

**Lieutenant Charles Wilkes
1798–1877**

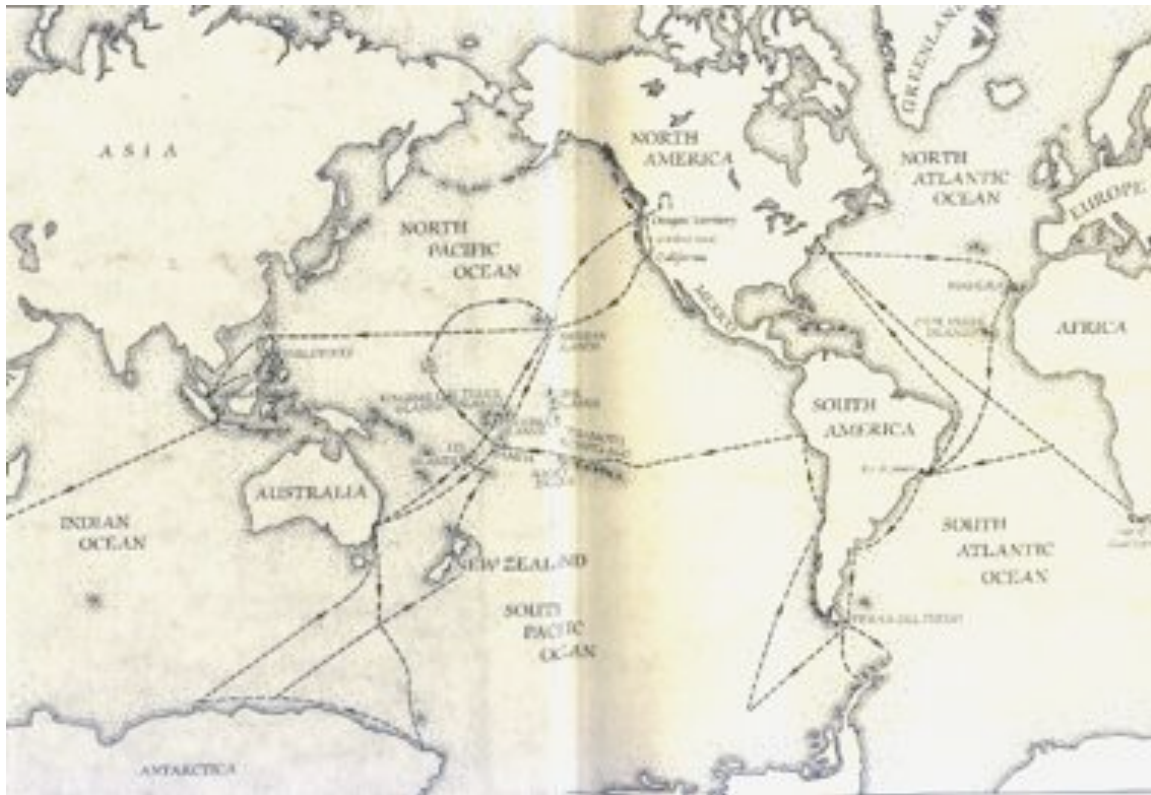
Named Maury Island for Lt. William Maury May, 1841

In 1841 Lt. Charles Wilkes and the United States Exploring Expedition sailed into Puget Sound. To help establish American claims to the area surveyed 49 years earlier by George Vancouver for the British, he gave new names to 261 places. Wilkes' contribution to Vashon-Maury Island was his naming of the major points around the island after his quartermasters -- Beals, Heyer, Robinson, Piner, Neill, Dalco, and Sandford; he named the harbor in the island's center for them all collectively; he named Colvos Passage after Midshipman George Colvocoresses; and he recognized Maury as a separate island naming it after Lt. William Maury, the Expedition's astronomer. He also charted the Sound, explored the interior, and concluded that controlling Puget Sound was essential for American interests on the Pacific Coast.



