

The Great Pig War: A Pig and Potatoes Spark a Tense Standoff between the U.S. and Britain

By Melkisedeck Leon Shine · July 3, 2023

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? July 17, 1859

In the peaceful and picturesque San Juan Islands, nestled between the United States and British-controlled Vancouver Island, a seemingly trivial incident ignited a high-stakes diplomatic standoff between two nations. What started as a mere pig and potatoes dispute quickly escalated into what would be known as the Great Pig War ??

It all began when an American named Lyman Cutler, a farmer on San Juan Island, discovered a large black pig rummaging through his potato patch. Enraged by the pig's voracious appetite for his prized spuds, Cutler decided to take matters into his own hands. ??

On June 15, 1859, Cutler shot and killed the troublesome pig, which happened to belong to an Irishman named Charles Griffin, an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company. Griffin, outraged by the loss of his beloved swine, demanded the hefty sum of \$100 from Cutler as compensation. The situation quickly spiraled out of control as both parties refused to back down. ??

Both the United States and Britain claimed sovereignty over the San Juan Islands, and this seemingly petty conflict presented an opportunity for both nations to assert their dominance. Ships were dispatched, troops deployed, and tensions soared as each side dug their heels in, ready for battle. ????

On July 27, the United States dispatched Captain George Pickett, a charismatic but hot-headed officer, with 66 soldiers to establish an American military presence on San Juan Island. Across the Haro Strait, the British commander, Captain Geoffrey Hornby, retaliated by positioning the HMS Tribune, a powerful warship, just offshore. ??

As weeks turned into months, an uneasy stalemate settled over the island. Though both sides had their cannons pointed at each other, no shots were fired. Instead, a bizarre camaraderie developed between the troops. Friendly exchanges, games of cricket, and even joint Fourth of July celebrations took place, easing the tensions that had brought them here. ??

Diplomats from the United States and Britain attempted to resolve the dispute peacefully. Finally, on November 25, 1859, they agreed to submit the issue to the arbitration of Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany, who ruled in favor of the United States in 1872. ??

While the Great Pig War may have seemed absurd at its core, it highlighted the increasing tensions between the United States and Britain over territorial claims in

the Pacific Northwest. Ultimately, the conflict served as a reminder of the precarious nature of international relations and the potential for even the most trivial incidents to ignite the flames of war. ??

? July 17, 1859 - The day a pig and some potatoes nearly sparked a transatlantic war.
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