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"Ambition Has Always Been My God": William Winlock Miller and Opportunity in Washington Territory

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In October 1875, when he was at the acme of his success as a pioneer Olympia businessman, William Winlock Miller offered some fatherly advice to an elder sister's son who had recently emigrated from Illinois:

If your object in coming hither was to get employment as a clerk it was injudicious—we only want men here who have muscle and are willing to labor. But now that you are here I would make the best of it. . . . Avoid saloons and all places of vice. Don't drink, chew, or swear. Start at the foot of the ladder. Practice economy. Every young man's success depends upon himself.¹

Miller's mildly chiding counsel was part caveat and part instruction, part encouragement and part injunction. He aimed it at his nephew's misconceived expectations of western opportunity—the idea that the West offered sizable rewards, even fortunes, for modest effort. Miller may have wanted to warn his young relative—after all, it was 1875 and Washington Territory's economy was suffering under the weight of a devastating national depression—but his advice reached beyond an admonition. It was a didactic litany that could have been lifted from any one of a dozen popular primers on the self-made man.

The idea of the self-made man, which dates from at least Benjamin Franklin's advice to young men more than a century earlier, enjoyed enormous popularity in late 19th-century America. It beckoned young men to the altar of industry and perseverance, where success was the idol. By the 1870s, the myth had been codified and injected into the mainstream of American popular culture. At its heart, as the historian Irvin Wyllie succinctly put it, was the belief that “any man can achieve fortune through the practice of industry, frugality, and sobriety.” Along with other successful men of his era, Miller fervently believed in the myth that achievement and wealth come from individual effort. If a man pursued success with true purpose and method, so the prescription went, then his rewards would be substantial and justified. By implication, the reverse also became true—not to pursue individual goals was irresponsible. As William Alcott warned his readers in *The Young Man's Guide* (1841), which Miller may well have read: “To live in idleness, even if you have the

means, is not only injurious to yourself, but a species of fraud upon the community.”²

In 1875, Miller could write to his nephew content and certain that his own career in Washington Territory had made him the antithesis of a “fraud upon the community.” Since coming to the Oregon country in 1850, Miller had succeeded impressively as a public servant, office holder, politician, and especially as a businessman. He had made his family in Illinois proud, even envious, but the explanation of his success as a self-made man, which he willingly embraced, only partly explained his success. Miller owed his success in Washington Territory as much to group support as to individual effort. Not unlike other entrepreneurs in the American West who have been portrayed in individualistic and heroic terms, Miller relied on financial, political, and moral resources provided by his nation, his community, and especially his friends. He parlayed with great finesse political connections and business collaborations into a sizable fortune and respectability. His story is a version of other western success panegyrics that have less to do with solitary effort than with a willingness to take full advantage of *all* opportunities, whether they are found in the natural or the social environment.³

William Winlock Miller began life in Greensburg, Kentucky, in 1822, the second son and fifth of eight children of Virginia-born William and Martha Miller. Like many others of their generation, the Millers moved west for better land and opportunities, first to St. Louis in 1827,

“Ambition Has Always Been My God”

William Winlock Miller and Opportunity in Washington Territory

William L. Lang

1. William W. Miller to Horatio Rew, Oct. 12, 1875, box 7, Miller Family Papers, Acc. 3912, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle.

2. Irvin G. Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1954), 6 (1st qtn.), 41 (Alcott quoted).

3. William Winlock Miller does not appear prominently in histories of Washington. When he is mentioned, it is usually in reference to one of his official positions. Kent D. Richards in *Isaac I. Stevens: Young Man in a Hurry* (Provo, 1979) has the fullest coverage of Miller's activities, primarily as Stevens's political adviser.

then in succession to Springfield and Jacksonville, Illinois, where the father operated a small hotel prior to moving the family to Beardstown in 1843. Young Miller spent his school years in Jacksonville and, like other children on the frontier, faced a limited range of career choices. The region had grown slowly since the first emigrants had staked out farms early in the century. Roads were poor and economic growth remained fitful well into the 1830s, when a national depression crippled the local economy. Fifteen years old and discouraged at his prospects, Miller turned his back on both farming and hotel keeping. He wanted more. As a youth growing up in central Illinois, he later told a confidante, he suffered from "too ambitious a disposition to timidly agree with myself to be a 'nothing' in the world."⁴

Success in school provided an alternative. Bright and willing to work at his subjects, Miller applied himself and aimed at teaching as a career, even though he was realistic about the meager financial rewards he could expect. From 1845 to 1849 in a country school at Bluff Spring, a small community near Beardstown, Miller taught students not much younger than himself the rudiments of mathematics and grammar and read to them from Shakespeare. He succeeded at Bluff Spring and seemed to be genuinely fond of his teaching, but his ambition knew little rest.⁵

At age 26 and still a bachelor, Miller responded to the lure of gold in California and the promise of unknown opportunities. In the late spring of 1850, he joined three of his brothers and at least six more Cass County men on a wagon trip west across the plains. It was an adventure none of them ever forgot. Years later, one of Miller's brothers assured him: "Well do I remember . . . the Fir Tree we slept under," he wrote, "everything recurs to my mind as vividly as if it had occurred yesterday. . . . I could tell every camping place and almost every incident that occurred along the way."⁶

The men were too late for the easier gold seeking, but work at day labor sustained them for several weeks while they decided whether to stay or return home to Illinois. Miller and one of his brothers had split off earlier and headed north to



William Winlock Miller posed for this daguerreotype in 1854. (Special Collections Division, University of Washington Libraries, neg. 14328)

Oregon on the Applegate Trail. Two other brothers and most of the Cass County men remained in California for at least one season.

