



TACOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

CITY OF DESTINY NEWSLETTER
www.tacomahistory.org

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A scene you won't see again



*Crossing Pacific Avenue in downtown Tacoma, the "Last Steam Train" excursion train prepares to climb the Prairie Line grade through Tacoma's Warehouse District to Nalley Valley on Dec. 8, 1957. The locomotive was a 1776 Class W-3 2-8-2. Burlington Northern Santa Fe closed the Pacific Avenue crossing in 2003.
Jerry Hansen photo, Jim Fredrickson collection*

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Silent rails crossing UWT campus a reminder of railroad past

Editor's note: This article is adapted from one written by University of Washington Tacoma student Cassandra Creley in June 2006.

Ghosts of Tacoma's railroad past linger on the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) campus. As students trek to the Science Building or Metro Coffee, they cross abandoned railroad tracks, probably without wondering about rusted rails being overtaken by irreverent weeds.

How old are the tracks? When and why were they built? Who built them and why are they still there?

The Prairie Line, as it is known, brought prosperity and prestige to Tacoma, according to local historians.

The Prairie Line was not only significant for the development of Tacoma; it was also significant to the United States. On July 2, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln authorized "construction of the first of the northern transcontinental railroad and telegraph lines between Lake Superior and Puget Sound," according to the website of J. A. Phillips III, the editor for the Northern Pacific Railway Historical Association's *The Mainstreeter*.

On July 14, 1873, Commencement Bay was chosen as the western terminus.

The first train to reach Tacoma entered via the Prairie Line on Dec. 16, 1873, according to Tacoma railroad historian Jim Fredrickson. "There was a derailment just before it got to Tacoma, but the train came through," Fredrickson added.

The derailment was not the only close call for the Prairie Line. Northern Pacific completed the tracks just 24 hours before the deadline. It was a rocky start for a railroad that would continue to have troubles.

The Northern Pacific would have preferred a more level route to Commencement Bay but due to financial constraints and a looming deadline, the company settled for a steep route that ran up Galliher's Gulch to what is now

Silent Rail Crossing, cont. on pg. 3

At the Exhibit Center now



Photo by Dale Wirsing

Exhibit Center volunteer Wilma Peterson looks over the 1905–08 guest register of the Tourist Hotel, where sailors and other Tacoma visitors could find lodging at the moderate rate of 25 or 50 cents a night. The hotel was at 1011-1013 Pacific Ave. The register is part of the current “Shore Leave” exhibit, curated by Thomas R. Stenger and containing many items from his extensive personal collection. The exhibit will continue through March 21.

Medal of Honor Monument

Plans are being made and donations being accepted for a Medal of Honor monument to be installed and dedicated in Tacoma’s War Memorial Park during Memorial Day week in May 2009.

For additional information, call Charlotte (Polly) Medlock, 253-752-7722.

In memoriam

Wilmott Ragsdale, who retained an affection for Tacoma though his journalism career took him all over the globe, died Jan. 16 at the age of 97.

Samuel Houston (Sam) Brown, retired Weyerhaeuser Co. official and a patron of local heritage societies, died Jan. 19 at the age of 90.

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Editor: Dale R. Wirsing. Contributing Editor: Darlyne Reiter.
Original articles about Tacoma history are invited.

Where are they all coming from?

Since Tacoma Historical Society opened its downtown Exhibit Center in December 2005, more than 1,500 visitors from many parts of the world have signed our guest book.

From around the world Canberra, Australia; Milan, Italy; Sweden; Tokyo, Japan; Nuremberg, Germany; Tavira, Portugal; St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands; and Vancouver, Canada, are represented,

From around the United States: Louisville Park and Mobile, Alabama; Denver and Lafayette, Colorado; Austin and Dallas, Texas; Ames, Iowa; Hayden, Idaho; Canton and Cincinnati, Ohio; Asheville, and Raleigh, North Carolina; Salisbury, Pennsylvania; Carmichael, Corona Del Mar, Durban, Cupertino, Elk Grove, Fullerton, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Roseville, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose, Sunland, and Ventura, California; Salt Lake City, Utah; Bronx and Sunnyside, New York; Massachusetts; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Hillsboro and Oregon City, Oregon; Wilmette, Illinois; New Orleans, Louisiana; Scottsdale, Arizona; Las Vegas, Nevada; Berwyn, Chicago, and Willamette, Illinois; Apple Valley and Minneapolis, Minnesota; Louisville, Kentucky; Drummond Island, Michigan; Springfield, Missouri; Ardmore and Miami, Oklahoma.

