



*Aerial view of now-Discovery Park and then-Fort Lawton.  
Google Earth. 2007.*



# CHANGE, THE ONLY CONSTANT: FORT LAWTON



By Mike Davis with Monica Wooton

Editor's Note: *The history of Fort Lawton was over 100 years in the making. The authors consulted many sources for their writing research, and one source stood out: The Evolution of Intent at Fort Lawton, by David Chance. The book is an excellent history of well-researched facts; relevant, insightful information; and interesting, detailed writing. Because this is a City of Seattle document of public record, we are able to repeat many passages in the following chapter. Chance consulted over 10 archives and many sources—many of the same works that have been studied by the authors of this chapter. The 109-page Chance report is in the University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections Division, in the Magnolia Historical Society Archive under the topic of Fort Lawton. In this chapter, we have tried to give the important facts and flavor of the history of Magnolia's Fort Lawton, with liberal sprinklings of Chance's historical scholarship and insight.*

*“ . . . if one is skeptical of the independent existence of historical truth, then one might accept the objective of knowing as precisely as possible what the founders and custodians of Fort Lawton actually thought, hoped, and did.”*

—David Chance, *The Evolution of Intent at Fort Lawton*<sup>1</sup>

Fort Lawton never lived up to the Seattle Chamber of Commerce's hopes that the Fort would be a major military complex. For some, the fact that Fort Lawton did not become an important part of the coastal defense reduced its historical significance. For others, never reaching garrison status and being used in a limited fashion meant failure. However, few American military posts have played central roles the way, for instance, Fort Sumter and the Pentagon have done. As Chance points out, “most military engagements have occurred away from posts,” rendering forts most useful as supply and processing facilities.<sup>2</sup> And, in that role, this history will prove that Fort Lawton succeeded spectacularly.

## Establishing the Notion

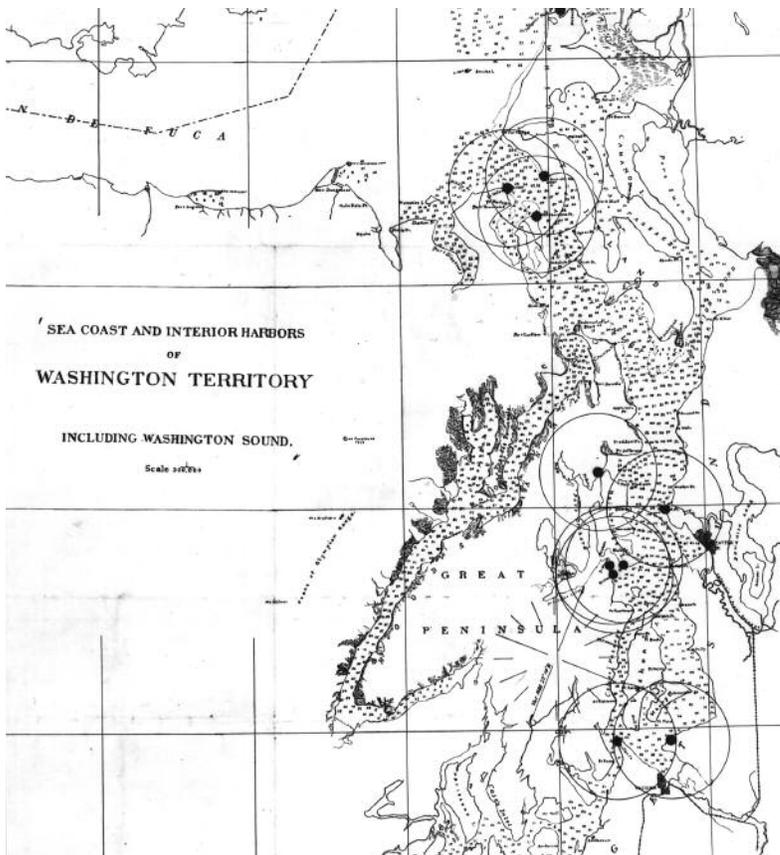
Fort Lawton, an Army post established in the late 19th century in what is now Discovery Park, in the neighborhood of Magnolia, in the City of Seattle, began as a vast expanse of claimed but unsettled land and old-growth timber. To understand why a fort was even needed at this location requires looking at the culture, the politics, and the changing world that surrounded the issue of having a fort in this City.

