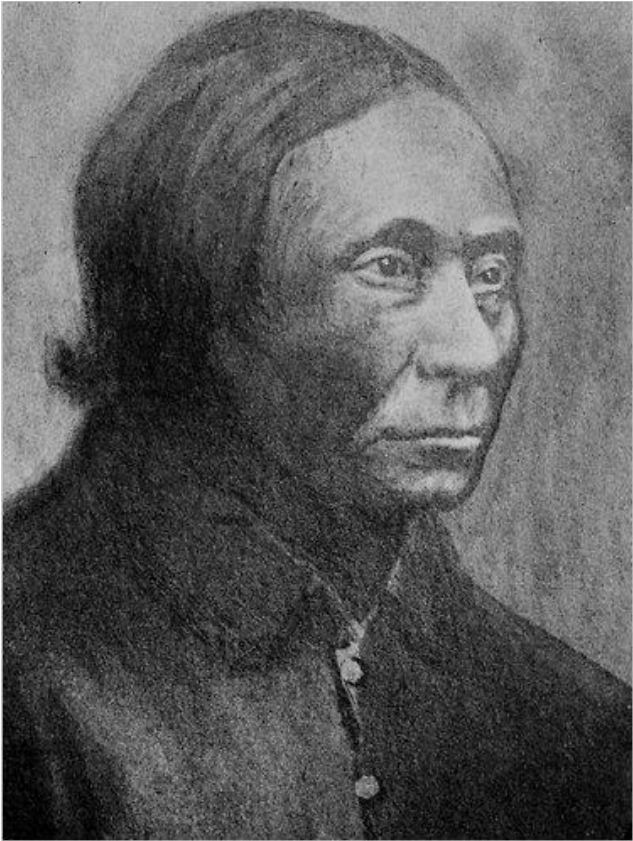


*Leschí:
A Nisqually
Leader*



How did Leschi get its name?

The Leschi neighborhood in Central Seattle is named for Chief¹ Leschi (1808-1858), a leader of the Nisqually people and a symbol of Native resistance to **displacement** from their homelands.

Nisqually Life

The Nisqually people lived for many thousands of years in the fertile, grassy valley west of Tacobet² (Mount Rainier). They called the tall grasses in the valley “squally” and named the river that flowed from the mountain into the southern end of Whulge (Puget Sound) after the nearby grasses. They called themselves “squally-absch,” people of the grass country. The people – and the river they depended on for survival – eventually became known as the Nisqually.



Leschi was born in 1808, in a village about 60 miles southeast of Seattle, near the present-day town of Eatonville. Leschi’s village was next to a prairie where

the family's horses grazed. They dug **camas** on that prairie, gathered berries and hunted elk in the woods, and fished for salmon – the staple of the Nisqually diet and the center of their way of life – in the river.

White Settlement

During Leschi's lifetime, many British and American people began to settle in Nisqually territory. As settlers fenced off land and began large-scale fishing, farming, and logging projects, they damaged the ecosystems in the region and depleted the natural resources the Nisqually depended on.

In 1846, as part of a comprehensive settlement agreement (one that did not involve the Native nations whose homelands they were occupying), the United States and Britain decided that the land Leschi's people had called home for thousands of years now belonged to the United States. Soon after, President Franklin Pierce appointed Isaac Stevens to be governor of the territory.

Governor Stevens' first assignment was to remove the Native people in Washington territory from their homes to make room for more white settlers.

Nisqually Survival Threatened

Governor Stevens met with representatives from all of the tribes in Washington territory and pressured them to sign **treaties** that traded away their ancestral homelands for blankets and other "gifts."

In 1854, Governor Stevens met with the Nisqually people and their neighbors, the Puyallup and Squaxin Island tribes, at Medicine Creek. Stevens chose Leschi and his brother Quiemuth to represent the Nisqually.

The Treaty of Medicine Creek required the Nisqually to relinquish their ancestral lands to settlers and move to a small reservation on a rocky cliff. This small piece of land could not accommodate the Nisqually people and was not near the river that had sustained them since time immemorial.