And more than 59 communities all over Washington state. With the hundreds of visitors from the Tacoma and Pierce County area we can take pride in our progress.

– Marie Hayden

Yes we can

It’s not always easy and the way sometimes looks forbidding, but visitors and volunteers can indeed reach the Tacoma Historical Society Exhibit Center at 747 Broadway.

Despite the heavy-duty construction involved in the city’s Broadway Local Improvement District, we still recorded 75 visitors in January.

Noteworthy...

Ron Karabaich wants it known that he is continuing his Old Town Photo business from his home at 2901 N. Carr St. He has closed his store on North 30th Street. He can be reached at 253-272-3089 or by e-mail at karabaichr@nventure.com. His website is www.OLDTOWNPHOTO.COM.

Silent Rails Crossing from pg. 1

called Nalley Valley. It may have cost less to build, but the steep route proved more expensive to use.

Despite its beginning problems, the railroad initiated Tacoma's rapid growth. The Prairie Line brought more than grain, coal and lumber to Tacoma. The growth of the railroad was instrumental in causing Tacoma's population to boom in the 1880s and more than double between 1900 and 1910.

"Tacoma wouldn't have been much of anything if it hadn't been chosen as the terminus of the railroad," Tacoma historian Dale Wirsing commented.

In addition, the Prairie Line served as a "nice little safety valve when other railroads met with problems," according to Fredrickson. "Every now and then there would be a train wreck or a derailment and the Prairie Line would come to the rescue."

The steep slope that made the Prairie Line expensive to run at the same time protected it from mudslides that sometimes plagued the water-level route, and it was used to reroute trains when other tracks were blocked by accidents or Mother Nature. Additionally, the Prairie Line continued to play a vital role during World War II as the railroad cars carried soldiers to Fort Lewis, Fredrickson noted.

Conversely, the Prairie Line had competition. In 1915, the water-level Point Defiance Line opened, according to Phillips' website. This more level route was less expensive to use, thus some of the Prairie Line's businesses switched to the preferable route. Over time, the Prairie Line lessened in importance.

Although the tracks that bisect the campus appear as if they were abandoned mid-way through the 20th century, the line has been out of service only since 2003. The railroad's current owner, Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF), closed the 2.1-mile spur when the Sound Transit Tacoma Link Light Rail was built in downtown Tacoma, according to a University of Washington Tacoma *The Ledger* article by Kayla Cogdill "End of tracks for campus railroad" (4/17/03).

Sound Transit would have been required to upgrade plans for the Link Light Rail so it could safely cross an active railroad line had the section of the Prairie Line that crossed busy Pacific Avenue continued in service.

The Prairie Line railroad played a role in shaping Tacoma, as well as the UWT campus. Thus, UWT chose to preserve the abandoned part of the railroad that travels through the campus.

We owe the campus' uniquely named buildings to the warehouses that were served by the Prairie Line, according to Milt Tremblay, UWT Director of Facilities and Campus Services. He explained that the history of the campus has influenced the style of the buildings, including the use of brick and arched windows.

The Prairie Line is also the explanation for the skybridge between the Keystone and Science buildings, according to



Trains no longer run on the section of the Prairie Line that bisects the University of Washington Tacoma campus, but crossing warnings remain as a reminder of the past.

Photos by Dale Wirsing

Tremblay. A train blocking the sidewalk would be no excuse for arriving late to class.

University of Washington Tacoma's master plan envisions making the railroad right-of-way into a bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly path similar to others in the Tacoma area. Several other railroad rights of way have been converted into trails as part of the Pierce County Rails-to-Trails program.

UWT has partnered with interest groups such as Pierce County and the City of Tacoma in its efforts to purchase the right of way. Tremblay emphasized that UWT is interested in being involved in the continuing development of the Tacoma area. "Collaborative projects are very important to us at UWT," he stated.

As recently as Feb. 10 of this year, *The News Tribune* reported that the City of Tacoma is still negotiating with BNSF to acquire a portion of the Prairie Line right of way with a view toward developing a biking and pedestrian trail between South 15th and 27th streets.

In the meantime, the Prairie Line continues doing the job it began in Tacoma on that steep slope in fulfilling a need for rail service for more than a century. Although its glory days in Tacoma have passed, the Prairie Line is not extinct.

"The Prairie Line still has industries that need service," Fredrickson noted. He reminded us that Nalley Valley industries continue to receive shipments along the old railroad. In addition, he said, the Prairie Line still extends to Roy, carrying chicken feed to Wilcox Farms.

