States’ rights, slavery and secession were hotly debated in the years leading up to the war, with Washington Territory lending its voice to the din. Just weeks after Fort Sumter, the first shots of the Civil War rang out in the territory. These shots were not delivered by rifles or cannon, but by the slings and arrows of political rhetoric during the May 1861 primaries for Washington Territory’s Delegate to the US House of Representatives. The Republican Convention was in Olympia, while Vancouver hosted the Democratic Convention.

In Vancouver, former Washington Territory governor Isaac I. Stevens and Clarke County’s Judge Columbia Lancaster vied for support. Both had already served as territorial delegates, and as Democrats, both were viewed with suspicion. Stevens was believed more sympathetic to secessionists because he supported President Buchanan’s pro-states’ rights appointees. Stevens won the primary, but lost the election to Colonel William H. Wallace, a Republican closely tied to Lincoln. In Washington Territory’s first skirmish, the Union prevailed.

While no military battles were fought here, the repercussions of the Civil War shaped Clarke County’s political and social landscape for decades. The great sectional strife cast a long shadow across our nation, with no person or place left untouched.

Civil War Timeline

- **November 6, 1860**: Abraham Lincoln elected President of the United States
- **December 20, 1860**: South Carolina secedes from the Union (first of 11 states)
- **February 9, 1861**: Confederate States of America formed with Jefferson Davis as president
- **March 4, 1861**: Abraham Lincoln inaugurated as 16th (and first Republican) president
- **April 12, 1861**: Civil War begins with Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, South Carolina
- **January 31, 1865**: US Congress approves Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery
- **April 4, 1865**: Lee surrenders to Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia
In Spring 1861, regular soldiers stationed at Fort Vancouver were dispatched to the east and replaced with volunteers from the First Oregon Cavalry. Tensions ran high in Clarke County. Fears of lurking Confederate sympathizers and the proximity of foreign forces, such as the British, plagued the minds of Clarke County residents. In April 1861, the *Morning Oregonian* fanned these fears by reporting on local activity by the Knights of the Golden Circle, a group organized “with the purpose of destroying the Federal Government and establishing a Slave Confederacy” and implicated in a plot to capture the Vancouver Arsenal near the fort. The validity of this plot has been questioned—the first account was not mentioned until the late 1860s and may have been a tactic by local Republican candidates to pull votes from territorial Democrats.
On June 22, 1862, the *Morning Oregonian* reported that many of Clarke County’s leading citizens had filed into Vancouver’s Metropolis Hall the day before to form a Union Party platform and infrastructure. They declared Clarke County “the most distant limb of the Union” and resolved, “that all sectional divisions can be better healed in the Union than out of it.” The Union Party reconvened in Clarke County in May 1863 to reiterate its call for a strong prosecution of the war.

The battles in Washington Territory were largely waged by competing newspapers, which were partisan at best (treasonous at worst). The Civil War spawned a variety of party presses in Clarke County, including *The Union Flag*, which ran between June and July 1861, and *The Morning Glory*, a pro-Democrat publication printed on election day, July 14, 1862--possibly in response to a paper printed by the opposition the day before called *The Revealer*, but no proof of this has been found.

**Welcome to the Party**

Well before the 1864 presidential campaign, the Republican Party changed its ticket’s name to the National Union Party to allow Northern/War Democrats to support Lincoln’s Civil War policies without voting Republican.
“The liberal, generous and unstinted Sanitary Commission is typified by the goddesses Pomona, Flora, Misericordia; Florence Nightingale; and Angels of Mercy and Plenty, scattering with well-filled cornucopias, to friends and foe.” Brigadier General Benjamin Alvord, US Volunteers, District of Oregon, stationed at Fort Vancouver.

Alvord’s address to the Vancouver Sanitary Aid Society in March 1865 recognized the efforts of Clarke County women in supporting Union forces. Clarke County women raised money through dances and other events to provide food and supplies that could improve the state of sanitation and health for Union soldiers, widows, and orphans. During the war, the Washington Territory raised more money than any other State or Territory, with Clarke County contributing between four and six thousand dollars to the cause. Their efforts were often praised in letters from high-ranking officials, such as one sent in 1864 by Henry Bellows, an officer stationed in San Francisco. Bellows noted, “it is a great comfort to see that the duration of the war does not exhaust your patience, and that your distance from the scene of bloodshed does not diminish your pity and anxiety to soothe the distresses of our noble soldiers.”

One Woman’s War
Melcenia Elliott served as a nurse with the Sanitary Aid Commission during the Civil War. Soon after, she married Seth Arnold and eventually moved to Clarke County, where she died in 1926.
By the 1840s, the United States military was engaged in open conflict with Native nations across the continent, including the Pacific Northwest. The army’s mission was two-fold; honor agreed-upon sovereignty of Native territories, and protect settlers moving westward. When these duties conflicted, settlers were often given priority.

This tenuous situation did not abate during the Civil War years. Volunteer troops, including those in Clarke County, inherited these responsibilities from the regular forces. The First Oregon Calvary volunteers stationed at Fort Vancouver were engaged in continued conflicts with Native nations. Clarke County resident Robert V. Cresap was a member of this unit. He “enlisted [in] Company C First Oregon Cavalry in 1861, and served three years…fighting [in] the Oregon, Idaho and Washington Territory.” CCHM Oral History Collection (Stoddard)

As the war ended, the gaze of many Americans turned west and the erosion of the western nations accelerated. With the land policies established by the Federal Government during the war, veterans--regular and volunteer--rushed to take possession of newly-available western lands.
The Federal Government’s passage of the Homestead Act of 1862 opened up newly-claimed lands for migration. The act stipulated that anyone who had not taken up arms against the government could file an application for land. Out of this movement rose several Clarke County communities. Union Ridge was established during this period, reputedly named for the large number of Union veterans settling there. The name of the city would eventually be changed to Ridgefield.

