



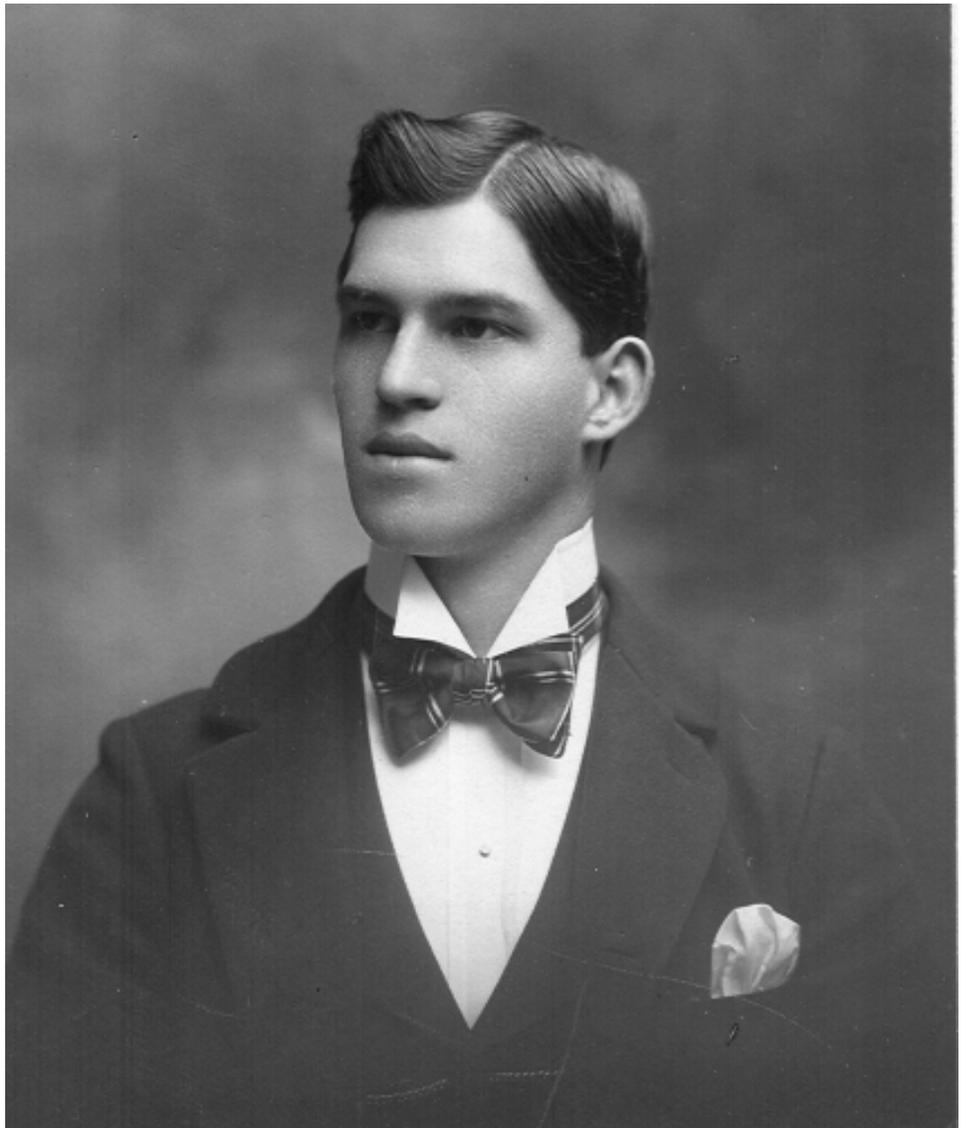
Building Renton: George W. Custer, Carpenter & Contractor

By Sarah Iles

Few builders have been as prolific in Renton as George W. Custer. As a carpenter and contractor, Custer worked in Renton and the surrounding area for over fifty years. Many of his buildings are still standing today, testaments to a time when carpentry and craftsmanship were artistic skills. A complete list of Custer's buildings in Renton may never be known, but it is certain that Renton's varied architectural fabric is richer because of Custer's work.