However, the forsaken section of the Prairie Line traveling through the University of Washington Tacoma campus serves only foot traffic and carries only memories.

Mason Plaza enhances Proctor District with public mansion

Installation honors visionary entrepreneur, preserves columns from his home

A large crowd braved chilly winds December 6 to attend a celebration marking completion of a landmark plaza remembering Tacoma entrepreneur Allen Chase Mason. The grand opening ceremony was held at the plaza at the Wheelock Library, North 26th and Adams Streets in Tacoma.

Mason Plaza provides a public urban space for all to enjoy and learn more about the visionary who shaped Tacoma's history. A bronze life-sized statue of Mason, created by sculptor Paul R. Michaels, invites visitors to gather on granite benches framed by six grand historic sandstone columns from the portico of Mason's former 1890s North End mansion.

Mason (1855–1920) proclaimed Tacoma's advantages to the nation through extensive newspaper advertising.

"The plaza serves as a tribute to Tacoma history and a permanent expression of the community's commitment to art and culture," said project manager Joe Quilici. "It creates a way of integrating Mason artifacts into a present-day interpretative center and major focal point of countywide significance."

Mason Middle School, Mason Avenue and Mason Methodist Church are named for him, as is the Tacoma Historical Society's exhibit space at 747 Broadway.

The \$250,000 plaza project was supported by a \$25,000 grant from the Pierce County Landmarks and Historic Preservation Commission, \$10,000 from the Pierce County Council (District 4) and \$1,000 from the Pierce County Arts Commission.

Tacoma Historical Society, a 501(c) 3 organization, served as fiscal agent for the project.



Sculptor Paul R. Michaels with his creation, the life-size statue of Tacoma promoter and developer Allen C. Mason.



Tacoma Mayor Bill Baarsma listens as Dr. Jim Hoard reviews the contributions of Allen C. Mason during dedication ceremonies Dec. 6.

Photos by Wilma Peterson

"The Vision of Allen C. Mason – Tacoma's Super Salesman"

Remarks at the Dedication of
Mason Plaza – December 6, 2008

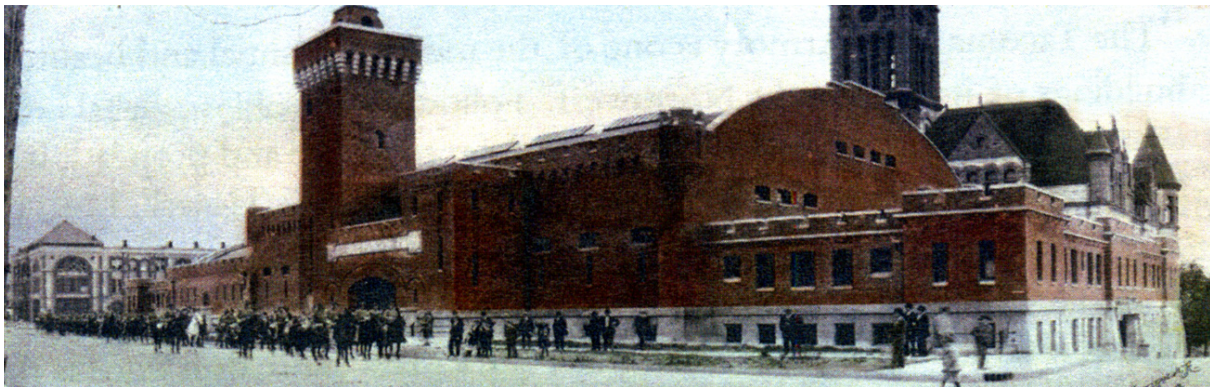
Dr. James E. Hoard,
President, Tacoma Historical Society

It's Allen C. Mason's spirit and his vision that has led to the construction of the Mason Plaza we're dedicating today. Mason Plaza honors our heritage and reminds us of what Allen Mason meant to Tacoma and to its development. So, who was Allen C. Mason?

He was born in Polo, Illinois in 1855. Polo is a farming community about 75 miles or so due west of Chicago. From an early age Mason was both a good student and a hard worker, raising chickens on his own chicken farm when he was just 13. He went off to college in Bloomington, Illinois, and graduated from Illinois Wesleyan University in 1875. He married Libbie Lawrence, who also graduated from Illinois Wesleyan, in 1878. He became a high school principal. While an educator, he wrote a school textbook and a book on pedagogy, both of which sold well. He read the law and was admitted to the Illinois bar.