## The Endicott Plan

In March of 1886, a citizens' group of King County Commissioners for the first time relayed to Secretary of War William Crowninshield Endicott their wish to have a "permanent garrison" in Seattle, and the commissioners were ready to hand over land for the garrison free of charge. The governor of Washington Territory, Watson Squire, was publicly in favor of this. He had had to evoke martial law in Seattle as a result of the anti-Chinese rebellion of late 1885 and early 1886, which pitted out-of-work locals living during a significant economic depression against the wealthy citizens who wanted Chinese workers for their cheap labor. The anti-Chinese mob went after the wealthy City leaders. Squire, one of the five wealthiest men in the district, was uncomfortable. This lawlessness somehow translated in the minds of the City elite into the concept that a fort would be helpful in quelling any future such citizens' rebellion.<sup>3</sup>

The first official happening after the citizens' request for the fort was the formation of the Endicott Board of Fortifications. This was a body convened in 1886 by Secretary of War Endicott, who wanted to address the coastal defense needs of the United States in light of rapid advances in naval ship design and weaponry. The Endicott Board's recommendations would lead to a large-scale modernization program for harbor and coastal defenses in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Map of Washington Territory coastline, printed in 1889, illustrating proposals made during the 1800s for the coastal defense of Puget Sound. Possible locations are shown for 11 defense installations, showing coverage that would be provided by coastal artillery having a range of about six miles. Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation, Discovery Park Photographic Archive, Park File #L-8, Source File #Dr. 103, Sh. 174-15. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C.



## Left Out of It

But all of Puget Sound was initially omitted from the Endicott Plan of 1886.<sup>5</sup> In the mid-1880s, the West Coast was so sparsely settled and militarily remote that the Endicott Board had recommended augmentation at only three Pacific harbors among the 27 reviewed nationwide: San Francisco, California; the Columbia River between Oregon and Washington; and San Diego, California.<sup>6</sup>

The omission of Puget Sound from the Endicott Plan would prove to be the first in a long history of oversights and uncertainties involving Fort Lawton. In 1885, Brigadier General Nelson Miles, commander of the Army's Department of the Columbia (Puget Sound fell under the direction of this department), pointed out the idea of development of military

defenses in Seattle and Tacoma to protect Puget Sound, an important navigational waterway. General Miles, in his personal recollections,<sup>7</sup> stated:

*"In 1884, in spite of its great commercial importance, and the large number of thriving towns that had grown up on its shores, Puget Sound was still in a defenseless condition. The government had reserved important sites for batteries and defensive works at the entrance of the Sound,*

and during the year mentioned I ordered a board of experienced artillery officers to report as to their relative importance, and the proper armament, garrison, and work necessary to place them in proper condition for use.”<sup>8</sup>

An 1888 study addressing the Endicott Board’s oversight of Puget Sound included a letter by the chief of engineers, Brigadier General J. D. Duane, that brought up this oversight and the consequent risks to the proposed naval station on the Sound at Bremerton, as well as the potential for the British naval force at Esquimalt on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, to prevail over others in Puget Sound:

“In case we possess no naval strength, the question narrows down to the protection of the towns and cities to prevent destruction of property therein; for unless our naval force can prevail over that of the enemy, no commerce will seek our ports through such long and narrow passages from the sea. Should emergency arise, the most practicable course would be to erect earthen batteries for the defense of Seattle and the ‘Narrows,’ [Point Defiance] as this would provide a reasonable defense in the least time. Fortifications at these points would be of value, too, as forming a second line to a more elaborate system.”<sup>10</sup>