It is unclear why Miller chose Oregon. Perhaps he followed other migrants from Illinois—many had traveled to the Willamette Valley during the late 1840s. Whatever the reason, he settled in Jefferson, a small community on the Santiam River near Salem. There he mixed easily with other midwesterners and earned a modest wage teaching his neighbors' children in a newly organized school. He adapted quickly to the countryside, which reminded him of the landscape near Jacksonville and Beardstown. He extended his friendships by investing with some of his neighbors in business ventures, including a cattle-trading company. As pleasant as his circumstances were in Jefferson, his ambition still pulled at him, just as it had in Illinois. In less than a year he moved again, this time north of the Columbia River to the southern extension of Puget Sound.⁷

Through the influence of his relatives in Illinois—staunch Whigs with connec-

tions to Congressman Richard Yates—Miller received appointment from President Millard Fillmore as surveyor of customs and inspector of revenue at Nisqually, the American port of entry for the territory north of the Columbia. The annual salary of \$1,000 easily topped what he had made as a teacher, but the position really brought its holder, as the Oregon territorial delegate Samuel Thurston told Miller's brother-in-law, \$3,000 to \$4,000 a year.⁸

Although the new port of entry had been created in February and Miller was appointed within a few weeks, he did not receive word of his appointment until early summer, and then it was through a notice in the *Oregon Spectator*. Arriving at the new town of Olympia in August 1851, Miller became the first customs official on the scene, bringing both the authority of American law to the area and a

4. William Thomas, *History of Morgan County, Illinois* (Chicago, 1878), 270, 289-90. Miller to Letitia Work, Feb. 22, 1854 (qtn.), box 9, William Winlock Miller Collection, S-1172, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (hereafter cited as Miller Collection-Yale).

5. Teaching certificates, 1845, 1846, 1849, box 11, Miller Collection-Yale. Years later, a former student remembered Miller reading aloud from *The Merchant of Venice*, telling students about moral choices that had to be made in the world. Joshua Garlick to Miller, Feb. 14, 1865, box 1, Miller Family Papers.

6. Robert W. Miller to Miller, Aug. 13, 1862, box 2, Miller Family Papers.

7. William Bowen, "The Oregon Frontiersman: A Demographic View," in *The Western Shore: Oregon Country Essays Honoring the American Revolution*, ed. Thomas Vaughan (Portland, 1975), 183; Jacob Conser to Miller, July 31, 1852, box 2, Miller Collection-Yale.

8. John McDonald to Miller, April 24, 1851, box 1, Miller Family Papers; Appointment to Surveyor and Inspector of Revenue for Port of Nesqually by President Millard Fillmore, 1851, box 10, Miller Collection-Yale. Customs officials could always gain additional revenue above their salaries through the purchase and sale of merchandise and business dealings that came directly from their position. Miller reported to his brother, for example, that the post paid \$1,100 per year and took no time, leaving the rest of his days for investments and other business affairs. Richard T. Miller to Miller, Sept. 27, 1851, box 1, Miller Family Papers.

key institution for improving the local economy.⁹

Established by a group of nascent merchants in 1850, Olympia lay at the tip of Budd Inlet, on the southern reaches of Puget Sound and close to the long-established overland travel route north to the sound from the Columbia River. The early economics of the area had been dominated by the Hudson's Bay Company, which had established a post at Nisqually, on the edge of Grand Prairie some 25 miles from Olympia. Fort Nisqually had been revamped in 1840 as a farm colony of the HBC's Puget's Sound Agricultural Company, making the HBC owner of a sizable piece of real estate and the most important trading center in the region. After the treaty of 1846 between Great Britain and the United States, the fort doubled as an American port.¹⁰

Without official appointment papers, proper customs forms, or other rudimentary tools of his new job, Miller first had to establish an office to conduct business. Simpson P. Moses, the collector of customs, would not arrive for more than four months, so Miller took on the collector's responsibilities, which included finding office space in one of the first frame buildings in Olympia. From there, Miller facilitated the increasing shipping business at the new port of entry on the south sound and oversaw shipments to the area, the majority of which arrived at Nisqually Landing.¹¹

At Nisqually and Olympia, Miller conducted customs business with nearly all of the local traders and men of means. Dr. William F. Tolmie, chief factor at Fort Nisqually, became Miller's friend. Even after the customs collector arrived on the scene, Tolmie seemed to prefer discussing most of his official business directly with Miller. Miller also ingratiated himself with Michael T. Simmons, a prominent sawmill operator and store owner, whose building housed the customs office. By hastening Simmons's supplies through customs and letting ships leave the sound quickly with timber and sawn lumber for export, Miller materially aided the millowner's business. He also dealt with Edmund Sylvester, a local entrepreneur and principal land developer in the town of Olympia, and with Isaac N. Ebey, a pioneer settler on Whid-

bey Island and an important political figure in the early days of Washington Territory. The other men he befriended and helped—including Benjamin F. Shaw, Hugh A. Goldsborough, Elwood Evans, and others—headed the active and go-getter group on the south sound in 1853.¹²