He determined to move west and after reading a number of articles, he settled on Tacoma. He arrived in Tacoma in 1883 with his family to practice law and seek his fortune. After renting a house and an office, he had just \$2.85 in his pocket. He began to practice law and was one of the founders of the bar association. He got into real estate. He was so good at it that he made \$10,000 in just his first year. Thus began a remarkably successful business career. In 1884, he built gas and electric plants in Olympia, selling them at a good profit. In 1886, he established the Shore Line Railroad and laid tracks northward from Old Tacoma toward Pt. Defiance. The Northern Pacific bought him out. He joined forces with Nelson Bennett (who built the Stampede Pass Tunnel among a host of other accom-

Vision of Mason, cont. on pg. 6



Gala event marks Armory's centennial

Photos courtesy of Charlotte Medlock

An Historic Experience

By Charlotte Medlock

The word was out. There would be a Centennial Ball at the Armory, and oh how I wanted to go. It was the place where my Stadium High School graduation was held in 1943. First I learned that there were no more tickets. Then a call came—there were two prepaid tickets available. How exciting! We would be “A Part of History.” The Washington National Guard Armory was built in 1908 and would mark its centennial on January 1, 2009.

The evening of December 6th we drove south on Yakima Avenue toward the Armory. We approached the closed-off street, following a horse-drawn carriage carrying ladies in period costumes and men in uniforms. How appropriate! Their carriage stopped in front of the building.

On the arm of a National Guardsman I climbed the ramp to the entrance. How beautiful the Armory looked. The huge space was decorated with lighted evergreen trees. In the center were round tables draped with white cloths, where 350 people would be seated for dinner. We were assigned to Maj. James Sharrett's table. From the balcony hung flags of all 50 of our states and four territories and from the north end of the building hung a huge American flag, the largest I'd ever seen.

Most Guardsmen were in their dress blues, except for one who wore a Revolutionary War uniform and the color guard in Civil War Union Army blues. Most ladies wore formals, but a few were garbed in period costumes. How grand they all looked.

The 133rd Army Band played preceding the buffet dinner. No alcoholic beverages were permitted—a cocktail party had been held earlier at another location. Our host explained there would be mounted horses coming inside the building. “Have they been practicing?” I asked, a little worried, as they would be near our table.

The program opened with the welcome of 96th Troop Commander Col. George Allen Abbot and followed by introductions of special guests—Tacoma Mayor Bill Baarsma, City Councilman Mike Lonergan and his wife Paula, and yours truly Charlotte Medlock, representing the Tacoma Historical Society, and husband Capt. (ret.) Robert L. Medlock. Other introductions followed.

The Presentation of Colors honored the men who served there in 1908, Troop B, Cavalry and Co A, 2nd Infantry. They were presented by members of the Washington National Guard 96th Troop Command and assisted by a



Charlotte Medlock and husband Capt. (ret.) Robert L. Medlock were honored to cut the armory's centennial cake.



Mounted units caused our correspondent a little worry

mounted color guard. The POW/MIA ceremony was conducted, followed by “Amazing Grace,” by piper SSG Patrick O'Hara. After the centennial dinner my husband and I were honored by being asked to cut the centennial cake.

Mayor Baarsma read a proclamation and gave a history of the 100-year-old Armory. Not only has it served as a place for military activities but also as a civic auditorium. Many recall receiving their high school diplomas there.

Special guest speaker was Dr. William Woodward, professor of history, Seattle Pacific University, who is a retired lieutenant colonel in the Washington National Guard and former Command historian for the Guard. In recounting National Guard history,

Historic Experience, cont. on pg. 6

Vision of Mason, cont. from pg. 4

plishments) to build street car lines in Tacoma. He eventually sold his interest, but later founded other street car companies and built the line through the Proctor District to Pt. Defiance. He also invested in irrigation works near Yakima and in farming in the Palouse. He became a director of several Northwest banks. He became the largest stockholder in the Tacoma Theater building, a stockholder in the Tacoma Hotel, and an investor in the Tacoma smelter. He built downtown real estate blocks in Tacoma (the Mason Block is at 10th and A St.), Fairhaven (now part of Bellingham), and Yakima.

