

The Treaty Trail: U. S. - Indian Treaty Councils in the Northwest

Treaties and Councils: What is a Treaty?

Today, all Americans live on what was once Indian land. Treaties transferred that land from Indian to United States control.

Treaties are documents that formalize relationships and understandings between two or more sovereign states. Sovereign states govern themselves, recognizing no superior power. Like the thirteen original states, Indian tribes were originally considered independent nations with established territories and the power of self-governance. Treaties brought Indian tribes into the Union with their inherent sovereignty intact, although federal statutes, court decisions, and administrative policies limited its actual exercise.



Shown here are the "Treaty Trees" at the site of the signing of the [Medicine Creek Treaty](#) on December 26, 1854. Photograph by Asahel Curtis and Walter Miller, 1914; Washington State Historical Society Collection.

Long before the American Revolution, Indian tribes formed complex networks of alliances. In 1751, Benjamin Franklin noted the contrast between the masterful alliances within the Iroquois Confederation and the inability of early colonial leaders to do the same:

"It would be a very strange thing if Six Nations of Ignorant Savages should be capable of forming a scheme for such a Union and be able to execute in such a manner, as that it has subsisted for ages, and appears indissoluble, and yet a like Union should be impracticable for ten or a dozen English colonies."

Letter to James Parker, 1751.

President George Washington signed the first treaties with Indian tribes for the newly independent United States. These first negotiations were between two bargaining equals and were treaties of peace. Both sides were militarily powerful.

Indian tribes believed the treaties became effective when they were signed. But United States law required Congress to approve all treaties after they were negotiated. Between 1789 and 1871, the United States negotiated approximately 800 treaties, but Congress ratified, or approved, fewer than 400—including the ten treaties negotiated by Isaac Stevens between 1854 and 1856.

The Treaty Trail: U. S. - Indian Treaty Councils in the Northwest

STUDENT READING: CAUSE AND EFFECT

INDIAN LIFE BEFORE RESERVATIONS

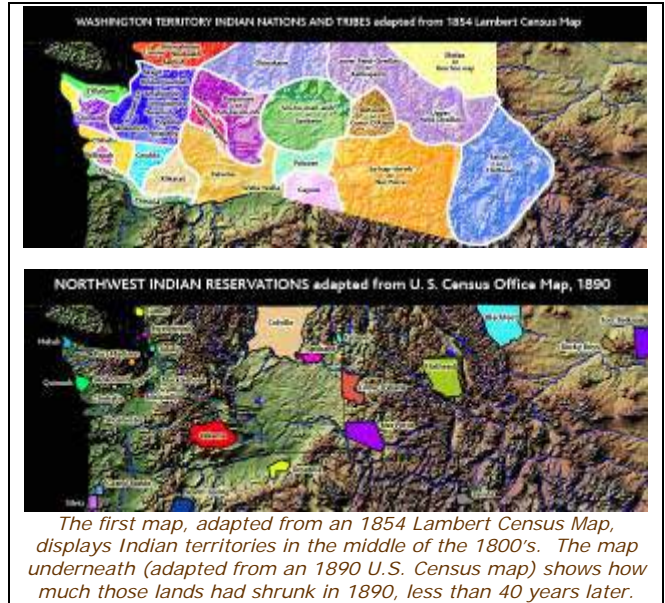
Before European/American arrival in the Northwest, there were no empty lands. The original homelands of native groups covered the entire expanse of lands now known as Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana. These lands were places where Indians lived, traveled, hunted, fished, and gathered food. Sacred places where ancestors were buried and religious rites and ceremonies performed also were a part of these lands.

However, the U.S.-Indian treaties of 1854 through 1856 left Indian tribes with only a small part of their former homelands. Tribes gave up millions of acres in Washington Territory alone, in exchange for a guarantee or promise that their rights would be protected, that some lands would be reserved, and that many goods and services would be provided for them by the U.S. Government.