Miller distinguished himself in the eyes of nearly all his contemporaries on the sound. One high-ranking federal appointee wrote President James Buchanan in the late 1850s that Miller had a reputation "as a firm and consistent man amongst all partisans." Miller acted cautiously, rarely taking chances and preferring to apply customs law directly from the regulations. Conservative as he was, he remained steadfastly impartial, while his personable manner invited trust and friendship. After little more than a year at the job, Miller added a position as deputy marshal to his duties and, the following year, appointment as master commissioner in chancery court.¹³

His tenure as surveyor of customs ended in early summer 1853, after the election of a Democrat, Franklin Pierce, as president had effectively eliminated the political protection for Miller's appointment. "I suppose you expect your walking papers," Miller's brother-in-law wrote him. That was practically as certain as the change of seasons, but Miller had already gauged local political winds well enough to see that his future in the new Washington Territory lay with the Democratic party, not the familiar Whigs of his Illinois youth. As he later wrote one of his brothers, the Whig party was "among the things that were." Miller's early success among the nascent entrepreneurs in the south sound area also made it easier for him to switch political parties. In 1853, the Democrats returned the compliment, appointing Miller deputy collector of customs and inspector of revenue. He was also among a small number of men consulted in early 1853 by Isaac I. Stevens, the Democrat-appointed first governor of Washington Territory.¹⁴

Regardless of his timely pirouette from Whig to Democratic allegiance, Miller had already established his reputation as an efficient bureaucrat of undisputed honesty with a sharp eye for business. He

missed few opportunities. In early summer 1853, for example, he took the lead in organizing a sawmill company—the Skookum Mill—at the head of Hammersly Inlet on the donation claim held by Wesley B. Gosnell. His partners included Gosnell, who provided the land and his labor, Michael T. Simmons, a veteran mill operator who also worked the mill, and Hugh A. Goldsborough, who invested some capital. Miller financed the bulk of the operation.¹⁵

The mill enterprise suffered from poor management and at least one calamity, so Miller sold out his interest within two years. By that time, however, he had considerably broadened his investments and had found better returns on his money. He continued the investments in live-

9. Miller to Thomas Corwin, July 25, 1851, surveyor's letterbook, p. 14, U.S. Customs Service, Seattle office.

10. James R. Gibson, *Farming the Frontier: The Agricultural Opening of the Oregon Country, 1786-1846* (Seattle, 1985), 60-61; John S. Galbraith, "The Early History of the Puget's Sound Agricultural Company, 1838-43," *OHQ*, Vol. 55 (1954), 234-59.

11. John Adair to Miller, Sept. 15, 1851, surveyor's letterbook, p. 39; Gibson, 93-96.

12. Murray Morgan, *Puget's Sound: A Narrative of Early Tacoma and the Southern Sound* (Seattle, 1979), 77-79; Edmond S. Meany, "First American Settlement on Puget Sound," *WHQ*, Vol. 7 (1916), 136-43.

13. Letter of appointment as deputy U.S. marshal, July 23, 1852; letter of appointment as master commissioner in chancery court, April 23, 1853, both in box 10, Miller Collection-Yale.

14. Martin N. Capell to Miller, Nov. 11, 1852, box 1; McDonald to Miller, Feb. 23, 1853, box 1 (1st qtn.); Miller to Richard T. Miller, Dec. 13, 1856, box 2 (2d qtn.), all in Miller Family Papers. Letter of appointment as deputy collector of customs and inspector of revenue, Aug. 13, 1853, box 10, Miller Collection-Yale.

15. Memorandum of agreement between William F. Tolmie, Hudson's Bay Company, and Michael T. Simmons, 1849, box 3; Wesley B. Gosnell to Miller, Nov. 29, 1853, box 1; memorandum of agreement between Miller, H. A. Goldsborough, Simmons, and Gosnell, Sept. 21, 1855, box 4, all in Miller Family Papers. Memorandum of agreement between Miller, Goldsborough, Simmons, and Gosnell, April 15, 1853, box 10, Miller Collection-Yale.



By 1870, a bridge connected the west part of Olympia with the rest of the growing town. (Spec. Coll. Div., UW Libraries, neg. 4877)

stock that he had begun in Oregon and contemplated bringing sheep from California into the south sound country. Friends sought him out as a broker for selling everything from mill machinery to property.¹⁶

Although he was unsure about staying in Olympia, Miller invested in property within a few months of his arrival. He began by purchasing a town lot and house from Simmons. By year's end, he had acquired enough property in Olympia to trade outlots in exchange for purchases of livestock and other goods. Sometimes unsure of himself and always conservative—one acquaintance called him "the greenest man about trade" that he ever saw—Miller formed numerous short-term partnerships in livestock trading and real estate sales. He accumulated sufficient capital by these transactions to lend out money at interest, a business in which he quickly shed his "greenness." His attention to detail and conservative judgments in an economy often characterized by high-risk deals made him a dexterous but careful lender. By 1855, Miller had become the "hip-pocket banker" of choice among men in the south sound region. His debtors included the governor, Isaac I. Stevens; Charles H. Mason, the territorial secretary; James Tilton, the territorial surveyor

general; Elwood Evans, a prominent lawyer; and nearly a dozen other important local leaders.¹⁷

