

Possession Point

The Cascadia Marine Trail site at Possession Point is located on the east side of the southernmost tip of Whidbey Island on an isolated bit of state parks land, hemmed in by private holdings. It's a great spot to enjoy the views of Possession Sound, Admiralty Inlet, and Puget Sound. The site fills a gap in the trail, as there are no other CMT sites nearby and those closest require crossing waterways with significant boat traffic.

Possession Point takes its name from the adjacent waterway, Possession Sound, so designated by Captain VanCouver, who came ashore in 1792 somewhere south of present day Everett, shot off a cannon, and declared possession for the English crown. VanCouver and his crew are thought to be the first Europeans to have entered Admiralty Inlet and explored the Sound. Whidbey Island was named by VanCouver after his ship's Master, Joseph Whidbey, who was the first white explorer to circumnavigate the island.

The first inhabitants of the area were, of course, Indians. Possession Point was called Tl'xol, meaning "gravelly". A major Snohomish village known as DEgwadzk, meaning "lots of a certain kind of crab", was located at Cultus Bay just west of Possession Point. This was a favorite gathering place to dig clams and smoke salmon. The village included several longhouses, enclosed by a high row of cedar poles for protection from Haida Indian raids. Its potlatch house was second in importance only to Hibulb and tribes from as far south as the Duwamish would come to the village for a potlatch. For many generations, it was the headquarters of important chiefs. Many Snohomish living at Tulalip today had great grandparents who lived at Cultus Bay.

The earliest white settlement of Whidbey Island occurred in 1848 on the north half of the island. Few settlers came to south Whidbey until the 1880's. An exception was Robert Bailey, who came to trade with the Indians and took up residence at DEgwadzk in 1850. Like many of the early white settlers on Whidbey, he married an Indian woman and established a home and a store. His land holdings eventually included 350 acres that reached from Cultus Bay, which at that time was called Bailey Bay, to the east side of Possession Point.

In 1853 one of Bailey's associates started a fish barreling business in Cultus Bay, buying fish from the Indians, salting it down and barreling it for sale in San Francisco and to ships. That business folded when the Indians went to the reservation. A few summer homes and fishermen's cabins gradually appeared near Possession Point. There was no pier on the east side of the point, but Mosquito Fleet steamers would pick up passengers from rowboats. As late as 1900 there were no stores or markets at Possession Point, and shopping was from trade boats that would bring various staples and housewares. There was no road to the point until 1940, and the only access by land was by foot along the beach from the Glendale community.

Fishing was a major occupation and preoccupation. Possession Point was known as a great fishing spot, in part because of a deep hole in the seafloor, 75-100 feet across, known locally as the Franklin Hole, which can be seen off shore at extreme low tide. Local lore is that the bottom of the hole has never been found and the world's largest octopi live there.

A major change occurred around 1900 with the establishment and then expansion of the Giant Powder Works, a distribution and storage facility for explosives used for blasting out stumps. The company built a large wharf and three concrete magazines, with sand barriers between them to reduce the damage in case of explosion. The explosives were brought in by ships, unloaded onto flatcars on tracks, and pushed by hand to the storage buildings. The facility inhibited development in the area, although the company allowed fishermen to build shacks on their beach property, as the fishermen were a source of labor as needed. The company paid 50 cents per hour, good pay at that time. Local histories recount that about every three months a workman would die of heart attack, attributed later to nitroglycerin contamination in the storage facility walls. The plant closed in 1935 when the business was sold to the DuPont Company.

Another major business in the area, located around the point in Cultus Bay, was the Sea Products Company Fertilizer Plant, a fish reduction facility locally known as the "stink plant". Scows loaded with dead salmon and dogfish, minus their livers, were barged in from canneries around the sound. The livers were sold separately for about \$1 per pound to make vitamins. The fish carcasses were heated and compressed to extract the oil, which was sold in barrels for use in paints and other manufacturing processes. The business continued in operation until the mid '50's, and local residents claimed that years later fish oil could still be smelled at low tide.

In 1918 a dance hall called Possession Pavilion was built 25 feet above the high tide line near the point. It was rented out to clubs and lodges on the mainland and people would come to picnic on the beach during the day and dance in the pavilion at night. Local lore has it that it was a speakeasy as well. It lasted about ten years before succumbing to beach erosion.

The community at the point gradually grew to a few dozen summer cottages, fishermen's cabins and driftwood shacks, and adopted the name Possession. Development was slowed by lack of potable water and recurring landslides from the bluffs above. In the 1920's, Charles and Mabel Payne constructed a dock, inn, post office, and store. The inn was not very profitable and closed after a few years, but the store rented cabins and sold hardware, newspapers, chemical toilets, refrigerators, etc., and continued in business until Mabel passed on in 1962.

At least three fish buyers and 40-50 commercial trollers worked near Possession Point through the 1920's. Commercial fishing was big business and from around 1900 to the 1930's, fish traps had lined the shores of Whidbey Island. Sport fishing and hunting were hugely popular and fishing and hunting resorts proliferated in the '20's and '30's. The first car ferries had come to Whidbey before 1920, and it became a destination for summer vacations, hunting, and fishing. But by 1931 it was clear the great runs of salmon were over. After much conflict between sports fishermen and commercial fishermen and canneries, Initiative 77 to ban fish traps and fish wheels was placed on the ballot in 1934 and passed statewide.

South Whidbey and the Cultus Bay/Possession Point area had its share of hunting and fishing resorts, but as trends in travel and leisure changed in the 40's and '50's, the resorts closed, sold lots for summer cottages, or became bed-and-breakfast inns. Sport fishing continues to be a favorite pastime, and the only business remaining is the Possession Point Bait Company.

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