

*Welcome to “History on the Fly” a podcast series offered by the Washington State Historical Society. This episode is titled: “1895 Sounds Like a Long Time Ago to Us,” by Maria Pascualy, Curator for the Washington State Historical Society. This episode is one of four gallery talks describing the Hall of History gallery at the Washington State History Museum, in Tacoma, Washington.*

1895 sounds like a long time ago to us. We imagine a raw and rugged Washington, untouched by Interstate 5 and skyscrapers and information superhighways. In 1895 Samuel Coombs, an old time Seattleite already felt the Washington he had known, was disappearing. And so he financed a book on the Indian history of Washington. It was written by a friend and newspaperman JA Costello. Some of the book was new research and some of it was based on articles already published by Costello in the *Seattle Telegraph*. Samuel Coombs financial backing meant Coombs’ son Raphael got work as an illustrator. THE SIWASH published in 1895 includes several ink drawings by Raphael. One of these black and white sketches served as a study for an oil painting now hanging in the Hall of Washington History. Siwash was commonly used to refer to Indian people. It’s French for undomesticated or wild and considered a demeaning term. The painting is a four foot by four foot oil of Old Man House, Chief Seattle’s boyhood home.

Raphael Coombs painting hangs to the left of a cedar house post from Old Man House that is also on display. Unless you read the label first, the house post on its own does not convey the spectacular dimensions of Chief Seattle’s family home. Old Man House, originally located on Agate Pass, was the Cadillac of plank houses. Every day homes were 40 to 60 feet in length. Old Man House was described by some as measuring a 1000 feet in length. As you look at the painting you are aware that Raphael has created a plank house of the imagination, possibly twice the size of the original. But I think the painting works. The oil is dark, romantic and despite its exaggerated size, and the fact that all the wall planks are missing, the painting works. It’s a respectful depiction of the spirit of traditional Indian architecture. Coombs had to use his imagination because by 1895 Old Man House had been destroyed. And Indian people lived alongside white folk in clapboard houses, or in clapboard houses on reservation lands or like Chief Seattle’s daughter Angeline survived in a small shack at the edge of the city named for her father.

Photos taken at the same time as Raphael's Old Man House painting was completed show Angeline on her front porch with no effort made to disguise her ramshackle existence.

Raphael Coombs made one or two other works of art remembered by pioneers. There is an oil of Chief Seattle, said to have made Angeline cry when she saw it. He also made a sketch of Chief Leschi that was reproduced in newspapers after the Chief's death. Ray, as he later called himself, worked as a lithographer for Lowman & Hanford in Seattle and variously through the years identified as an artist, a decorator, a sign painter and a designer. He survived. He lived in his parents home for many years and then with his sister until his death in Seattle in 1933.