Commodore Charles Wilkes

Wilkes, from a patrician New York family, was a slight man with brown hair, a ruddy complexion, and an "abrupt manner" created by his intense and hyperactive nature. Educated by tutors, in 1815 he entered the merchant service, in 1818 received an appointment as a midshipman in the U.S. Navy, and became a lieutenant in 1826. Wilkes had limited sea duty, although he did cruises in the Mediterranean and Pacific and was a renowned surveyor because of his survey of Narragansett Bay in 1832–33. As a reward he was designated head of the Hydrographic Office of the Navy in 1833. In 1838, Wilkes was offered the command of the US Exploring Expedition after it had been declined several times by senior officers. Six ships in very bad condition were selected for this voyage - the sloops-of-war "Vincennes" and "Peacock", the brig "Porpoise", the store-ship "Relief" and two tenders the "Sea Gull" and "Flying Fish."



Map of American Exploring Expedition Route

The U.S. Exploring Expedition was intended to provide accurate naval charts for the whaling industry, to explore parts of the South American coast, to look for evidence of an Antarctic landmass, to survey and map island groups in the Pacific, and to gather information about the western coast of North America -- particularly the area called Oregon where the United States shared sovereignty with Great Britain -- and to survey San Francisco Bay. Wilkes, then a lieutenant, set sail in 1838 from Norfolk, Va., in charge of a squadron of six ships and 346 seamen, and accompanied by a team of scientists, including James D Dana, and artists, including Titian Ramsey Peale, Alfred T. Agate, and James Drayton. They sailed around South America, did important research in the South Pacific, and explored the Antarctic. The portion of Antarctica that he explored was subsequently named Wilkes Land. Wilkes explored Fiji in 1840, visited the Hawaiian group, and in May, 1841, entered the Strait of Juan de Fuca on the Pacific coast of the United States, and explored the Pacific Northwest. The Expedition then sailed south to survey San Francisco Bay and the Sacramento River, and returned home by way of the Philippines, Singapore, and the Cape of Good Hope. After having completely encircled the globe (his was the last all-sail naval mission to do so), Wilkes returned to New York in June, 1842. In four years at sea the Expedition had logged some 87,000 miles, explored 280 islands, collected 60,000 plant and bird specimens, and lost two ships and 28 men. Wilkes's *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition* (5 vol. and an atlas) appeared in 1844.



American Exploring Expedition in the Antarctic

During its four year journey, the Exploring Expedition made a number of important contributions.

It was first to map Antarctica, was the first to cite Antarctica as a separate continent, and charted 1,500 miles of the Antarctic coast (now called Wilkes Land)

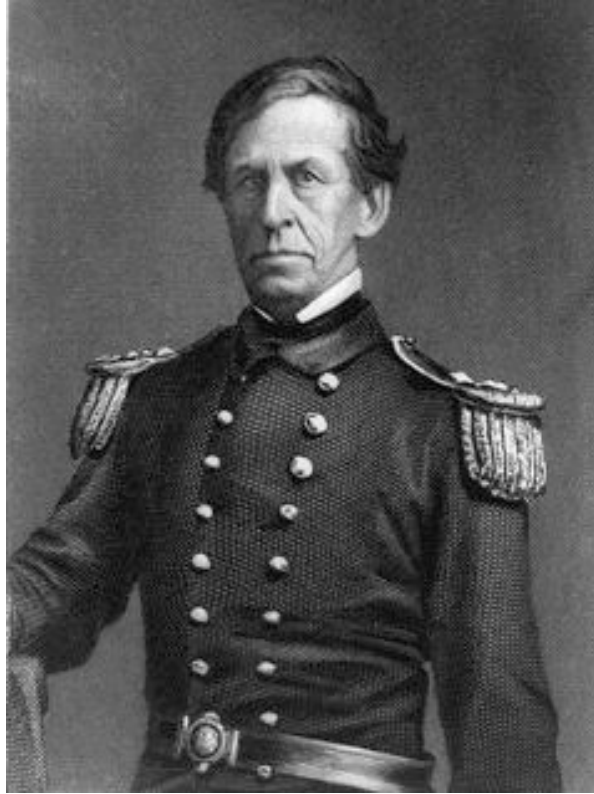
Major Pacific island groups were mapped with precision, and many new islands were discovered.

It was the first maritime expedition sponsored by the United States government.

The dried plant specimens went to what would become the National Herbarium, live plants went to what would become the National Botanic Gardens, and the rest of the collection became part of the Smithsonian Institution when that was formed in 1857, ultimately forming the foundation for the Smithsonian Institution collection. The work of the expedition scientists profoundly affected the development of American science, and their accomplishments inspired other men and other expeditions. If the expedition did not immediately win the renown its creators had hoped for, its contribution to knowledge was far greater than they could have dreamed.