This picture of the Dalles, taken by Asahel Curtis in 1916, shows the Dalles as it was before the Dalles Dam. It was once a series of waterfalls twelve miles long, with its head, Celilo Falls having a 20 foot drop. Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

Some of the richest natural resources of the region were shared among different tribes and brought different people together.



The first map, adapted from an 1854 Lambert Census Map, displays Indian territories in the middle of the 1800's. The map underneath (adapted from an 1890 U.S. Census map) shows how much those lands had shrunk in 1890, less than 40 years later.

For example, the fisheries around The Dalles and Celilo Falls provided an important food source for many native groups from different tribes. The gatherings at these important places were times for different tribes to trade, share information, and develop relationships with each other. Because many native people spoke multiple languages, they could communicate with other groups.

Native people used plants, animals, and other resources carefully so that their children and grandchildren would be able to use them as well. Caring for these resources was a way of respecting the land and treating what it had to offer as gifts. Each Indian community had responsibilities and obligations to care for the natural resources. These responsibilities and relationships with the land were different from the European idea of private property and ownership of land.

EARLY SETTLERS

In the 1820s, Congressmen and others urged Americans to consider the Oregon Country as a new place to live. Beginning in the 1830s and increasing dramatically in the 1840s, a large number of Americans came into the Oregon Country. The Willamette Valley was one of the first places settled.

As the United States continued to explore the western half of the country, the creation of new laws made it easier for settlers to cross the country. Accurate maps, enthusiastic reports, and trail guides helped attract people to the western territory.

Unfavorable living conditions in the rest of the United States also encouraged many people to choose to immigrate to Oregon Territory. In the Mississippi Valley, for example, nearly ten years of hard times began in 1837. Bad weather and widespread sickness worsened living conditions already made difficult by economic depression.



Detail from "Nez Percés" by John Mix Stanley. This picture, created in October of 1853, displays a meeting between Isaac Stevens' railroad survey team and a hunting band of Nez Percé Indians. Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

THE COMING OF THE RAILROAD

In 1853 Isaac Stevens successfully applied to President Pierce for the governorship of the new Washington Territory, a post that also carried the title of Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Not content with just two jobs, Stevens asked for and was given a job with the proposed transcontinental railroad survey. Washington Territory Governor Isaac

Stevens was placed in command of documenting the northern route by recording information about plants, animals, Indian tribes, and topography of the land. The railroad would bring large numbers of people and economic development to the region.

THE TREATY TRAIL

From 1854 - 1855, Governor Isaac Stevens traveled hundreds of miles across the modern states of Washington and parts of Montana, Oregon and Idaho negotiating ten treaties that would open the territory for future, ongoing white settlement of the region. The American drive for occupation of Western land led to the creation of a reservation system established through the treaty councils.

The treaties attempted to isolate Indian society and remove Native Americans from their traditional land and culture. One of the goals of the Reservation system was to concentrate the Indians upon a few reservations, and encourage them to abandon Indian culture and adopt European types of farming, schooling, and prayer.

This period of United States History was greatly influenced by the vision of "Manifest Destiny", the belief that the United States had a mission to expand freedom and democracy. The term became used to describe expansion of the United States westward from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean.

The Treaty Trail in the Northwest changed how both Native American peoples and non-native peoples have experienced life in the United States since 1854. As a result some of our family histories involve triumphant journeys westward to start a new life; other family histories tell of displacement, survival, and innovation amid discrimination. By opening up the region to the commercial development of natural resources, even the landscape around us is evidence of the Treaty Trail.

The Treaty Trail: U. S. - Indian Treaty Councils in the Northwest

TEACHER AND STUDENT READING BIOGRAPHY OF GUSTAV SOHON



Photograph of artist Gustav Sohon. As an artist, Sohon was a product of his time and his depictions of treaty events reflect this. His drawings and watercolor paintings allow everyone who views them to see, through his eyes, the treaty councils between the United States Government and Indian tribes of the Pacific Northwest. Courtesy of the Sohon Private Collection.