These men turned to Miller for two reasons. In a cash-scarce economy, he had ready money that he willingly lent, securing it with signatures for those he knew well or with real and personal property for those he thought too risky or on amounts too large to chance. In 1855, for example, when his friend and one-time business partner Hugh A. Goldsborough requested more than \$1,000 for an investment scheme, Miller agreed but only after Goldsborough offered considerable property as security. Regardless of his terms, Miller greeted more loan seekers at his door than he could serve, even though he purposefully discouraged some by charging prohibitively high interest—sometimes as much as 5 percent per month.¹⁸

The capital-poor but ambitious men of the south sound also went to Miller because of his reputation as a straightforward bargainer who paid more than lip service to honesty. The rough calculation of risk in hip-pocket banking fell nearly equally on both debtor and creditor, which argued for caution by the loan-seeker. Debtors could default or force creditors to invest in a court judgment, but creditors could apply as much or more force by invoking stringent terms and keeping borrowers treading a staircase of increasing debt. In the financially unstable zone between San Francisco-originated bank loans and local

barter accounting, men like Miller who had established a record of reliable moneylending became important community assets. Within only four years of his appointment at Nisqually, Miller had created a place for himself and a means to wealth by prudently melding his talents, his access to official territorial business, and his solicited friendships. He had stepped up the first rungs of a successful career.

His next opportunity came in 1856, when the reaped whirlwind of a failed Indian policy engaged the full energies of Miller and his cohorts in a short war against Indian tribes who were resisting white encroachment. Relatively few lost their lives in the war, but the conflict destroyed property, disrupted business and travel on the sound, and sent a shock wave through the pioneer communities. It became one of the central events in Washington Territory's history, an episode that bound many participants one to another to a degree matched only by the overland emigration experience. Hostilities between Yakima Indians and the army erupted in late 1855 and expanded quickly, as clashes with the military and assaults from volunteer forces enraged treaty and nontreaty Indians throughout the region.

Under pressure from frightened citizens on the west side of the Cascades, Governor Isaac Stevens—West Point-trained and experienced in war—encouraged the raising of volunteer forces. Acting in Stevens's behalf while the governor was negotiating additional Indian treaties, Charles H. Mason, the territorial secretary, called up the volunteers. Within

16. Memorandum of agreement between Miller and Goldsborough, May 1853, box 10; B. R. Biddle to Miller, Oct. 24, 1854, box 1; George Gibbs to Miller, Nov. 24, 1854, box 3, all in Miller Collection—Yale.

17. E. A. Starling to Simmons, Dec. 3, 1852, box 3; James G. Story to Miller, July 11, 1853, box 2; Powe [A. M. Poe] to Miller, July 19, 1853, box 2 (qtn.); D. I. Liste to Miller, March 1854, box 1; William Rutledge to Miller, May 13, 1855, box 5; memorandum of notes and monies taken August 1, 1855, box 3, all in Miller Family Papers.

18. Memorandum of notes and monies.

weeks of his return from the treaty negotiations in present-day Montana, Stevens organized an officers' corps composed of local politicians and close advisers. He chose Miller, by now a political associate and personal business adviser, to head up the quartermaster and commissary corps, the department responsible for feeding, clothing, and equipping the volunteer force.¹⁹

Stevens made a wise choice. From his headquarters in Olympia, Miller ran the department with efficiency and economy. He took immense pride in his ability to procure supplies and equipment at the lowest cost and in keeping unblemished account books. At one point, when Stevens had criticized others for sloppy record keeping, Miller assured the governor that his accounts "will answer any test." Miller's promise required more than tracking columns of figures. The territorial government had issued scrip to finance the war, making the account books for the volunteer effort more complicated and fractured than the ones he had kept for the customs department. Miller dispensed the bulk of the scrip, which was used to pay volunteer soldiers, to purchase munitions, and to acquire supplies and commissary. He bought goods from merchants who would accept the in-lieu money and directed his assistant quartermasters in the field to bargain with farmers and shopkeepers for additional supplies.²⁰

Miller ran the department like his own business, haggling for the best prices and cajoling suppliers, even in the face of inevitable wartime inflation that affected the prices of all goods. From his deputies in the field, he demanded accurate accounts and efficient transactions. He often sent men to check on his assistant quartermasters; when their performance fell below his standard, he threatened them with dishonorable discharges or the application of martial law.²¹

Miller remained in Olympia during most of the war months, but in February and early March he helped establish a garrison south of Steilacoom. In April and May he outfitted Benjamin F. Shaw's campaign across the Cascades to chastise tribes in the Walla Walla Valley, a campaign that led to the battle of Grande

Ronde, where volunteers killed more than 60 men, women, and children. Miller probably shared Shaw's viewpoint that those Indians deserved their fate because they "had no idea of rights except that of 'brute force,'" but he remained clear of disputations about war strategy and tactics. He focused his attention on keeping the supplies flowing to the volunteers in the field and satisfying the demands of the field commanders.²²

