

# Casto Massacre

## Squak Valley, Washington Territory, 1864

From Clarence B. Bagley's 1916 History of Seattle, Volume II  
Pages 663 to 665. Now in Public Domain

<http://www.issaquahhistory.org/archives/castomassacre.htm>

The arrival of William Casto and his girl-wife in Seattle in 1864, then a village of about thirty families, created quite a stir. Every desirable addition to the small community, that had so little communication with the outside world, was heartily welcomed. It was in the spring of the year that Abbie Casto (John Bonser's daughter) exchanged her pioneer Oregon home for a more primitive one in Washington. Her husband's free and easy manner won him many friends, but he gladly handed the laurels to his wife, whom he loved deeply, and who was noted for her kindness and beauty.

He built a small home in the heart of the Issaquah Valley, a natural prairie. John Halstead, a friend, lived with them. The pioneer, like the primitive man, must find his means of sustenance at hand, so they put in a garden and commenced home-making; and to help meet expenses William Casto opened a small trading post. There was a demand for hoop-poles to be used in the making of barrels, so he made use of the dense hazel brush surrounding the little home. He found help in the Indians, who proved industrious and soon became expert workers. He treated them well and they liked him, looking up to him as a white "Tyee," or chief. Himself addicted to the free use of liquor, he made the mistake of giving it to his Indians, either in a spirit of friendliness or with the mistaken thought that they would work better. It proved his own undoing, and brought calamity upon his innocent young wife and Halstead.

In the fall of 1864 great fear of an Indian uprising was entertained. This was due to the fact that the previous summer, during trouble between some white men and the Snohomish Indians, a chief and two Indians had been killed.

Occasionally, when under the influence of liquor, Casto's Indians had proved difficult to manage, and the neighbors had warned him against giving them whisky, but he thought they underestimated his influence and the character of the Indians. So, in spite of warnings, on that fatal afternoon in November he gave his Indians liquor and went home to supper.

Tribal revenge is a chief characteristic of the primitive Indian, and includes all members of a tribe, or race, of whatever color. If wrong has been done to one or more of an Indian tribe and those who committed the deed cannot be conveniently reached or made to pay the penalty, every member of the wrong-doer's race or tribe stands liable to pay the debt with his life, if he comes within reach of those of the inimical tribe.

Two of the Indians to whom William Casto gave liquor were more brutal or more deeply steeped in tribal revenge than the others. With their better judgment clouded by bad whisky they decided to take revenge on the three members of the white tribe within their reach. The supposition is that they thought the white "Tyee's" life would avenge that of the chief killed the previous summer and that the lives of the wife and John Halstead would answer for the two other Indians who were killed at the same time.

They softly approached the room where the three white people had just finished supper. A whizzing bullet instantly killed William Casto where he lay on a lounge; another felled the young wife, who sprang to her husband's assistance. John Halstead was struck by a third shot, but was not too disabled to fight valiantly. When found, his body showed many knife wounds. Through with their bloody work, the Indians ran from the house. One was shot in the back and killed by a friendly Indian, named Aleck, who had heard the shots and sensed the trouble. The other Indian ran. Aleck followed and came upon him in the woods where he killed him with an ax.



Hannah Bonser Knowles Collection  
*William and Abigail Bonser Casto.  
Early Squak Valley Residents and  
victims of the "Casto Massacre."*

The ranch of Mr. J. Bush adjoined that of William Casto. Alarmed, and fearing worse from an Indian uprising, he and his family, together with several single men who lived on nearby ranches, set out for Seattle. Although the distance is now easily covered in two hours by an auto-bus, they did not reach Seattle until the morning of the 9th. This was due to the roundabout way they were forced to take. The report of an Indian uprising spread like a forest fire. The coroner, Josiah Settle, and a party of men started at once for the scene of the murder. The only witnesses found were Aleck and a young squaw.

The bodies of the young pioneers were laid in the Denny Park Cemetery in North Seattle. They have since been removed to the Masonic Cemetery.

Later the Snohomish Tribe, unable to catch Aleck, who was very quick with a rifle, killed his son; but no Indian uprising followed the direful tragedy, proving the fact that most of the reported raids and uprisings were really cases of revengeful murder for mistakes made by the white man in his dealings with his red brother. In this case, as in many modern tragedies, whisky was the instigator of the crime.

## Related Articles

- [Abbie Casto's Fate](#), By Roger Knowles Thompson. Contains photos.
- [Natives Murder the Casto Family](#) - From "Squak Valley" by Bessie Wilson Crain
- [How "Greenbacks" Saved the Lives of the Bush Family](#), by Andrew Jackson "Jack" Bush