Born in 1825 in Belgium, Gustav Sohon was educated in Tilsit, Germany. He immigrated to the United States in 1842, and in the early 1850s, he enlisted in the U.S. Army. Upon his enlistment he was stationed in the west, and eventually found his way to Fort Steilacoom, Washington Territory. One of his first assignments was with Lieutenant John Mullan, who was surveying the country between the Rocky and Bitterroot Mountains for the railroad survey led by Isaac Stevens.

Sohon Reaches the Northwest

From that moment on, Sohon witnessed and contributed to some of the most important events in the history of the Northwest. As an army private, he served with the Stevens railroad survey for over a year before Washington Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens noticed his artistic ability. Sohon traveled with Governor Isaac Stevens on his historic campaign of 1855: the Treaty Trail, where he documented events of the journey

and treaty councils with Native American tribes. Sohon proved to have a flair for languages, and was soon fluent in the Flathead and Pend d'Oreille languages. He could communicate with the Native peoples, and many allowed him to draw pictures of them.

Sohon was also a talented painter, who produced accurate landscapes and vivid scenes from native life, including the first panoramic view of the Rocky Mountains and the earliest-known sketch of the Great Falls of the Missouri.

What is a landscape?

To an artist, a **landscape** is art that represents a place in the natural environment.



The detail of the painting "Crossing the Bitter Roots, Nov. 1855" by Gustav Sohon depicts his 1855 journey with the Stevens party through the Bitterroot Mountains. Two men and several horses or mules are following a steep trail through a snow-covered landscape. Courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society.

The End of Army Life

Sohon's five-year enlistment ended in July 1857. He then sought out his earlier friend and mentor, Lieutenant John Mullan. Mullan was leading the construction of a military road from Walla Walla to Fort Benton, and Sohon surveyed routes and kept track of the construction progress. In 1860 Sohon guided the first wagon party to cross the Rocky and Bitterroot Mountains to the Columbia Plateau by a route other than the more commonly used Overland Trail. When Mullan's Road was complete, Sohon went with him to Washington, DC, to assist in the preparation of topographical data, maps, and illustrations for a report on the road's construction. He never returned to the Northwest.

Marriage and Family

In April 1863, Gustav Sohon and Julianna Groh were married. For a brief time they lived in San Francisco, where Sohon ran a photography studio. Several years later, they returned to Washington, DC, where Sohon disappeared from public life, running a shoe business and raising a large family with Julianna. He died on September 9, 1903.

As an artist, Sohon was a product of his time and his depictions of treaty events reflect this. His drawings and watercolor paintings allow everyone who views them to see, through his eyes, the treaty councils

between the United States Government and Indian tribes of the Pacific Northwest.



This painting by Sohon, "Bloods Come into Council, Blackfoot Country, 1855", portrays the artist's perspective of a scene at the Blackfeet Council with four Blood Indians riding into camp on horseback. Two men in the foreground, one carrying a large American flag and shooting a gun into the air. The other man also has a firearm and is holding the bottom corner of the flag. In the background are two women on horseback. One horse is pulling a travois. Both women's horses have decorated collars or martingales. Courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society.

Sources:

- Buerge, David M. "Big Little Man: Isaac Stevens (1818-1861)," *Washingtonians: A biographical Portrait of the State*. Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 1988.
- McDermott, Paul D. and Ronald E. Grim "The Artistic Views of Gustavus Sohon: Images of Colonel Wright's Campaign of 1858" *Columbia: The Magazine of Northwest History*, 2002, Vol. 16, No.2
- Nicandri, David L. *Northwest Chiefs: Gustav Sohon's View of the 1855 Stevens Treaty Councils*. Tacoma: Washington State Historical Society, 1986.

The Treaty Trail: U. S. - Indian Treaty Councils in the Northwest

BIOGRAPHY OF SPOKAN GARRY (1811-1892)



Sketch of Spokan Garry of the Spokane Indian tribe by artist Gustav Sohon done on May 27, 1855. The signature on the illustration is by Garry himself.

Courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society.

Spokan Garry was born in 1811. Although his boyhood name is not known, we know that early traders mistook his father's name, Illim-Spokanee, for the name of the tribe. In this way, the Sma-hoo-men-a-ish people became known as the Middle Spokanes. Garry grew up around the white traders who built their post near his tribe, so he was very familiar with the "King George" men (the British) and the "Bostons" (the Americans).

Garry Goes to School and Returns

At the age of fourteen, Garry was selected as one of two boys from the surrounding tribes to be sent to the Red River School at Fort Garry, sponsored by the Hudson's Bay Company and run by the Church Missionary Society of the Church of England. There Garry learned history, geography, religious studies, and he learned to read and speak English and French.

In 1828, at the age of eighteen, Garry traveled the 1800-mile trip back to the Spokane River. The encroachment of the white population on the tribes of the Northwest put stress on their traditional religious beliefs. The tribe accepted the Christian teachings brought back by Garry upon his return and combined them with their traditional beliefs.

When George Gibbs traveled through the area, he described how Spokan Garry appeared to him:

Garry himself accompanied us to the forks of the Spokane, where his band usually reside. A few lodges, chiefly old men and women, were there at the time. His own, in neatness and comfort, was far beyond any we had seen. His family were dressed in the costume of the whites, which in fact now prevails over their own. Many of the Spokanes, besides their intercourse with the fort, visit the American settlements, where they earn money by occasional work, most of which is spent in clothing, blankets, &c. The chief offered us the hospitality of his house with much cordiality - a cup of tea or coffee and bread.



A detail of the signature of Spokan Garry.
Courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society.

The Coming of the American Missionaries

When missionaries arrived in the area, rather than building on Garry's teachings, they began attacking the way he understood Christianity. This conflict led Garry to give up his school and public preaching. He also stopped wearing white man's clothing, gradually returning to traditional dress and activities, many of which did not meet the approval of the Missionaries.

Washington Becomes a Territory

On October 17, 1853, Garry was summoned to a meeting with newly-appointed Governor of Washington Territory, Isaac Stevens, who was making his way east from Olympia, the new territorial capital. Garry surprised Stevens by carrying on a lengthy and fluent conversation that evening, in both English and French. Garry was uncertain of Stevens' intent with regard to the Indians, so he remained as noncommittal as possible on the issues.

Stevens and the Treaties

In Spring of 1855, Spokan Garry attended the Walla Walla Treaty Council as an observer. The Yakama tribe was one of several tribes signing treaties at this time. A few days after the treaty an announcement published in a newspaper encouraged a stream of pioneers to east of the Cascades and settle on Yakama land. The Yakamas decided to fight to keep whites out of their territory and recruited other tribes to help them. Many of the younger Spokanes joined. Garry

pleaded for no action against the whites until they could talk to Governor Stevens.

The Treaty council with Spokan Garry and the Spokane Tribe was the last treaty council of 1855. Stevens, hearing about the outbreak of war while traveling back from Blackfeet country, arrived suddenly in the Spokane village on the evening of November 27, and surprised the Spokanes by demanding an instant decision for war or peace.

When the chiefs of the Spokane, Coeur d'Alenes, Colvilles were assembled, along with some French Canadians, Stevens opened the council and promised friendship.

Stevens then urged that the tribes relinquish lands and move to reservations.

Garry had been appointed spokesman for the tribes. He delivered a long and passionate speech revealing the Indians' point of view.

This speech left Stevens, for the first time in the treaty process, on the defensive. Of all the

councils held by Stevens with the Indians, the Spokane Council was the only one that failed to produce a signed treaty.