Apart from finding scarce supplies, Miller's chief problem was the use of scrip. Because the territorial government had no legal basis for issuing scrip and there was no guarantee that Congress would recognize or redeem the territory's pseudomoney, sellers and buyers often discounted scrip. Miller knew there was room for fraud, especially with supplies scarce and demand high. The resulting inflation made the value of scrip in the marketplace even more volatile, encouraging merchants and brokers to hedge against a congressional discount on the redemption of scrip, if Congress chose to redeem it at all. Not long after Miller had been appointed quartermaster, one of his old and savvy friends from Illinois had warned him not to issue scrip because the potential for fraud was too great and the quartermaster would be held responsible. Even before he received that letter, Miller had discovered the dangers of scrip. Just two months on the job, he fired off a sharply worded note to one of his quartermaster corps, complaining in an exasperated tone that one of their own volunteers had been bragging about making "\$2000 in Washington Territory Scrip, [and] that it was no trouble to make money out here, if a man was not very particular about how he made it."²³

Sharppers could make money buying and selling scrip and also by purchasing goods using discounted scrip dollars, so Miller warned one of his quartermasters not "to allow any extravagant charges such as would tend to depreciate the value of the scrip." But the discounting had already become part of the regional economy. The United States third auditor, whose responsibilities included reviewing the volunteer accounts, later confirmed the volatility of scrip values by recommending that Congress reimburse scrip holders in U.S. currency at only 50 cents on the dollar.²⁴

It was the winding down of the war, however, that gave speculators their greatest opportunities. As Miller's quartermaster and commissary department sold off surplus supplies and equipment after Stevens ordered the force disbanded in late 1856, men waving discounted scrip dollars bargained for goods and equipment at auctions. One of the largest sales that took place at Fort Vancouver, only a few miles from Portland, drew hundreds of speculators who had purchased a significant amount of scrip. Miller kept a watchful eye on these sales, responding to reports from observers who feared the worst. Even the suggestion of the sales, one of Miller's agents in Portland wrote him, "creates great dissatisfaction" among merchants afraid that further discounting of the scrip would diminish their own returns from the sales of war

19. For activities of the volunteers, including the quartermaster general, see Washington Territory Volunteer Papers, 1855-57, Washington State Archives, Olympia (hereafter cited as Volunteer Papers). See also the letterbook of William Winlock Miller, U.S. Army, Washington (Volunteers) Collection, Acc. 2294 (hereafter cited as army letterbook), and various letters in the Isaac Stevens Papers, Acc. 111, University of Washington Libraries.

20. Miller to Tolmie, Jan. 21, Feb. 1, 1856, to Isaac Stevens, Sept. 14, 1856 (qtn.), to R. S. Robinson, Dec. 16, 1856, all in army letterbook.

21. Miller to M. R. Hathaway, April 23, 1856, box 12, Volunteer Militia Papers, Washington State Archives (hereafter Militia Papers). Stevens also had expectations of his men, as he later wrote James Nesmith: "I look upon it as the duty of all officers, without waiting for instructions, to guard the treasury" (July 25, 1857, box 4, Stevens Papers).

22. Miller to Stevens, Feb. 20, July 18, 1856, box 1, and Stevens to B. F. Shaw, May 21, 1856, box 4, Militia Papers; transcript of speech, Dec. 19, 1903, Benjamin F. Shaw Papers, MSS 412, Oregon Historical Society, Portland. On the Shaw campaign and the battle of Grande Ronde, see Richards, 297-98; Carl P. Schlicke, *General George Wright: Guardian of the Pacific Coast* (Norman, Okla., 1988), 128.

23. Josiah M. Lucas to Miller, April 1, 1856, box 4, Miller Collection-Yale; Miller to T. P. Patton, April 4, 1856 (qtn.), army letterbook.

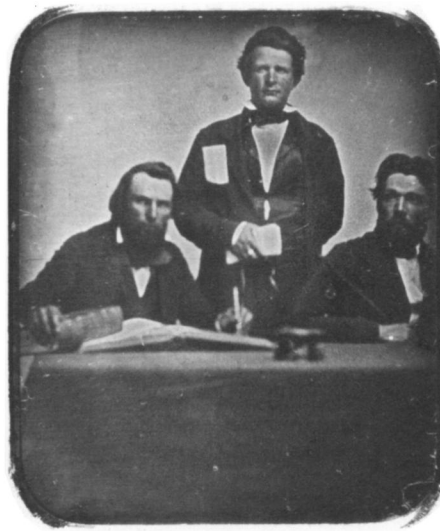
24. Expenses of Indian Wars in Washington and Oregon Territories, in 35th Cong., 1st Sess., 1858, H.E.D. 45 (Serial Set 955), 6-9 (qtn., 8).

supplies. Miller could do little in Olympia but apply pressure on his assistants by cajoling, threatening, and manipulating them. Worried that the Vancouver sale might go awry, Miller warned his quartermaster, James K. Hurd, not to leave the grounds and then tried to flatter him into action. "No other man," he reminded Hurd, "can protect the interests of the government as well as you."²⁵

The government's interest meant a good deal to Miller. Although he never shied away from the infighting that characterized territorial politics, he honored loyalty and fidelity to friends above all. For Miller, government was only as good as its service to citizens. He had become a Douglas Democrat on most issues, but his political orientation included a heavy dose of Whig paternalism, which in effect lifted politics slightly above the open market of interest trading. The Democratic impulse prompted him to instruct Stevens on the government's duty to reward its citizens' service. Writing the governor at the disbandment of volunteer forces in late 1856, Miller urged prompt and liberal payment of the volunteers. "They are all poor laboring men," he reminded the governor, "and this will enable them to buy some provisions for the coming winter."²⁶