Growing Up

George Washington Custer was born in Newcastle, Washington on July 4, 1879. He was the second son born to Washington pioneers Charles S. Custer and Susan Jane (Harris) Custer. The family moved to Renton soon after George's birth. Details of Custer's early years are sparse. He grew up on Main Street in a Victorian house that his father built in 1880. Custer attended Central School and he graduated from the 8th grade in 1896.¹ His class was small; he was one of only six students (all male) that graduated.



*Right: George W. Custer, 1896.
(RHM#2000.127.8346)*

*Masthead Photo: George W. Custer's
childhood home, ca. 1900. (#41.0113)*

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Though his formal education ended there, he continued training in what was to be his life's trade: carpentry. Custer's father Charles was clearly a capable carpenter. The house he built on Main Street stood for almost ninety years before it was condemned and razed in 1969.² Charles S. Custer's main occupation, however, was running his general and hardware store. Custer likely learned his carpentry mastery from his father and his uncle, George Seward Custer. George S. Custer is listed in census records as a carpenter. His tools were passed down to George W. Custer; several tools found in George W. Custer's belongings bear the initials "G. S. C." These tools are much older than the others in Custer's tool collection and are fine examples of craftsmanship themselves.

"We have a pretty tough place up here"

Two years after his graduation, seventeen-year-old Custer had made his way up to Skagway, Alaska. He had gone north with thousands of others as a part of the Klondike Gold Rush. His goal was not to seek his fortune by mining gold; Custer was there to make his money in the service industry. The massive migration into Alaska spurred the development of several boomtowns. Skagway, Dyea, and Dawson were all towns that experienced overnight growth. Someone had to build these towns and Custer struck a path north in hope of being that someone. Reality, however, quickly sunk in once he arrived in Skagway.

*"There is not much carpenter work going on here at present. We are thinking of going over to the Lakes in a few weeks and try Boat building for a while. There is about [sic] 5 people for every job here."*³

George W. Custer to his cousin, Bert H. Harris, Skagway, Alaska
March 8, 1898

Custer's stay in the north was short, and he likely returned sometime in 1900. After his time in Alaska, Custer probably worked for others in the Renton area honing his carpentry skills. He also became Renton's first City Clerk, serving from September 10, 1901 to January 5, 1904.⁴ Custer's 8th grade education was rare during that time and was likely the impetus for his appointment as clerk. Custer's life became even busier in late 1902 when he married fellow Rentonite Annie Lewis.

Traveling Man: Construction Away From Home

After years of working for others, Custer set out on his own by 1906. Ledgers in the Museum's collection trace his construction projects from 1906 well into the 1950s. Most of his early jobs took him away from Renton. Mining and logging towns were the sites of most of his building activities until the 1930s. Barneston, Black Diamond, Burnett, Carbonado, Cumberland, Kerriston, Ravensdale, and Taylor are all towns that at one time or another hosted Custer construction projects.



Administrator's House, Taylor, ca 1906. (RHM#2000.127.8676)

Below: Houses, Kerriston, 1909. (RHM#2000.127.8715)



Many of these towns were “company towns,” towns that were owned and built by either a mining or logging company. Land was quickly cleared and identical houses were quickly built in rows. Later they were rented by the miners’ and loggers’ families. Industrial and commercial buildings were also constructed. Contractors built mills, sheds, stores, administrators’ homes, and even hotels. Contracts to build in company towns were likely quite attractive to Custer’s fledgling business. They were fairly large contracts and ensured work for his crew for months at a time.

Custer was a meticulous bookkeeper and also took photographs during and after many of his construction projects. Many of these photographs from the company towns are all that remain. Once the timber or the coal played out, the reason these small towns existed ceased to be. Barneston and Taylor both fell victim to their geography. Both towns were located in the area that eventually became the Cedar River Watershed. Concerns about keeping Seattle’s water supply clean led to both towns being abandoned and razed, Barneston in 1924, and Taylor in 1947.⁵



Above: Mill Construction, Kerriston, 1909. (RHM#2000.127.8706)

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Below: Custer House, pre-1909. (RHM#2000.127.8456)