The Later Years

As the white settlers poured into the region in the years following the Civil War, Garry tried to protect himself and his followers by continually seeking to secure a treaty with the Government and preserve a portion of

"When you first commenced to speak, you said the Wallawallas, Cayuses, and Umatillas were to move onto the Nez Perce Reservation, and that the Spokanes were to move there also. Then I thought you spoke bad. Then I thought when you said that, you would strike the Indian to the heart."

- Spokan Garry at the Spokane Council

his country for his tribe. This, he felt, had been promised by Governor Stevens. In 1881 the Spokane reservation was created as a subdivision of the Colville Agency.

The following year, while Garry and his family were at a temporary fishing camp, trespassers took possession of his own farm, which he had fenced and cultivated for many years. Garry tried to recover his land through the legal system. Shortly before his death, a final judgment was made against his claim of ownership; his home, valued at \$2,500, passed into the hands of another man with no compensation made to Garry or his family.

On January 14, 1892, Spokane Garry died in poverty. Today many members of the Spokane Tribe reside on the Spokane Indian Reservation.

Sources:

Gibbs, George *A Report of Mr. George Gibbs to Captain McClellan, on the Indian Tribes of the Territory of Washington.* Olympia, Washington Territory, 1854.

Jeset, Thomas E. *Chief Spokan Garry: Christian Statesman, Friend of the White Man.* Minneapolis, MN: T. S. Dennison & Company, Inc., 1960.

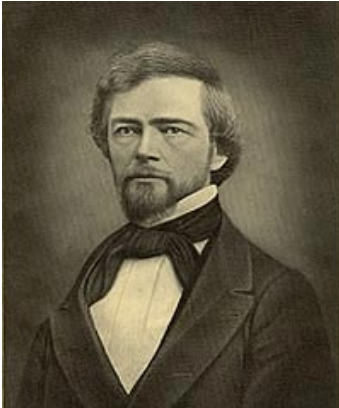
Josephy, Alvin M. *The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997.

Ruby, Robert H. and John A. Brown *The Spokane Indians: Children of the Sun.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970.

Stevens, Isaac Ingalls *A True Copy of the Record of the Official Proceedings at the Council in the Walla Walla Valley 1855.* Fairfield, WA: Ye Galleon Press, 1985

The Treaty Trail: U. S. - Indian Treaty Councils in the Northwest

BIOGRAPHY OF ISAAC INGALLS STEVENS



Portrait of Isaac Stevens, first Governor of Washington Territory (March 25, 1818–September 1, 1862). Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

A small man of large ambition and keen intelligence, Isaac Stevens made a large

impact on the military and political institutions of the 19th century. Although his family was among the earliest settlers of Andover and the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and played a prominent role in colonial society, Stevens insisted that "he rose from humble but honest circumstances to win education, forge a career, and emerge as a figure of national prominence."

Education and Early Military Experience

Following his education at Phillips Academy in Massachusetts, Stevens attended West Point Academy, where he graduated in 1839, first in his class. His skills in mathematics, engineering, surveying, military strategy, and politics earned him a job in the prestigious Corps of Engineers, a government agency responsible at that time for the largest public works projects.

As an officer in the War with Mexico (1846-48), he had his first taste of combat. He returned home with a commission promoting him to the rank of major, and convinced of his country's

"manifest destiny." Stevens returned to the Corps of Engineers for a time, later

joining the newly established U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. This was the agency destined to map the nation and its newly acquired territories.

Stevens' Political Career Begins

His active support of Democrat Franklin Pierce's 1852 candidacy for President launched his own political career. In 1853 Stevens successfully applied to President Pierce for the governorship of the new Washington Territory, a post that also carried the title of Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Not content with just two jobs, Stevens also lobbied for a position with the proposed transcontinental railroad survey. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis placed him in command of the survey of the northern route.

Stevens's survey expedition left Minnesota in June 1853. The expedition was responsible for documenting the potential route of the railroad, and recording information about the flora, fauna, and the Native American tribes whose homelands were being surveyed.