Duane’s logic for Seattle as a point of fortification, a place that could work as a defensive fort for both situations he mentioned, was later reflected rather closely in both the arguments for Seattle’s fort and the events that took place in the 1890s—although no credit for the thinking was ever directly given to Duane.<sup>11</sup>

### 1890-1900: Puget Sound Strategic Value

The final construction of a dry dock by the US Navy at Bremerton in 1891 increased the strategic value of military defense on Puget Sound and established Seattle as militarily important for that role. General Elwell Otis,<sup>12</sup> now the commander of the Army’s Department of the Columbia, in his annual report of 1894 recommended that a fort be established on Magnolia Bluff. According to David Chance in *The Evolution of Intent at Fort Lawton*, Otis’ advice seconded that of the previous Fortification Board of 1894: “. . . it was necessary that Magnolia Bluff be garrisoned with an infantry battalion to control the ‘frequent exhibitions of lawlessness’ on the part of the ‘restless, demonstrative, and oftentimes turbulent’ population of Puget Sound.”<sup>13</sup>

Seattle business leaders were energized to secure a fort for Seattle for obvious economic benefits. Chance notes that “Edward O. Graves, president of the Seattle Chamber of Commerce and the leading banker of Seattle, wrote to him [Otis] ‘to find out what the City could do to further these plans.’ ”<sup>14</sup> Otis replied oddly in a letter that his recommendation was made at his own discretion and was personal opinion, not official policy. Afterward, Otis again gave credit to the belief that a fort at Magnolia Bluff could be defensive in a military

Men clearing timber to build Fort Lawton. Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation, Discovery Park Photographic Archive, #N-124. Circa late 1890s.



way and also possibly helpful in putting down “internal” restlessness, another repeat of the peculiar dual mission for a military fort suggested by Duane.<sup>15</sup>

Graves requested Otis to return to Seattle.<sup>16</sup> Otis did not comply and sent in his stead his departmental quartermaster, Major James M. Marshall, for a two-week stay. Marshall met with the Chamber to listen to Graves’ dissertation of why Magnolia Bluff would prove the best site for a defensive fortification and witness the formation of a Chamber committee to inquire about ownership of the property they wanted for a fort.<sup>17</sup> That step initiated what Chance describes as a three-year effort “of land purchases, exchanges, condemnations, and fundraising, not to mention lobbying and wooing of a rotating and somewhat befuddled Army administration.”<sup>18</sup>

### Politics More Than Usual

In the meantime, the Seattle Chamber was pursuing legislative action to bring a fort to Seattle. Chamber members Thomas Burke, Edward Graves, and John Leary, all wealthy and influential, drafted a bill designating Seattle as an Army installation. The bill was sent to

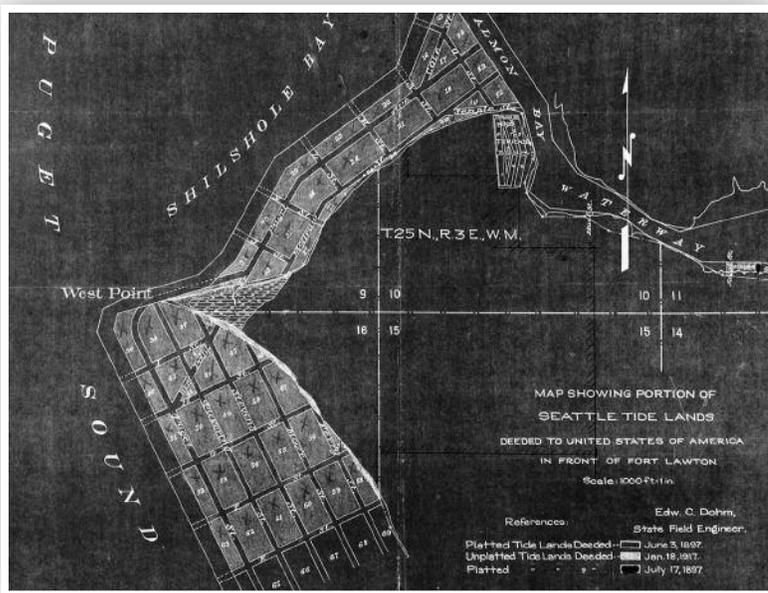
then-Senator Watson Squire, the former governor of the Washington Territory, who was involved with Burke (or at least, on the same side) in the anti-Chinese riots episode. On January 9, 1895, Squire forwarded the measure to the Senate Committee on Military Affairs.<sup>19</sup>

