

U.S. Customs and the San Juan Sheep War

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U.S. Customs was the thin blue line protecting our nation's borders for over two hundred years. Protecting our nation's borders was never an easy job but it became even more difficult when our nation expanded westward, and when both our northern and southern borders were so often in dispute. These disputes were left to boundary commissions, the U.S. State Department, and politicians to sort out and resolve, often taking years to settle.

One such dispute involved San Juan Island located between British Canada and the Washington Territory in the Straits of Juan de Fuca. The island was not inhabited by Anglo settlers of either nation but was coveted by both because of its fertile farmland. With sovereignty over the island still in dispute in 1854, the British Hudson Bay Company established a sheep farm on the island and had plans to colonize the newly claimed land.

While the bureaucrats wrung their hands, Isaac Neff Ebey, the Collector of Customs for the Puget Sound at Port Townsend, took immediate action. On April 21, 1854, Collector Ebey visited the island and handed a bill to Charles Griffin, the farm manager, for the U.S. Customs duties on the newly arrived sheep. Collector Ebey advised that the sheep "were liable to seizure" for being smuggled into U.S. territory. When payment was not forthcoming, Ebey advised Griffin that he would return to the island later to collect the duty.

On May 3rd, Collector Ebey returned to the island with soon-to-be U.S. Customs Inspector Henry Webber. Griffin refused to pay the duty and warned Ebey that he would be subject to arrest and other penalties for "molesting property and disturbing the peace" if Ebey attempted to enforce U.S. law. Griffin quickly summoned Victoria Governor James Douglas and British Collector of Customs James Sangster to the island for back up.

Arriving the next day, Governor Douglas quickly surmised that Collector Ebey and Webber did not constitute an invasion force and he decided to return to Victoria. But before Douglas departed, he ordered Collector Sangster ashore with a Union Jack which he was directed to run up a flagpole at the sheep ranch.

Collector Sangster then approached Collector Ebey and asked him what his intentions were. Collector Ebey replied that he was thinking of placing an inspector on the island. Collector Sangster advised Ebey that Webber would be arrested if he were left on the island.

The gauntlet had been thrown. Collector Ebey was not about to back down. The next morning, Collector Ebey and Webber were banging on Griffin's cabin door. When Griffin opened the door, Collector Ebey swore Webber in as a U.S. Customs Inspector. Inspector Webber then immediately pitched a tent next to Griffin's cabin and ran up the U.S. Flag.

Now, tensions were building on the island. Griffin and Collector Sangster arrived at inspector Webber's tent the next morning along with a constable and announced they were going to arrest him. Inspector Webber instantaneously pulled a revolver and pointed it at the constable's chest warning that if the constable touched him, he would fire. The British officials influenced by inspector Webber's "brace of pistols hung about his waist and knife in his boot," promptly withdrew from the confrontation.

The incident continued to escalate as Collector Sangster and the constable returned with six men to assist in the arrest, but inspector Webber continued to resist. The constable now requested Griffin's permission to arm himself so he could confront inspector Webber again. It began to look like Britain and the U.S. would go to war over the sheep on San Juan Island.

Just as the situation looked out of control, Griffin ordered the constable and Collector Sangster to leave Webber alone with his guns and knife if Webber did not attempt to cause trouble. This sovereignty of San Juan Island would have to be ironed out by higher level officials of both countries.

The stalemate over sovereignty of the island continued until trouble flared again during what became known as the "Pig War" in 1859. This confrontation over the shooting of a British owned pig by an American settler escalated to the point of both nations stationing troops on the island to protect their interests. Peace again prevailed and the troops jointly occupied the island until October of 1872 when the German Kaiser acting as an arbitrator for the joint boundary commission ruled that San Juan Island was part of the United States.

Collector Ebey did not live to see San Juan Island officially become a part of the United States. On August 11th of 1857, Ebey was confronted by a group of northern coastal Indians allegedly seeking revenge for the killing of one of their chiefs and several members of their tribe. Unfortunately, Ebey was shot dead and beheaded at his residence on Whidbey Island. Ebey was laid to rest in the Ebey family cemetery located on a bluff overlooking his home.

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Additional references are available upon request.