Wasting no time, Governor Stevens quickly organized a territorial government, settled claims by the British-owned Hudson's Bay Company, expended \$5,000 for books to set up a territorial library, and petitioned Congress for land on which to build a university. However, it would be his duties as Superintendent of Indian Affairs that would truly define his long-term impact on the future State of Washington.

In June of 1854, leaving acting Governor Charles Mason and the new legislature in charge, Stevens returned to the nation's

capital to lobby for money to cover the remaining debts from the railroad survey expedition, and to secure funding for the Indian treaty councils. He returned home with money to build military roads and funding for the treaty councils.

Stevens immediately plunged into the task of organizing the councils. He intended to make treaties with the Indians to secure the necessary resources for building the railroad and to obtain land sought by the ever-increasing stream of settlers flowing into the region. His agents had already been visiting the various Indian villages, selecting individuals to represent each tribe.

The Medicine Creek Council

On the day after Christmas in 1854, Stevens held his first treaty council at Medicine Creek in the Nisqually Delta. The Nisqually, Puyallup, Steilacoom, Squaxin, and other tribes, were informed in advance of the upcoming negotiations. They were anticipating fair payment for land settlers had already appropriated, and a reservation of land that would sustain their families and future generations.

What the tribes received were several widely separated small reservations. These brought different tribal bands together, but allowed the tribes to continue to fish, hunt, and gather food and other supplies in their usual accustomed places outside the reservations. The government also pledged to provide schools, blacksmith

shops, carpenters, and medical care. In return, the United States acquired 2.5 million acres of tribal land.

Understandably pleased at the positive outcome of the Medicine Creek Treaty, Stevens prematurely speculated that if the whole treaty program proceeded as smoothly, all the tribes would soon be on reservations. However, his lack of understanding of native culture led him to make some serious mistakes. He did not understand that Indian leaders had limited powers to represent their tribes, nor did he recognize that there would be resistance to moving tribes, who had traditionally been enemies, onto a single reservation.

News of the western treaties had quickly passed to the eastern Washington tribes, along with sad tales from the nation's interior and eastern states concerning the plight of the tribes in those regions. The Indians were aware that their lands had been ceded, and that just compensation and the promised services had

not been received from the "Great Father" in Washington, DC. They were understandably wary of Stevens and the treaty proceedings.

The Walla Walla Council

Although the Nez Perce, traditionally friendly to the whites, readily agreed to attend the Walla Walla Council, the Yakama, Walla Walla, and Cayuse bands were initially very reluctant to participate. Despite their misgivings, however, the Council formally convened on May 29,



This pair of epaulets in a metal case once belonged to Isaac Stevens. The epaulets are made of board covered with fabric and leather. A fringe made of coils of gold wire is attached around the outer edges. At the center of each epaulet is the symbol of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the shape of a castle. Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.

1855, with thousands of tribal members in attendance.