A rider was added to the bill by Congressman William H. Doolittle on behalf of Tacoma, striking the word “Seattle” in favor of “Puget Sound,” so that Tacoma would have a chance at obtaining the fort. The bill insisted that all sites be evaluated, and that no members of the Board that would choose the site for the

fort be drawn from the Department of the Columbia. The plan was to prevent Otis and his officers, with their predisposition toward Magnolia Bluff, from participating on the Board.<sup>20</sup>

James W. Clise (author David Chance called him John), a Chamber member and wealthy real estate broker in Seattle, wrote a letter to Quartermaster General R. F. Batchelder and Senator Watson Squire, directing the Army to make its decision at once, and advising that property had been planned to be turned over to the Army at no cost, with the acquisition work being done by the Chamber. At about the same time, Secretary of War Daniel Scott Lamont let Senator Squire know “he had fully decided to locate the proposed military post at Magnolia Bluffs in Seattle,” according to author David Chance. Clise’s letter and Squire’s approval hastened Lamont in moving toward securing the post. But he made it known there was a process to go through.<sup>21</sup> Still, his instructions to the Board that would make the final selection were definitely prejudiced in favor of the Magnolia site over any others.<sup>22</sup>

Map showing tidelands included in the land given to the US Army to build Fort Lawton. F50.1, 3601; Record of the Army, Corps of Engineers, Office of the Chief Engineer, Seattle District, Record Group 77; National Archives, Pacific Alaska Region, Seattle.



The Board of Engineers of 1894 recommended three possible sites for an installation to defend Puget Sound: near Seattle, close to Tacoma, and at Port Townsend.<sup>23</sup> The Board of Fortification had also already looked at Magnolia and found it to be fitting for a fort. The next step Lamont ordered was to find ground for a Seattle post. (One must remember that the Seattle Chamber of Commerce had made it clear they would help, and certainly Magnolia land had been discussed as the most probable undeveloped and sufficiently large piece of land properly sited to be in a position to fortify naval actions in the waters below.) A board headed by Otis was given the task of looking at specific sites and making a recommendation. Captain Walter Fisk, of the Army Corps of Engineers and a member of the Otis Board, was prepared to point out to the Army the determined merits of the Magnolia site previously favored by the Fortification Board.<sup>24</sup>

Then, 12 days later, Secretary of War Lamont withdrew the orders for the Otis Board's involvement in selecting the site. Otis and the appointed board of officers, all from the Department of the Columbia, were removed from the process. Lamont had been aware of Congressman Doolittle's political effort to get a fort placed at Tacoma by manipulating the wording in the Squire Bill, and Lamont wanted to make sure that the selection process followed the letter of the law so there could be no future accusations and confusion regarding the choice of a site for the fort. As author David Chance notes, "Secretary Lamont was tiring of civilian politics."<sup>25</sup>

### The Recommendation Stands

Lamont replaced Otis with Inspector General Colonel Burton to work with an appointed Board that was made up of members who were not from the Columbia Department. The Board was ordered to convene in Tacoma. This was to give the impression of a Board not predisposed to a fort at Seattle's Magnolia Bluff. But Captain Walter Fisk, involved in the first decision-making process with the Otis Board, was retained in an advisory capacity, as his experience with the Army Corps of Engineers was said to be needed to access any properties discussed for selection. Lamont then ordered that both his detailed instructions for the Board and the deliberations of the Board be kept strictly confidential.<sup>26</sup>

