moves into the 21st century, it seems clearer than ever that authentic fragments of material history from before the Civil War are almost completely lost. Few buildings exist and fewer still remain within meaningful context. The Richards Building connects with a period of Indian wars, gold rushes and the unsettled marine boundary between Canada and the United States. It dates from before the Civil War, the arrival of the transcontinental railroad

and the emergence of cities on Puget Sound. It was the first brick masonry building to be erected in Washington Territory and the oldest standing brick building in the State today. It was recognized as historic almost 70 years ago when the Historic American Building Survey documented it in 1934. Although the ground around it has been altered, its material integrity is substantially intact, and as an architectural narrative of the events it has participated in over 145 years, its story is clear and will continue to speak to current and future generations.

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