The Civil War

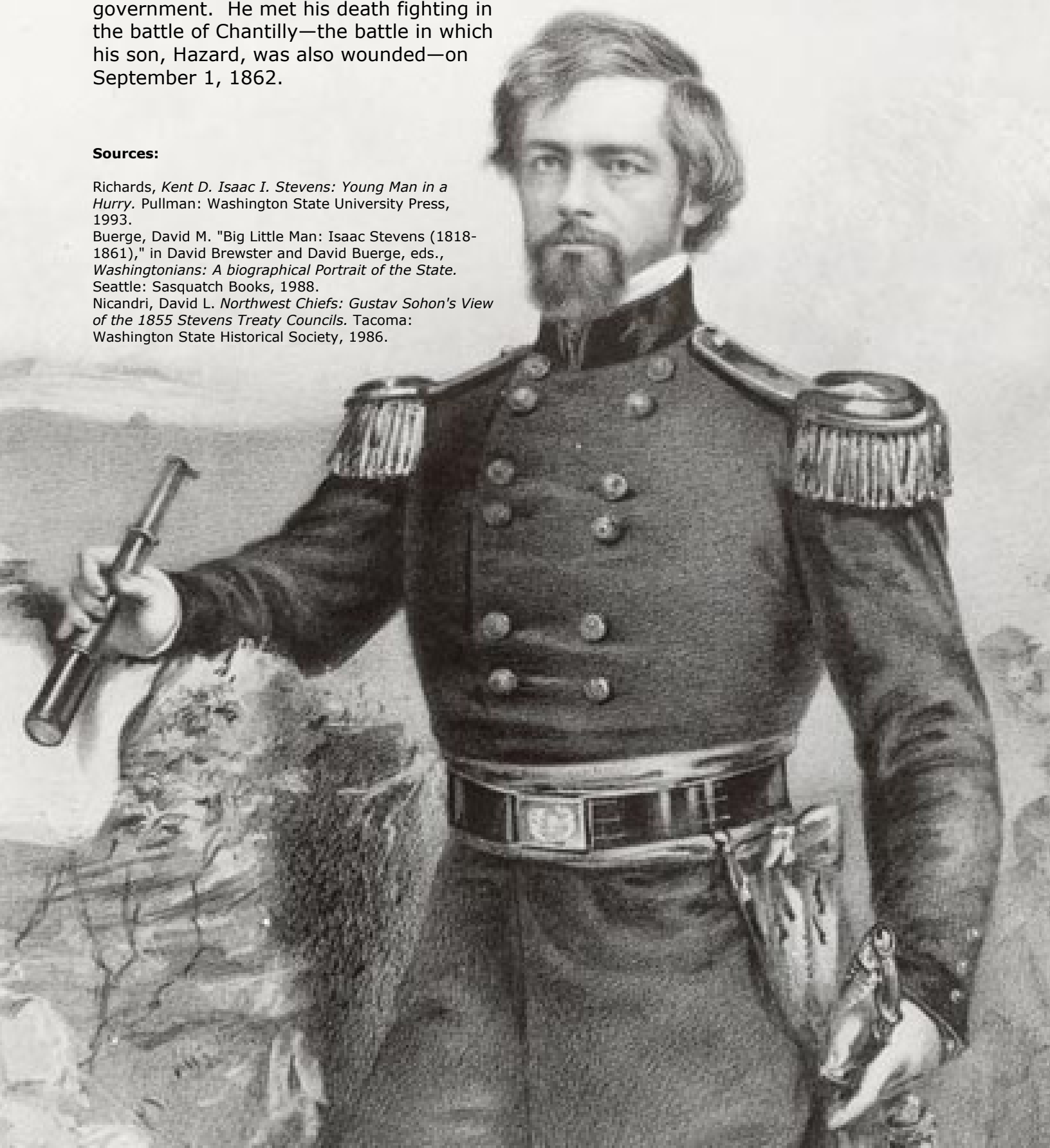
offered his services to the Union government. He met his death fighting in the battle of Chantilly—the battle in which his son, Hazard, was also wounded—on September 1, 1862.

Sources:

Richards, Kent D. *Isaac I. Stevens: Young Man in a Hurry*. Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1993.

Buerge, David M. "Big Little Man: Isaac Stevens (1818-1861)," in David Brewster and David Buerge, eds., *Washingtonians: A biographical Portrait of the State*. Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 1988.

Nicandri, David L. *Northwest Chiefs: Gustav Sohon's View of the 1855 Stevens Treaty Councils*. Tacoma: Washington State Historical Society, 1986.





**THE TREATY TRAIL: THE JOURNEY
STUDENT WORKSHEET**

Student Self Assessment Checklist

Student	Map Comparison	Treaty Trail: Time and place		Primary Sources: Understanding history		total points 5
	cites one example of impact on Indian life as a result of treaties signed in Washington Territory	analyzes topographical and chronological information to identify Treaty Trail route	records possible challenges of the Treaty Trail journey.	describes, analyzes, and interprets a historic work of art and written account	relates findings in primary sources to specific time, place, and human motives	