Under Burton's command, the new Board began to study possible sites on February 4, 1896, in Tacoma. After considering American Lake, where Fort Lewis now stands, as well as Point Defiance, the Board then visited Seattle. Due either to confusion or the Board's desire to be anonymous, a welcoming committee from the City of Seattle arrived at the train station five hours early and then left when no Army officers descended from the train. When the Board members arrived, they made their own way to the Rainier Grand Hotel, registering without divulging their military rank or places of origin, which in itself suggests a desire for anonymity.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, the Seattle city fathers did catch up with them. They escorted the Board on a munificent tour of Seattle, entertained them, used a special trolley to take them all to Ballard, boarded a Simpson lumber mill tug for a trip around the Bluff, stopped at Salmon Bay to inspect the plans for the Hiram M. Chittenden Locks, and generally extolled the advantages of a fort on Magnolia Bluff. That evening, the Army Board was treated to a sumptuous dinner at the Rainier Club, hosted by the Chamber. Then, the day after, the Burton Board was escorted by the Chamber members on a tour by horseback of the potential fort site.<sup>28</sup>

In its official report to the Secretary of War, the Burton Board noted Magnolia Bluff's elevation and its commanding view of the Sound. The Board's report also stated that 707 acres would be needed for a fort, and that it would be difficult for the "citizens" of Seattle to secure that land for the government. The Board went on to visit locations at New Whatcom and Fairhaven, near Bellingham, and then Port Townsend, Everett, and Olympia, patiently looking at all available options.<sup>29</sup>

The Burton Board reviewed previous recommendations and came to the same conclusion as General Otis: that a post should be built at Magnolia, although the Board also proposed one at Port Townsend (Burton had been the commander there and knew that area intimately—including its good hunting and fishing).<sup>30</sup> The Burton Board's report was accompanied by a letter from the Seattle Chamber of Commerce that offered 703.21 acres of land to the Army free of cost, although the land had yet to be acquired.<sup>31</sup> Another letter from the West Street & North End Electric Railway Company promised to extend its rail

lines out to Magnolia Bluff. And on March 2, 1896, the Acting Secretary of War, Joseph B. Doe, approved Magnolia Bluff for the fort site "one year after Congress had provided authority for a post on Puget Sound," as Chance notes in *The Evolution of Intent at Fort Lawton*.<sup>32</sup> This was the first such approval.

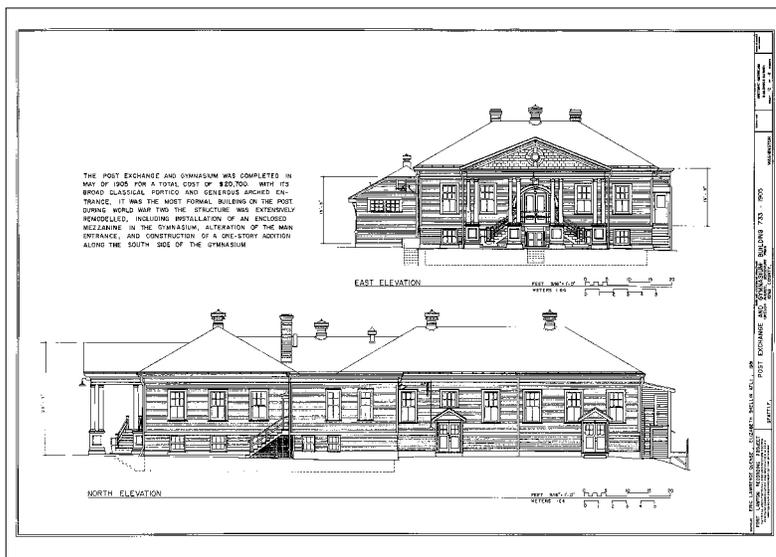
*Wheeling and Dealing: Not Easy*  
The Chamber's wheeling and dealing for land took longer than expected. In December of 1896, the Chamber again dispatched Graves to Washington, D.C., to

