THE PIG WAR OF THE SAN JUAN ISLANDS

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The Pig War of 1859 is one of the most interesting events that took place in the Pacific Northwest that could have changed the history books forever. The Pig war is a great example of why it is very important that both parties understand the conditions of an agreement. It is hard to think that two great nations were on the verge of war because of the actions of a pig. The Oregon Treaty lead to a land dispute between America and Great Britain. Although there were early attempts to resolve the land dispute the death of a pig triggered a series of events that escalated making the Pig War becoming a very serious issue. Through mediation there was an agreement of joint occupations on San Juan Island with British troops on one end of the island and American on the other end. Eventually the land dispute of the San Juan Islands was resolved in a peaceful way. The Pig War is a very unique disagreement that is of great importance to pre-confederate Canadian history. The Pig War was over the issue of whether America or Great Britain held ownership over the San Juan Islands that are between what is today the state of Washington and British Columbia’s Vancouver Island.[[1]](#footnote-1) San Juan Island is not a small island it is about one hundred and forty three square kilometres in area.[[2]](#footnote-2) The land dispute was a result of unclear language in the Oregon treaty signed in 1846.[[3]](#footnote-3) The treaty established the border between America and Britain in the Pacific Northwest. However the treaty was not clear on what the boundary was under the forty-ninth parallel between Vancouver Island and the mainland of America. The Americans claimed that the boundary was to be determined by the Haro Strait; on the other hand the British thought the boundary was determined by the Rosario Strait, which would mean the British would have ownership over the San Juan Islands.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Pig War was the last land dispute between Britain and America.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Although there was a land dispute over who had control of the island of San Juan both American and British people settled on the island. In 1853 James Douglas, Governor of Vancouver Island allowed the Hudson’s Bay Company to have a sheep farm on the San Juan Island, which was called Bellevue.[[6]](#footnote-6) The farm assumed that the island was British however the American officials disagreed and encouraged Americans to settle the island.[[7]](#footnote-7) This caused some arguments for the residents on the island such as whose rules to follow and which nation to pay taxes to. In 1857 British and U.S. commissioners tried to agree on a water boundary but they could not reconcile.[[8]](#footnote-8) The two nations agreed to both settle on the island and eventually the land dispute would be sorted out. This land dispute made the residents disagree on many different matters.

The most famous dispute between residents of San Juan Island was between Charles Griffin, a British resident, and Lyman Cutlar, an American farmer. The event took place on June 15, 1859 when Cutlar was fed up with Griffin’s pig eating his potatoes on his land and shot it dead.[[9]](#footnote-9) Cutlar had told Griffin previously to keep his pig from trespassing on his land. This was not just any pig though it was an award winning pig and was Griffin prized pig. Griffin was very furious and wrote saying, “an American shot on my pigs for trespassing!”[[10]](#footnote-10) Griffin confronted Cutlar and demanded that he pay one hundred dollars. Cutlar refused to pay that amount because he did not see the pig being worth that much.[[11]](#footnote-11) Griffin was furious and threatened to shoot Cutlar’s cattle.[[12]](#footnote-12) He also said he would have him arrested by British authorities. The American residents of San Juan told the US army about their grievances.[[13]](#footnote-13)

When the news of the threats made by the British to the American settlers on the San Juan Island made it to the US army, William Harney took action immediately. William Harney had just recently been appointed commander of the United States’ Military Department of Oregon.[[14]](#footnote-14) Harney pledged his support and sent troops to the San Juan Island. He ordered Captain Pickett and Company D of the Ninth Infantry to move from Fort Bellingham to San Juan Island and set up a post there.[[15]](#footnote-15) On July 27, 1859 Pickett had established a military post on the island.[[16]](#footnote-16) Harney however never consulted with his superiors that were in the war department about a military force going to San Juan Island.[[17]](#footnote-17) It would take about a month before officials and the president in Washington D.C would hear about the actions Harney authorized. Harney claimed it was to protect the American citizens from both the British and the natives.

In response to the US army landing on the San Juan Island, Governor James Douglas contested this move and ordered Captain Geoffrey to land a force of Royal Marines to the island. Douglas did not want a war to begin. Evidence of this was found in one of the letters he wrote saying, “I hope they will not seek to force a quarrel upon us.”[[18]](#footnote-18) He then told his Captains this, “be cautious and not to push matters in his department to extreme.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Given this caution from Douglas the Royal Marines did not land on the island until later on. However, Douglas still sent three warships to set anchor off of the bay where the sixty-six American soldiers were stationed.

Captain Pickett was now outnumbered and outgunned by the British and wrote to General Harney asking for reinforcements. Harney sent reinforcements and the American military occupation was now a force of one hundred and sixty-one men.[[20]](#footnote-20) The British responded as well and by the end of August the British had five warships with a total of two thousand men.[[21]](#footnote-21) This was no longer a small dispute and could have led Britain into war with the Americans. Meanwhile neither of the nation’s capital cities knew of the events that took place on the San Juan Islands. News of the brewing war on San Juan Island made its way to President James Buchanan on September 3, 1859.[[22]](#footnote-22) He was shocked and did not want a war to start with Britain because of this land dispute. The very same day he sent General Winfield Scott to the Pacific Northwest to order Harney to desist.[[23]](#footnote-23) He was also tasked to make arrangements with James Douglas to resolve this land dispute in a peaceful way.

Scott was successful in resolving the land dispute in a peaceful way and had made the following agreements between each nation. Scott convinced both sides to participate in joint occupations of the San Juan Island having equal number of troops on the island till the dispute is resolved.[[24]](#footnote-24) Also territorial officials of the United States would have no jurisdiction over the British settlers on the San Juan Island as long as the island was in dispute.[[25]](#footnote-25) Scott resolving the war in a peaceful way meant the only casualty of the war was one pig; this is why this war is called the Pig War.

The San Juan Island stayed in joint occupations for years peacefully. However on May 8, 1871 British and American officials agreed to submit the San Juan question to binding arbitration under the Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany. The Kaiser’s three-man commission voted two to one in favour that San Juan Island belonged to America. San Juan Island land dispute was over on October 21, 1872. [[26]](#footnote-26) The British agreed to the ruling and so one of the strangest Wars was resolved peacefully.

The Pig War had strange events take place, which almost led to a war between Britain and America. It’s funny to think that a death of pig almost led to a history-changing event. From the Pig War we can learn the importance of making clear agreements. When agreements are made between two parties there should not be any grey areas that could allow for differences in its interpretation. Thankfully the land dispute was settled peacefully and the only casualty of the Pig War was a pig. The Pig War was significant event that took place in pre-confederation Canada.

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