In 1865, Washington Territory was asked to embrace another kind of immigrant—300 children described as “orphans of deceased soldiers.” At a meeting held on September 30, 1865, Vancouverites resolved that “fifty orphans [could] be provided with homes in Vancouver and vicinity.” Sadly, after this point the historical record on the fate of these children is silent.
While most soldiers rejoined their communities, the memories of war remained in the hearts and minds of veterans and civilians alike. In 1876, Clarke County hosted their first community-wide Decoration Day to honor those lost in the war. By 1879, their efforts had evolved into a grand celebration that included a parade from the city square to the National Cemetery, crowds of excursionists from Oregon City, and a baseball game between Vancouverites and Portlanders. However, the event was not without controversy.

News reports from this event noted the lack of military participation and gave a detailed account of a speech sympathetic to southerners. In response to the anger this speech provoked, local city official WH Smallwood wrote a letter published by the Vancouver Independent June 12, 1897 stating, “surely no reflecting person possessing any of those tender emotions which give vitality to the human soul can deem “our Decoration Day” the proper time – or the grave the proper place, to parade a feeling of malice or revenge toward even the living.”

What’s in a Name?
Celebrated widely for the first time in 1868 under the name Decoration Day, Memorial Day was not declared a national holiday until 1971.
Veteran Voices

Civilians may empathize, but can never fully comprehend the senses and emotions experienced during combat. Veterans of war cope with and express their memories in different ways, but few escape them.

Daniel Boone Baker moved to Clarke County in 1874 after serving in both Co. F, 25th Missouri Infantry and Co. D, 1st Missouri Engineers during the Civil War. Recalling his first predawn threat of a Confederate attack as a raw recruit, he wrote, “We waited for what seemed to me to be ages for the battle to begin, but that battle has never been fought until now, when I am fighting it all alone, fifty-two years after, and three thousand miles away.” CCHM Library: Life in the Ranks: A Soldier’s Experience in the Civil War C4721

Lewis Wells Sutton moved to Clarke County in the 1890s after serving in Co. I 14th Iowa Infantry during the conflict, writing poetry and detailed accounts of his experiences during the war. Of his capture at the Battle of Shiloh April 6th, 1862 he noted, “...the prisoners...marched five miles on the Corinth Road into an old cornfield surrounded by woods. The prisoners were guarded by two lines of rebel soldiers with loaded guns, standing facing inward, and elbows touching...the soldiers (without orders) cocked their guns and leveled them upon the prisoners, ready to make their camping ground a slaughter ground.” CCHM Archives C2071

Sutton remained uncharacteristically silent on his brother Jacob’s death from wounds received at Corinth, Mississippi later that year.
Veterans and their families have always been at the core of America’s postwar experience, and the Civil War was no different. In 1866, a national organization for Union Civil War veterans called the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) was formed, with the motto Fraternity, Charity, Loyalty. This group championed a variety of causes, including the black veteran vote, veteran pensions and Republican candidates. In 1881, Clarke County veterans formed Ellsworth Post No. 2 of the Department of Washington and Alaska Grand Army of the Republic. In 1883, GAR added a women’s auxiliary, the Women’s Relief Corps; Vancouver’s Ellsworth Women’s Relief Corp was created in 1886. The GAR formally disbanded in the 1950s when its last member died, but the spirit of the group lived on in the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War and Auxiliary, which also boasted a Clarke County contingent.

The Confederate States’ United Daughters of the Confederacy established the Winnie Davis chapter in Clark County in 1937, named for a daughter of CSA President Jefferson Davis who died in infancy.

Dropping the ‘E’
Clarke County’s name was officially changed to Clark County on April 8, 1926, correcting a long-standing clerical error.
Born of racism in the south after the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan had seen a steady decline in its ranks over the first two decades of the twentieth century. But by the early 1920s, with a resurgence of nativist and racist ideologies, the organization began to expand its membership and reach across the nation. Clarke County was not immune to its influence. The Klan’s first appearance in the county was noted in 1922, and their presence continued to grow. By the summer of 1924, the group enjoyed enough community support to host what the August 25, 1924 Vancouver Chronicle described as, “a huge Ku Klux Klan open-air ceremonial meeting...[with] some 500 Klansmen in full regalia and some 10,000 spectators” at Vancouver’s Bagley Park. Newspaper accounts of the time reported some of the group’s more philanthropic activities, but by the 1930s, resistance to the group’s core principles from America’s citizens and government spurred its decline.
By 1970, the last Civil War veterans had died, taking the living memory of the war with them. But many veterans passed their memories on to others, passing the mantel of memory and memorial to later generations. One local example of this legacy is Walter W. Pollock, who cherished the journal his father, Thomas Pollock, kept as a soldier from Iowa. Walter remarked, “the most amazing thing was that he kept a diary of how they marched every day.” *CCHM Oral History Collection (Pollock)*

The war left its mark on Clark County. Many current Clark County residents—whether they know it or not—are descendants of Civil War veterans. For some, the stories were kept alive. For others, they were never heard. While the conflict is long past, its shadows remain.