For Vashon-Maury Island, the Expedition helped ensure that they became part of the United States along with the rest of the Oregon Territory. The United States Exploring Expedition marked America's first formal entry into Puget Sound waters. Only 100 copies of the expedition report were published, but they helped to establish Oregon and Puget Sound as new prizes for America's Manifest Destiny. The Expedition had an immediate effect upon the negotiations in process on the Oregon question. Barely 20 days after the *Vincennes* docked in New York, a report on the expedition containing Wilkes' views on the value of Puget Sound was delivered to the Senate. There, it helped to crystallize the negotiating position from which the Americans never retreated, which ultimately led to the present border with Canada rather than the British preferred Columbia River boundary.

Despite these successes, the Exploring Expedition was plagued from the very beginning with controversy that ultimately tarnished the results and the careers of all those involved. Forty years old, with limited sea duty, Wilkes was the center of controversy for the Expedition from the very beginning. He had a reputation for "punish first and enquire afterwards," and was considered "exceedingly vain and conceited" by many. Because of Wilkes's obstinate, overbearing nature, morale suffered throughout the journey. Wilkes claimed he played the martinet to maintain discipline, but he seems not to have been acting. Innately suspicious, he frequently imagined mutinous cabals. Officers were demoted or sacked and sent home, and seamen flogged with depressing regularity. Naval regulations forbade more than 12 lashes with a cat-o'-nine-tails, but on one occasion Wilkes had 50 meted out. He complained to the scientists that their specimens smelled bad. Wilkes's leadership on the Expedition inspired Herman Melville's most famous character, Captain Ahab. With the return of the Expedition in 1842 Wilkes was court-martialled, but was acquitted on all charges except that of illegally punishing men in his squadron. For a short time he was attached to the Coast Survey, but from 1844 to 1861 he was chiefly engaged in preparing the report of the expedition. Twenty-eight volumes were planned but only nineteen were published. Of these Wilkes wrote the *Narrative* (1845) and the volumes *Hydrography* and *Meteorology* (1851). In addition to many shorter articles and reports, he published *Western America, including California and Oregon* (1849) and *Theory of the Winds* (1856).

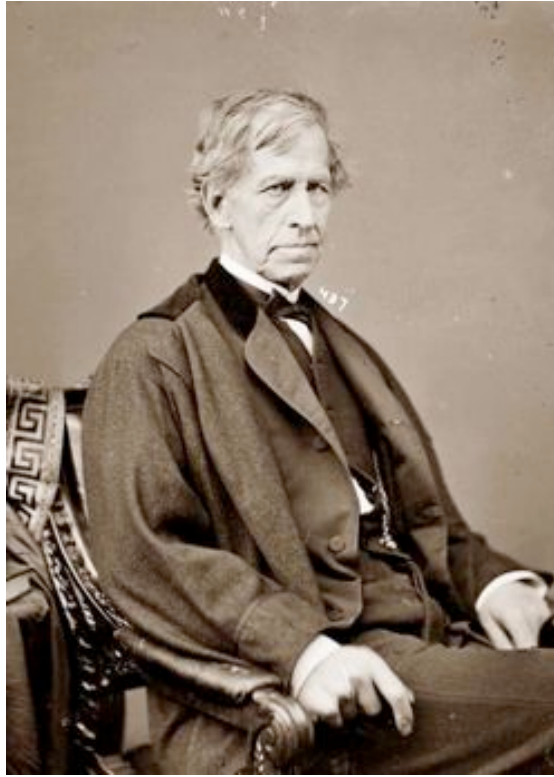


Captain Charles Wilkes at Beginning of the Civil War

With the beginning of the Civil War, Wilkes was given command of the *U.S.S. San Jacinto*. In November 1861, the *San Jacinto* stopped the British steamer *Trent* and arrested Confederate diplomats James Mason and John Slidell who were en route to Europe to rally support for the Confederate cause. The diplomats were brought taken off the *Trent*, brought ashore and imprisoned at Fort Warren in Boston Harbor. The seizure of Mason and Slidell sparked an international controversy that brought the United States to the brink of war with Great Britain. Claiming violation of international law, Britain demanded release of the diplomats and ordered troops to Canada to prepare for a potential Anglo-American conflict. To avoid a clash, Secretary of State William Seward apologized for the incident. The diplomats were released in early January 1862, bringing the "Trent Affair" to a peaceful close.