The government tie for Miller, however much it connected with the larger volunteer force, bound him closest to his fellow officers. For years after the Indian war, he continued to aid associates in sorting out scrip and other claims against the government. In addition, he took on the office of quartermaster general for the Washington Territory militia in 1858, which kept him centrally involved in the citizens' military force and made him the chief purchaser of military goods and services in the territory. Miller's peers in the legislature honored his attention to their accounts by registering a unanimous vote electing him to the position. His subsequent appointment in 1861 to the office of superintendent of Indian affairs in Washington further solidified his place in the territory's federally funded economy.²⁷

In each of his government positions, from the customs service to the quartermaster's position to the superintendency



Miller (center) established both friendships and business relationships with men such as Isaac Ebey (left). (Spec. Coll. Div., UW Libraries, neg. 4877)

of Indian affairs, Miller mixed private and public interest without the slightest hesitation. That some of his actions might have been considered a conflict of interest would not have occurred to him, or to his compatriots, because he viewed all of his efforts as contributing to the same end: the betterment and development of the territory. For Miller, that meant the use of government action as a stimulant and support for individual enterprise throughout the territory, while it also meant the betterment of his Democratic friends. As Miller wrote to Isaac Stevens's son Hazard in 1866, when a couple of friends put his name in for superintendent of Indian affairs again, "I would like to have the Superintendency in order to be able to help your father's and my old friends in different parts of the territory." Miller's perspective commingled the old Whig advocacy of an active government with the frontier Democratic support for all nascent capitalists. As the young territory drew more emigrants and bolstered its fledgling settlements, men like Miller felt both the weight and the possibility of creating a new commonwealth. For Miller, private and public interests mixed and flowed together in a larger river of opportunity, and he dived into it with enthusiasm.²⁸

The access to that opportunity often orig-

inated in political action, and if Miller's experience in the Indian war did little else it solidified his place in the territory's political arena as one of Isaac Stevens's inner circle. Stevens had relied heavily on Miller during the war, leaning on him for administrative advice and trusting in his scrupulous management of the quartermaster department. He also depended on Miller's loyalty after his unwise and questionable invocation of martial law during the war provoked a storm of controversy, diminishing his political effectiveness and threatening his political future. As many of Stevens's allies scattered, voicing sharply critical opinions or putting distance between themselves and the governor, Miller stood stolidly with his commander-in-chief. After the war, when Stevens campaigned and won election as territorial delegate, Miller kept Stevens informed on local political conditions and advised him on crucial patronage decisions.²⁹

Miller's political network in the territory made him invaluable to Stevens, so much so that he became his principal adviser. That network included many Indian war veterans and Miller's business associates. Significantly, it also included Obediah McFadden, chief justice of the Washington territorial supreme court. Miller and McFadden had become friends not long after the justice had ar-

25. W. S. Ladd to Miller, May 21, 1862, Miller Collection-Yale; M. B. Millard to Miller, Aug. 4, 1856 (1st qtn.), Militia Papers; Miller to James K. Hurd, Sept. 28, 1856 (2d qtn.), army letterbook.

26. Miller to Stevens, Sept. 7, 1856, army letterbook.

27. *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Territory of Washington*, Feb. 27, 1858 (Olympia, 1858), 236. Accounts, quartermaster's department, 1858-68; appointment as quartermaster general of the Washington Territory militia, 1858; appointment as superintendent of Indian affairs in Washington Territory, 1861, all in box 10, Miller Collection-Yale.

28. Miller to Hazard Stevens, Nov. 22, 1866, Hazard Stevens Papers, Special Collections, University of Oregon, Eugene.

29. Several letters between Isaac Stevens and Benjamin F. Shaw describe Miller's involvement in the dispute (see esp. May 21, 28, 1856, Militia Papers).

rived in Olympia in 1853. By the late 1850s, Miller had become McFadden's financial adviser and increasingly included him in his business schemes; McFadden returned the favor with legal advice and aid in securing court judgments against Miller's debtors. Miller encouraged the judge to enter politics, especially after he married McFadden's daughter, Mary, in 1869. Miller's astute maneuvering and campaign tactics piloted McFadden to victory in the territorial delegate election of 1872.³⁰

Throughout the Indian war, Miller had continued his personal business, lending money to friends and associates. As serious and conscientious as he was in his administration of the quartermaster department, Miller still kept his eye on the main chance, and his engine of ambition hummed. In a remarkably revealing letter to his friend William F. Tolmie, Miller confessed to the driving force of his life. "Ambition," he wrote, "has always been my God since childhood."³¹

The Indian war over, Miller gave his ambition more latitude and attention as he returned to his business interests with an expanded clientele, much of it generated by his associations during the conflict. He continued business partnerships with Wesley Gosnell, Michael Simmons, and Hugh Goldsborough. Miller served his friends and they served him. While superintendent of Indian affairs, Miller saw that Gosnell received appointment as Indian agent on the Yakima reservation. Goldsborough, who had connections with the post office department in Washington, D.C., substantially aided Miller in acquiring a lucrative government mail contract on Puget Sound. Stevens's principal field commander during the Indian war, Colonel Benjamin F. Shaw, joined Miller in several enterprises, including the incorporation of the Columbia River Transportation Company in 1862-63, which they hoped would challenge the Oregon Steam Navigation Company's dominance of transportation on the Columbia River.³²