When Leschi resisted the terms of the treaty, Governor Stevens threatened that if the Nisqually people did not move to the reservation, he would send soldiers to force them off of their land.

War

Leschi chose to fight back. Many Native warriors joined Leschi and his brother in their fight to hold on to their homelands and their way of life. This series of battles, which lasted about a year, became known as the Puget Sound Indian War.

The Native resisters were able to continue fighting for a long time because they understood the terrain much better than the settler soldiers. But as the fighting dragged on, they ran low on food and weapons.

Near the end of the war, a group of Native fighters attacked the small village of Seattle to try to get more ammunition. They camped on the shores of Lake

Washington. Though it is not known if Leschi was with them, white settlers believed that Leschi was their leader.

The Native fighters lost the “Battle of Seattle” and, soon after, gave up their fight. Even though they didn’t win the war, Leschi and his followers won a victory for Native people.

After the fighting ended, Governor Stevens offered better reservations to several tribes, including the Nisqually. The new Nisqually reservation was larger than the one that the governor had originally proposed, and, importantly, it was next to the Nisqually River.

After the war, Governor Stevens arrested Leschi for the murder of a white settler who fought against the Native people. Even though international law says that killing someone in a war isn’t a crime, and even though there was no evidence that Leschi killed the man, a jury of white settlers found him guilty. In 1858, Leschi was **hanged** as punishment for the murder.

Nisqually Resilience

In 1917, only a few decades after the Nisqually reservation was granted, the US government took back most of the reservation land – again removing Nisqually people from their homes – to make room for a military base. Today, that base is called Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM).

Despite this and many other instances of injustice, the Nisqually people have continued to fight for their land and river – and for their human dignity. In the 1960s and 70s, Billy Frank, Jr., a Nisqually, led the struggle to protect and preserve Native fishing rights. In 2004, a group of people, led by Nisqually tribal chair Cynthia Iyall, convinced an historical court³ to overturn Leschi’s 1858 murder conviction.

Today, the Nisqually tribe actively participates in restoring habitat for salmon and other species that depend on healthy ecosystems. Every year on January 29th, they close their tribal offices to celebrate Chief Leschi Day.



Nisqually Indian Tribe
Squally-Absch

People of the river, people of the grass

¹ Leschi was a well-respected leader among his people, but the title “chief” was first used by Stevens, after Stevens chose Leschi to represent the Nisqually during treaty negotiations.

² British explorer George Vancouver named Mt. Rainier in the 1790s, after his friend Peter Rainier. The Nisqually call the mountain Tacobet; many tribes who live east of the mountain call it Tahoma. Both ancient names have similar translations: “mother of waters,” or “nourishing breast.”

³ A group of Washington State judges who volunteered to revisit Leschi’s case.

Glossary

Camas: A flowering plant that has a nutritious, edible bulb (root). Many Native peoples in the Pacific Northwest would bake this root to eat immediately or dry it to eat in the winter.

Displacement: When one group of people is forced to leave the place where they live to make room for another group of people.

Hanged: Killed by being hung by the neck from a rope.

Reservation: An area of land that belongs to and is managed by a Native American tribe.

Reservations came about because the US took away land from Native people to make room for white settlers. Sometimes, the government would set aside (or “reserve”) a small portion of land for the displaced tribe to live on.

Even though they must follow many US laws, tribes are independent nations and have their own tribal governments and laws.

Treaties: Formal, written agreements between independent nations. The treaties between the United States and Native peoples in Washington territory were written by territorial officials and given to tribal leaders to sign. Native people were not involved in creating the agreements.

Further reading

Framing Chief Leschi, by Lisa Blee

Leschi, Last Chief of the Nisquallies, by Cecelia
Carpenter

Nisqually Indian Tribe, by Cecelia Carpenter

Tears of Internment, by Cecelia Carpenter

The Bitter Waters of Medicine Creek, by Richard
Kluger

*Where the Waters Begin: The Traditional Nisqually
History of Mount Rainier*, by Cecelia Carpenter

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