Promoted to the rank of commodore in 1862, Wilkes commanded a squadron in the West Indies interdicting Confederate blockade runners. He was disgraced (becoming a captain on the retired list) in November 1862 on the ground that he had been too old to receive the rank of commodore under the act then governing promotions; and engaged in a long controversy with Secretary of the Navy Gideon Wells. Wilkes was court marshal for a second time in 1864 for writing scathing article in NY Times in response to being recalled by Sec of the Navy Wells for not capturing the Confederate raider *Alabama*. This controversy ended in his being found guilty of disobedience, disrespect, insubordination and conduct unbecoming an officer and sentenced to a public reprimand and suspension

for three years. President Lincoln changed the sentence to one year, and on July 25, 1866 Wilkes was promoted to the rank of Rear-Admiral on the retired list.



Admiral (ret) Charles Wilkes

He died on February 8, 1877 in Washington, D.C. and was buried in Rock Creek Cemetery and reinterred in Arlington National Cemetery in 1920.

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But the tensions and disputes normal among men in close quarters on a long cruise were exacerbated by Wilkes'

As 1840 drew to a close, the men on the remaining four ships longed for the expedition's end. During their stay in Hawaii, Wilkes fought with his officers, dismissed Couthouy and ran a marathon 18-day session of courts-martial. When the sailors' enlistments expired and neither the promise of extended liberty with an advance in pay or the threat of being marooned succeeded in producing enough reenlistments, he had the resisters jailed and flogged until they changed their minds. Sullenly, the expedition resumed its course. In December the *Peacock* and *Flying Fish* were ordered to conduct surveys in the central and southern Pacific and afterwards to rendezvous with Wilkes at the Columbia River.

Wilkes was unsure of the reception he would receive from the Company, but soon learned that they intended to give him whatever service they could. Piloted to the fort, the *Vincennes* and *Porpoise* anchored in the roadstead off Sequatchew Creek, where the flora of the new land continued to exert its fascination. It was to prove an extremely significant observation, and it underscored the conviction many felt that since the United States had a claim on these shores, Britain must surely yield its own. Some, like R. B. Robinson, the purser's steward on the *Vincennes*, were "astonished that our Country should let them get such a secure footing as they already have got on this land."

When the *Peacock* and *Flying Fish* failed to rendezvous with him at the Columbia, Wilkes began to fear that they might have come to grief somewhere in the Pacific. With only half his resources available for the work ahead, he doubled his efforts. After Wilkes landed at Fort Nisqually, chief trader Alexander Anderson aided him in the construction of two log cabins, one to serve as an observatory for the instruments used to determine and check longitude, and the other for the use of chart makers. Next,

Their work added some detail to Vancouver's earlier chart. A new inlet, Hammersley, was added to the clutch at the head of the Sound; the eastern arm of Hood Canal was mapped, and the north arm of Port Orchard was found to connect with Admiralty Inlet, making the land east of it insular rather than peninsular. Wilkes named it Bainbridge Island. To strengthen the American connection to waters the British had discovered, Wilkes affixed names—some 261 in all—to prominent features of the waters and land around them. An indifferent speller, he sometimes took liberties with the names of those he honored. Hammersley Inlet was named after midshipman George Hammersly, and

McNeil Island after William Henry McNeill, captain of the Hudson's Bay Company steamer Beaver. The name of Ketron Island was an attempt to reproduce that of William Kittson, a helpful Company carpenter. When confronted with the nominal complexity of George Musolas Colvocoresses, a Greek immigrant serving aboard the *Vincennes*, Wilkes simply shortened the surname to Colvos and used it to identify the passage west of Vashon Island. Another misnomer involved Wilkes' mistaking the dogwoods flowering above a cove on the Kitsap Peninsula for apple trees, which led him to name the place Apple Tree Cove.