Miller's investments in Columbia River shipping and Puget Sound postal deliveries brought him nearly as much trouble as profit. Time and again he found himself frustrated by the incompetence or machinations of minor business part-

ners. He made much more money serving as financial agent for his friends and their associates. Charging a commission for facilitating debt collection and land transactions, especially when legal work was required, Miller could and did take advantage of investment opportunities. For several years, he served as agent for John and Benjamin Hackney, Chicago brothers who speculated in western real estate. They owned land in six counties in western Washington, so just paying their tax bills and watching over their properties kept Miller busy and his commission lucrative. He also administered estates and investments, such as the Whidbey Island holdings of Isaac Ebey and Seattle properties belonging to Dexter Horton and David Maynard.³³

Managing other people's money and guiding their investments, however, was not Miller's principal means to fortune. Lending money at interest to the eager and energetic, he wrote the Portland banker William S. Ladd, "seems to be the business for which I am best." By the late 1860s, he had returned nearly full time to hip-pocket banking. His ledger books record this activity, month by month, most of it in short-term notes, which he typically offered at 2 or 3 percent per month. The loan amounts ranged from one hundred to several thousand dollars. In any month, he carried from \$100 to more than \$200,000 on his books, most of it secured by real estate. Defaults were common, and Miller often had little recourse but foreclosure on his debtors' properties. By the early 1870s, he had garnered considerable real estate, mostly timberland and farms in Thurston, Lewis, Cowlitz, and King counties.³⁴

Miller's success in moneylending rested on the same personal qualities that had made him successful in government service. He attended to his duties and to people in a straightforward manner. He dunned his debtors boldly and regularly but not without humanity. "You need not be under any apprehension of my suing you in a hurry," he wrote Hillory Butler, warning him to hasten his payment:

In speaking of another business transaction between myself and the Judge [McFadden], I casually remarked that I would be compelled to collect that note at the next term of

*court. . . . And you know it is now some three months until court.*³⁵

In other cases, notably when he had carried notes for years or had granted additional loans, Miller could tighten the financial screws and demand immediate payment. Writing a long-term debtor, who had been on his account books for several years, Miller came quickly to the point:

*Get the \$300 you speak of in your letter . . . and bring it to me at once. I want the money paid here [Olympia]. I have no use for money at the Cowlitz Prairie. You can ride to town here in three days. So don't humbug me any more.*³⁶

Evidently his debtor at Cowlitz ignored the letter, because two weeks later Miller had to jab him once more. "For once in your life," Miller wrote, "try and be punctual. . . . I have waited with you for a long time at low interest." Miller eventually had to proceed with foreclosure in this case, but he generally understood

30. H. L. Caples to Miller, Oct. 21, 1872, box 1; O. B. McFadden to Miller, Oct. 7, 1872, box 4; Miller to McFadden, Oct. 18, 1872, box 4, all in Miller Collection-Yale.

31. Miller to Tolmie, July 23, 1853, box 9, Miller Collection-Yale.

32. Miller to Isaac Stevens, Oct. 11, 1861, box 4, Stevens Papers. Goldsborough to Miller, Nov. 15, 1863, box 1; Miller to Goldsborough, April 6, 1865, box 3; Alexander S. Abernethy to Miller, May 26, 1862, box 1; Shaw to Miller, March 20, 22, April 2, 1863, box 2, all in Miller Family Papers. Goldsborough to Miller, Jan. 1, 1863, box 3; Paul K. Hubbs to Miller, Aug. 7, 1862, box 6; Shaw to Miller, March 6, 19, 1863, box 6, all in Miller Collection-Yale.

33. Miller to John J. Hackney, July 13, 1873, Feb. 18, 1874, May 24, 1875, box 7; W. S. Ebey to Miller, Oct. 8, 1860, box 1; Dexter Horton to Miller, Jan. 6, 1875, box 1, all in Miller Family Papers.

34. Miller to William S. Ladd, April 29, 1870, box 7 (qtn.), and warrant deeds and foreclosure judgments, box 4, Miller Family Papers. Miller's accounts list \$46,296 in outstanding notes in October 1861 and more than \$70,000 just two years later (box 2, Miller Family Papers).

