

Point Robinson

The Point Robinson Cascadia Marine Trail site is on the east end of Maury Island next to an historic light station complex that is listed on the Washington Heritage Register and the National Register of Historic Places. The complex is described as an “almost completely intact example of a Pacific Northwest light station,” with the original early buildings and equipment, predating automation, remaining on site.

The first known inhabitants of the area were the S’Homamish Indians, a precursor band of the Puyallup Tribe. According to Upper Skagit elder Vi Hilbert, the Indian name for the point was TsEtsa3a’p, or “hollering across”, referring to how the point of the island reaches over toward the mainland.

The gully in the bluff, now a gravel pit just south of the park, figures in an Indian legend. According to the story, an Indian from the tribe in Quartermaster Harbor known as the Swobabsh, or Swiftwater People, had injured a garter snake in the White River valley (now the Auburn-Kent area). The garter snake was a mythological ancestor of a White River valley tribe and, according to legend, the tribal members could become snakes. The snake, which later died of the injuries, was the son of a chief. To revenge the killing, the snake/people came over from the mainland, slid up the gully called Tuksiu’b, or “where the snakes landed”, over Maury Island and out at Kwiloot, the village in Quartermaster Harbor. They killed everyone except one woman who was mourning the death of the snake. The story concludes that after this thoughtless transgression, the dream time ended and human history began.

The first Europeans in the area were Capt. Vancouver and crew in 1792, who mistakenly concluded that Maury Island was part of Vashon Island. The Wilkes surveying team in 1841 determined that Maury was a separate island. Wilkes named the island after William L. Maury, a member of the survey team, and named the point in honor of crewmember John Robinson.

The physical characteristics of Point Robinson have been substantially altered as a result of the light station. Originally there was a salt marsh lagoon bounded by drift logs and a gravelly beach opening to the north, with the sand spit extending out into the channel to the northeast. By 1886 hydraulic sluicing from the bluff bank was used to begin filling the lagoon, and a large bulkhead was constructed around the spit to enclose roughly 4.5 acres. Filling continued through the years, and in the 1930’s, a WPA project sluiced additional dirt from the hill to finish filling in the marsh, reduce mosquitos, and add more beach. Large rocks were added to the shoreline at the same time for erosion control. Today there is a meadow where the marsh had been.

Point Robinson served as a transportation hub for people and cargo in the era of the Mosquito Fleet. Even though it was not a scheduled stop, a dozen or more boats connected the Point with other landings on the island and the rest of the Sound. In the early part of the 20th century, the cargo included “many hundreds of tons” of stumping dynamite and other explosives from R.J. Skalberg’s Maury Powder Company located nearby. The first post office on Maury Island was established at Point Robinson in 1888 and the station keeper served as the postmaster. The first road on Maury, a narrow trail hacked out of the woods, was built in 1885, and ran to the Point.

By the early 1880’s Point Robinson had been identified as a hazard to maritime traffic and in need of a fog signal. The area still is known to local mariners as the “fog net” because of the prevalence of thick fog. The deep water channel makes a 90-degree turn around the point, and

a 19th century navigator had to locate Point No Point, West Point, and Point Robinson to safely transit Puget Sound. A steam whistle, with a boiler and water-collecting cisterns, was in place by 1885. But the fog signal was soon determined to be inadequate without a light. A “post lantern” was first erected in 1887, replaced with higher and brighter lights in the next few decades. Adding a light to Point Robinson allowed mariners visual contact with at least two light stations at all positions in the channel.

The station keeper’s work could be arduous. Records show in 1897 the fog whistle blew 528 hours and the station keeper shoveled 35 tons of coal to keep the boiler going. An assistant keeper was added by 1903. The fog whistle was later replaced by three trumpet-style foghorns projecting north, south, and east.

By 1915 the light was an oil burning lamp made to rotate by descending weights. The lighthouse keeper wound a clockwork assembly to keep the mechanism turning. In 1918, when a reliable source of electricity became available, a 5th order Fresnel lens, “beehive” design, with a white electric occulting light from a 120-watt bulb was installed. Invented by French physicist Augustin Jean Fresnel, the lens is a multiple array of lenses and prisms that direct as much as 80% of the light 12 or more miles out to sea. Though the light was automated in 1978, the station still has its Fresnel lens in place, which could be activated, even though it is no longer its main operational light. The light tower now keeps company with a radar tower linked to the Coast Guard’s Seattle vessel traffic office, various antennae, NOAA scientific instruments, and GPS towers. The last Coast Guardsman to be stationed at Point Robinson served there until 1989.

The buildings to support the station were constructed over the years, beginning in the 1880s. Still existing are the buildings important to the function of an early 20th century light station--a storehouse/barn (1886), Quarters B (1908), oil house (1912), lighthouse (current structure built in 1915, replacing earlier towers), Quarters A (original replaced in 1917 and rebuilt as assistant’s quarters), and garage (1919). A boathouse, chicken coop, fruit locker, paint and carpenter shed, pump house, water shed and cisterns have been lost, as well as a cement boat ramp and a small rail car to help launch and land small boats.

The original site consisted of 24 acres. In 1959 the federal government declared roughly 12 acres excess and put them up for sale, but proximity to the foghorn reduced their value. The property was eventually transferred to King County for a park, and then to the Vashon Park District in 1995. The District now has a free long-term lease from the Coast Guard to use the federally owned part of the site for park purposes and a permit to use the light station as a museum. The Cascadia Marine Trail site was added in 2003.

A local nonprofit group, “Keepers of Point Robinson”, has been instrumental in restoring and maintaining the buildings, and volunteers conduct tours of the lighthouse, usually on Fridays or Sundays or by appointment. To visit the lighthouse, contact the “Keepers of Point Robinson” through the Vashon Park District. The keeper’s quarters house is available for rentals; for more information, contact the Vashon Park District.

The site has been evaluated for the Washington Natural Heritage Program and determined to be one of the best remaining examples of the Douglas fir-Pacific madrone/salal plant community in the state. Point Robinson is a favorite place to watch the J pod of orcas, and it is sometimes possible to hear sea lions on the mid-channel buoy.

Acknowledgements and sources

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