But he put much of his development efforts into residential development, and advertised heavily throughout the country to attract newcomers. He not only sold lots, he built scores of the houses that were constructed on them. He was responsible for platting and selling 13 additions in Tacoma's north end. To open up his properties for development, he built both streets and bridges. The viaducts across both Buckley gulch on N. 21st St. and Puget gulch on North Proctor were built by Mason. He donated them to the city. He improved the land just west of the Proctor Street viaduct and donated it to the city as a park. (It's today's Puget Park.) In 1888 he was elected to the board that launched Puget Sound University. Also in 1888, Mason's Commencement Bay Land & Improvement Co. undertook building wharfs and warehouse operations along 1¼ miles of waterfront. In 1889, he organized the first boatload of bread and meat that went from Tacoma to Seattle when news of the great Seattle fire was received. Within a decade of arriving in Tacoma, Allen C. Mason was a multimillionaire.

In 1892 he built a magnificent mansion at 4301 North Stevens. It cost \$86,000, the equivalent of sev-

eral million dollars today. It had thirty-six rooms, and used local woods and stone extensively. In the Panic of 1893, when Mason lost most of his fortune, he sold it to Whitworth College, which used the mansion as its main building from 1899 to 1913, when the college moved to Spokane. John P. Weyerhaeuser bought the property and demolished Mason's mansion in 1920 when he built "Haddaway Hall." The sandstone columns from the mansion's portico were used in the landscaping. The Northwest Baptist Seminary, which now occupies the site, generously donated the six sandstone columns, almost all that remains of Mason's mansion, for this plaza.

It's notable that in the Panic of 1893, Mason personally bought back houses from anyone who asked, losing all his money in the process. He truly was a person of rare integrity.

No one foresaw Tacoma's destiny more clearly than Allen C. Mason. Where others saw woods and wilderness, he saw a metropolis. Mason employed the phrase, The City of Destiny, over 100 years ago and promoted our community as a wonderful place to live.

Along the way, he promoted Tacoma more than any other person, advertising our city's strengths in east coast papers through a dazzling illustration he called Tacoma's Star of Destiny. At its height, his advertising budget was over \$5,000 a month—at a time when that was real money. The bronze rendition of his Star of Destiny that is part of Mason Plaza dates from 1910. Mason's slogans on the Star name all the railroads and shipping lines that serve Tacoma, point to its many manufacturing and job opportunities, and its favorable geography. And he sprinkles in some reasons that you will love living in Tacoma. My personal favorites are:

"The grass stays green all winter," "Ideal for Retired Capitalists," and "No poisonous bugs or reptiles."

The statue of Mason depicts him extending a hand of welcome. If you buy a building site from him, he will, we can suppose, be pleased to give you a cigar from the breast pocket of his vest.

In closing, let me add that it's most appropriate that Mason Plaza be located adjacent to the Wheelock Library. That's because Allen C. Mason gave the city its first public library, along with 6,000 volumes to put inside it. Allen C. Mason was, then, a person of uncommon integrity and a unique combination of visionary, promoter, salesman, builder, businessman, and philanthropist.

The Tacoma Historical Society has been pleased to team with the Proctor District Association to construct Mason Plaza. We trust that you will enjoy it.

Historic Experience, cont. from pg. 5

he told the audience that Tacoma's Armory is the only one west of the Mississippi that has been used as a military facility continuously for the past 100 years.

Col. Abbott of the 96th Troop Command came to Maj. Sharett's table where we were seated and thanked us for coming. A medal had been cast to commemorate the event, and the colonel gave us one.

As much as I'd have liked to dance in the Armory, the music was not our kind (and maybe no one's) and we made our way home. The evening more than met all my expectations. How grand it was!

For those who have never been in the Armory or wish to renew old memories, the Armory will be part of Tacoma Historical Society's Historic Homes of Tacoma Tour May 2 and 3, 2009.

2008 ANNUAL APPEAL

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Regular meetings

March 9, 2009 – Monday, 7 pm

Tacoma Public Library

***“Life and Times of Gentleman Jim, the Story of
Tacoma’s Admiral James S. Russell,”*** Malcolm Russell

April 13, 2009 – Monday, 6:30 pm

Bates Technical College, Downtown Campus

“A Tale of Two Mayors,” Tacoma Mayor Bill Baarsma
***19th Annual Meeting – Presentation of Murray Morgan
and Alan C. Liddle awards.***

May 2 & 3, 2009

16th Annual Historic Homes of Tacoma Tour

June 8, 2009 – Monday, 7 pm

Tacoma Public Library

“Tough Times in T-Town,” Thomas R. Stenger

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CITY OF DESTINY NEWSLETTER

published by The Tacoma Historical Society

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