Coming Home

Beginning in the mid-1920s, Custer's projects began to slowly shift closer to home. By that time his family had grown, with the addition of a son, Charles Lewis Custer, born in 1912. His work in Renton began with a few residences, mostly for friends and family, and buildings for non-profits, such as the Masonic and Odd Fellows Halls. By the 1930s Custer's work was almost exclusively in Renton. He continued building residences and, in the 1940s and 1950s, he also began building and remodeling whole city blocks in downtown Renton. The "Nannie Evans" block on the south side of Third, between Main and Wells, was constructed by Custer in 1938-1939 and subsequent work was completed in 1949 and 1952.⁶



Unlike the elaborate Victorian home that he grew up in, Custer built almost exclusively in the Craftsman style. A reaction to the ornateness of the Victorian style of architecture, Craftsman architecture relies on clean lines, simplicity and sturdiness, and natural materials. Custer's own home, built in 1902, is a perfect illustration of this building style. The house was originally built at 203 Wells Avenue for his bride Annie. A subsequent remodel sometime around 1909 significantly altered the appearance of the exterior of the house. In 1941, an expanding downtown prompted Custer to move his house farther north on Wells Avenue. A series of photographs in the Museum's Custer-Lewis Collection documents the arduous process of jacking the house up off its foundation and moving it up the street to its new lot. The Custer house remained in the family's possession until the death of Charles L. Custer in 2000. The house is now owned by another family and is still a wonderful example of George W. Custer's carpentry craftsmanship.



Above: Custer house, post-remodel, ca 1915. (Charles L. Custer in foreground.) (RHM#2000.127.8459)

Below: Relocation of the Custer house, December 1941. (RHM#2000.127.8472)

Several other residences built by Custer still stand in Renton today. Homes built for families with familiar Renton names, such as “Dobson,” “Cugini,” and “Wilson,” stand today in the Renton flats as a testament to Custer’s prolific building career. The building formerly known as the “Sweet Center” in Liberty Park was also constructed by Custer. The building, put up for the City, was constructed in 1922 using volunteers. The building was originally used as a concessions stand for the Park and offered both lunches and “sweets.” This building still stands at the west end of Liberty Park and is one of the oldest buildings owned by the City of Renton.



Custer kept building well into his late years. His ledgers document projects into 1959 when he was 80. Two years later, Custer was honored by the Rotary Club of Renton for his many years of service to the community.⁷ Custer died suddenly from a heart attack in 1963.⁸ He is buried next to his wife, Annie, at Mt. Olivet Cemetery.

Historic Preservation

As Renton continues to grow and change, more of Custer’s work will likely be threatened by the way of progress. The City of Renton does not have a historic preservation plan, so the survival of these buildings will depend solely upon the owners and their goodwill. While progress and change are necessary, it is also important for Renton to remember where it came from. Custer’s buildings are now historical and are visual reminders of Renton’s architecture from the early and middle 1900s. Hopefully, many of his buildings will survive as fine examples of Craftsman architecture and will serve to remind future generations about Renton’s early days as a growing city.

¹ Renton Public Schools 1855-6 Graduating Exercises Program, RHM #2000.127.0924.

² “Timbers Begin to Fall at Custer Home,” *Record-Chronicle*, June 27, 1969, p.1.

³ George W. Custer to Bert H. Harris, March 8, 1898, RHM# 2000.127.0895.

⁴ *City of Renton Listings of City Officials 1901-1978* (Renton: City Clerk’s Office, 1978), 69.

⁵ “Barneston — Thumbnail History,” HistoryLink.org Essay 2489, http://www.historylink.org/essays/output.cfm?file_id=2489, January 8, 2008; Morda C. Slauson. *One Hundred Years Along the Cedar* (Renton: published by the author, 1971), 73.

⁶ Sarah Iles, *Custer-Lewis Collection Cataloging Project, Renton History Museum, Renton, Washington*, M.A. thesis, University of Washington, 2005 pp. 55-56.

⁷ “Rotary Honors Builder For Community Service,” *Renton News Record*, January 19, 1961, n.p. (“Custer Family,” Vertical file, Renton History Museum).

⁸ “G. W. Custer, Renton, Dies,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, February 2, 1963, n.p.



Above: Sweet Center at Liberty Park, ca 1930. RHM#1986.060.2201