offer the Army 641 acres rather than the original 703. During this trip, Graves heard that Secretary of War Lamont had moved on to other projects, and General Miles spoke up that he was not totally convinced of the advisability of a fort on Magnolia Bluff. Graves knew Miles was off to a "military tournament" at Madison Square Garden, so Graves hurried himself from Washington, D.C., to New York. How that meeting went was never reported. If it had been positive in the least, Graves would have used the information in the press.<sup>33</sup> But by May of 1897, the Army had accepted a little over 641 acres, on the provision that additional road rights of way and title to the state tidelands were also thrown in to provide a suitable site to build a boat landing.<sup>34</sup>

Issues continued to plague the planning process of the Chamber. Trouble with the Chamber's land donation campaign and having the Army renege on this fort being a regimental post, plus scaling the facility down to four companies and possibly less, made the Chamber more adamant than ever regarding their role and wishes for the post on Magnolia.<sup>35</sup>

Again, Graves was called on to negotiate with the Army. Now the Chamber had 990 acres donated to the fort project. Graves made an argument to Secretary of War Russell Alger for the absolute need for a whole regiment to be stationed on Magnolia.

Drawings of two views of the Fort Lawton Post Exchange and Gymnasium, which was completed in 1905 at a total cost of \$20,700. This building, which still stands on the parade grounds, is on the National Register of Historic Places. Historic American Buildings Survey, Fort Lawton Recording Project, Page 12. 1981.



He went so far as to give military advice and strategies. In the words of Chance: “One must credit Graves with tireless persistence and considerable ingenuity in mustering arguments. As a versatile nineteenth century man of affairs he was not adverse to doing military planning for the Secretary of War.”<sup>36</sup>

In the end, he succeeded in soliciting a telegram from Alger that read, in part: “I have had no other thought on the subject but to make Magnolia Bluff Post a regimental one and that is my present intention.” Chance notes that in “late January of 1898, the site for the post was deeded to the United States, and the plans drawn up by Constructing Quartermaster W. W. Robinson, Jr., were being passed around the War Department for approval.” But Miles continued to see no reason why Magnolia needed a post. One of the last Army officers who actively opposed the fort in Seattle, Miles saw his military post position discontinued.<sup>37</sup> The new Army post at Magnolia Bluff was approved by the Secretary of War Alger on February 15, 1898.<sup>38</sup> This second approval stuck.



*“Salute howitzer or reveille gun” at Fort Lawton, located near the flagpole and used during morning and evening flag ceremonies and other occasions when appropriate. Photo by F. M. Mann. Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation, Discovery Park Photographic Archive, Photographer’s File #092274-3.*

Twice, references to Fort Lawton as a park came up. In an article for the Chamber, James W. Clise described the acreage they had gathered for the Army: “The area acquired by the Government has exceptional natural advantages for park purposes, which undoubtedly will be made the most of by the Government.” Thomas Prosch paraphrased this perspective in the minutes for the Chamber: “The post site is a grand one, and in due time will be virtually a city park equal in attraction and beauty to anything of the kind in the United States.” Chance sums up this Chamber sentiment by saying of it:

*“Had it all been a conspiracy to make a big park for Seattle to rival the Olmsted parks in the large cities. To believe so would be probably going too far . . . For the present, it was now evident that the Chamber’s idea of a military post was something of a scenic park with soldiers in it. At least someone must have pondered the fact that land for a large park in Seattle could not have been secured by ordinary purchase or condemnation.”*<sup>39, 40</sup>

We hope you enjoyed this excerpt from our recent book, *Magnolia: Making More Memories*. We have another 15+ pages on Ft. Lawton in this story.