Besides surveying the Sound,. One led by Robert Johnson, a lieutenant on the *Porpoise*, was taken on horseback by native guides over Naches Pass, thus becoming the first American party to cross the Cascades. They passed down the Yakima River valley to the Columbia and traveled the long route up its banks to the Hudson's Bay Company posts of Fort Okanogan and Fort Colvile. Under the June sun they traveled next up the Spokane River to the Tshimakane Mission where they met Mary Walker, the hardy wife of missionary Elkanah Walker. Her commanding manner succeeded in securing fresh horses for them from the Spokane Indians, and she stayed up late that night sharing her passion for natural history with Johnson and his men. From Tshimakane the party crossed over to Henry Spaulding's mission at Lapwai on the Clearwater River, and then down the Snake River to Fort Walla Walla where they met Marcus Whitman. On July 15, 60 days after they had left, the party returned, saddle-sore and weary, to Fort Nisqually. They had been awed by the immense country they had seen, but not favorably impressed. Recalling the vast stretches of sage and bunch grass north of Fort Walla Walla, William Brackenridge—a gardener but no prophet—was emphatic: "Not two acres out of a hundred would produce wheat that would pay the farmer for his trouble."

Wilkes himself led another party from Fort Nisqually down the Cowlitz River to the Columbia and Fort George, earlier the site of John Jacob Astor's post, Astoria. From there he and his men made their way to the Hudson's Bay Company headquarters at Fort Vancouver, where they were greeted warmly by its Chief Factor, John McLoughlin. During the following week McLoughlin and his assistant, James Douglas, entertained Wilkes and his men and freely gave of the information they had acquired about the region. Not surprisingly, Wilkes was favorably impressed by the order and discipline maintained at the post, and he greatly enjoyed the affable company of McLoughlin and Douglas on tours of their establishment and during the long after-dinner conversations with brandy and cigars.

His impression of the American missionaries in the Willamette Valley was less positive. He may have been predisposed to such an impression. On his way up the Willamette Valley he met the Reverend Jason Lee camped on the river bank and observed condescendingly that his party was "...annoyed with mosquitoes & sandflies-being Methodists however they were used to such accommodations before they left the U. States." Almost without exception he judged his countrymen to be "low, vulgar and unclean," and he compared their settlements unfavorably with the Canadians', which were marked with "cheerfulness and industry." When a group of Americans approached him with their plans for a provisional government, he was not sympathetic..

"The forrist trees," wrote John Dyes, taxidermist on the *Vincennes*, "of the largest size grow to the Very Warter's Edge where you may cut a mast or stick for a Line of Battle Ship. I never saw Sutch large forrist trees in any part of the world before." And the great ramified inlet on which they sailed in from the sea elicited similar rhapsody. "Nothing," wrote Wilkes, "can be more striking than the beauty of these waters without a shoal or rock or any danger for the whole length of this Internal Navigation, the finest in the world."

He was determined, however, to assert the American claim to the region, and upon his return to Fort Nisqually, he had the Fourth of July celebrated with all the show and pomp he could muster. Celebrated the first Fourth of July in Puget Sound - On July 5, 1841, Wilkes marched his crew from the shoreline to the mission to celebrate the Fourth of July (a day late because the Fourth fell on the Sabbath that year) for the first time in the Pacific Northwest. The parade and Richmond's speech, which declared the inevitability of American control of Oregon, subjected the fort's British subjects to a deliberately provocative display of American patriotism

The expedition dropped anchor at Discovery Bay on May 2, 1838, precisely 39 years after Capt. Vancouver, and then proceeded south into Admiralty Inlet. It arrived at the mouth of Sequilatchew Creek on May 11 and approached Fort Nisqually unsure of the welcome it would receive from its British residents. The Hudson's Bay Company turned out to be a good host, and Wilkes established a scientific observatory near the fort.

On May 17, *Porpoise* Master George Sinclair chose "Commencement Bay" as the point at which to begin a detailed survey of upper Puget Sound. Wilkes was not impressed by the data on the waters off the future city of Seattle -- "I do not consider the bay a desirable anchorage" -- but he did name it "Elliott Bay."

On May 11, 1841, the U.S. Navy ships *Vincennes* and *Porpoise*, commanded by Lt. Charles Wilkes (1798-1877), drop anchor in southern Puget Sound, near the mouth of Sequilitchew Creek and the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Nisqually. Wilkes' crew proceeds to chart Puget Sound and name numerous landmarks, including Elliott Bay. This United States Exploring Expedition marks America's first formal entry into Puget Sound waters