35. Miller to Hillory Butler, July 5, 1860, box 3, Miller Family Papers.

36. Miller to Timothy R. Winston, April 11, 1872, box 7, Miller Family Papers.

Statement of business up to November 1st 1863—

Notes Due Me—

Date	Maker	Original Amount	Present Value	Rate of Interest	Remarks
Dec 1 1859	A S Gault	136 00	137 00	3.	136 p paid Dec 14 1860— Collect what you can.
Jan 2 1860	Moore Ward	330 00	1211 84	3.	This is not good.
Jan 2 1860	A S John Lewis	345 00	242 00	3.	
March 1860	J M Chambers	1000 00	537 00	3.	Judgment entered up and transcript filed and recorded in Judgment Record— No one pays 117 & 118
Oct 2 1859	John R Jackson	1144 00	610 00	3.	Judgment entered and transcript recorded in Lewis County
April 1 1860	H. Minner	480 00	460 00	3.	Secured by my holding title to lot 1 old State in Block 15— Minner is indebted to an officer to the amt of his own agent against me which is
March 20 1860	F. A. & G. D. Clarke	1460 00	1731 00	3.	Judgment entered and transcript recorded in Lewis County— I have the first judgment against these gentlemen This judgment entered and transcript filed both in Lewis and Thurston Counties
Nov. 24 1859	J. H. & Geo. H. Clark and Henry Minner	528 00	1846 00	3.	
Oct 17 1859	John Rensley	109 00	728 00	3.	Judgment entered and transcript recorded in Thurston County— No record will please try and collect this note— but don't sue the old man— take it in Greenbacks or stock.
April 5 1860	Charles Ganger	860 00	1412 64	2.	Secured by title to Ganger's State and lot and a half adjoining on me— he having bond for deed.
May 3 1860	A. Ryles	50 00	116 60	2.	
	J. F. Lang & W. P. Phelps	300 00	1071 36	2.	Judgment entered and transcript recorded in Lewis and Thurston Counties both.
May 7 1860	OTB in Ladd's	544 00	255 32	2.	This is the value after deducting a payment of 500 p made by giving me Master's Receipt for that amount— for this payment I gave M. Ladd a receipt while Rountree held this note— the receipt M. Ladd will produce

Miller kept careful accounts on ledger pages tied with ribbon, noting the original loan amount, the remaining debt, and the interest charged. (Miller Family Papers, University of Washington Libraries)

the frailty of frontier economics and how easily fortunes could be reversed.³⁷

He heard stories from his debtors that made him pause. "My house being burned," one man wrote Miller, "my family misaraly take shelter under sum cedar bark. I will try to comply . . . more shortly." To another who pleaded poverty and the loss of his land, Miller wrote: "Don't sacrifice any property in order to pay my interest. . . . Debt will eat up any man in the world."³⁸

As Miller's fortune grew he invested it in territorial businesses and real estate, but he also looked outside Washington, first to the Midwest and then to San Francisco. From the mid-1860s until his death in 1876, Miller shifted more and more of his economic activity to San Francisco, where he spent increasingly more time. After his marriage in 1869, he even considered moving to San Francisco, at least in part because the climate improved his health. His principal investments, however, continued to be in Olympia and the Puget Sound area. He remained active in local and territorial politics, always boosting investment and plans that would increase the commonwealth. During the early 1870s, for example, when Puget Sound communities competed with each other to become the terminus of the Northern Pacific Railroad, Miller used his connections with well-placed national politicians and investors to provide Olympia an advantage in the competition. He led local citizens in lobbying railroad officials, while he

joined friends in real estate investments that were predicated on successfully luring the railroad to Olympia. But in the prime of his life, his health, which had always been fragile, began to fail, restricting his activities.

Just after New Year's in 1876, William Winlock Miller prepared for a quick business trip to San Francisco. He hurried to get his business affairs in order, dunning his debtors, arranging for land transactions in his absence, and alerting San Francisco businessmen to his pending arrival. On the eve of his departure the grippe he had successfully battled for several years returned and laid him up for a few days. He canceled his trip, then regained his strength only to contract pneumonia. Confined to his bed, he suffered for nearly three days before expiring on January 24, 1876, only two weeks after his 54th birthday. Miller left behind a wife and two young children and a sizable estate in securities, investments, and landholdings throughout western Washington. He departed this life a successful and prominent man, a proud and self-consciously self-made man.

A few months later, after her feelings of grief allowed her, Mary Miller wrote a sealed letter to her children to be opened and read upon her own death.

My two sweet children, when your bright young eyes read this page, the one who is writing it, your own loving Mamma will no longer be with you, but will have gone to meet dear Papa and we will both wait for you, for I know you will try to meet us on the other shore. . . . You will learn from the newspaper extracts I enclose that your father, Gen. William Winlock Miller, was a gentleman and a man of importance in the community. . . . Papa was born of a good family, but began life as a poor boy and by energy, perseverance, and self-denial he amassed a handsome fortune. It remains for you, my dear boys to receive the benefits of his fine business qualities and sagacity, benefits of great value, if rightly

*used. . . . Never do a dishonorable deed or any base action. Keep yourselves pure in word, thought, and deed. . . . Keep your own counsel in business matters and when you need advice go to those whom your Father trusted, if still living.*³⁹

Mary Miller's advice—Christian, respectful, and admonishing—charted a path for her sons that she believed would bring success, both in this life and "on the other shore." She reminded them of their father's qualities and his reliance on self-denial and perseverance as prime components of the good and financially successful life. And, tellingly, she counseled them to be watchful, to make friends carefully, and to rely on only known and trusted men, especially their father's associates. That had been William Miller's path to success. He had personalized his business, invested sagaciously, treated his friends well and relied on them. But most of all, he had taken advantage of his access to government and government-associated activities to enrich himself as those associations also enriched Washington. William Miller's success was not so much self-made as it was jointly made between himself and the larger, federally funded greening of Washington. □

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37. Miller to Winston, April 20, 1872, box 7, Miller Family Papers.

38. A. C. Lowell to Miller, Oct. 19, 1860 (1st qtn.), and Miller to William Littlejohn, April 19, 1872 (2d qtn.), both in box 1, Miller Family Papers.

39. Mary Miller to Winlock and Pendleton Miller, May 2, 1876, box 1, Miller Family Papers.