

Fay Bainbridge Park

This Cascadia Marine Trail site on the northeast end of Bainbridge Island is conveniently located for a central Puget Sound paddle trip, and has panoramic views of the sea and mountains and the Seattle skyline. We have the Fay family to thank for this park.

Bainbridge Island was the historical territory of the Suquamish Indians, the tribe that was led by Chief Kitsap, whose name was given to the County, and later by Chief Sealth, whose name graces the City of Seattle. A Suquamish summer camp was located on the sand spit and lagoon at the northeast corner of the park, and the Indians called that area “Sal3a’ gwEp”, meaning “place where butt ends of trees are lying around”.

Captain Vancouver and crew in 1792 were the first Europeans known to visit the island, though he believed it to be a peninsula rather than an island. The next recorded European in the area was John Work, exploring for Hudson’s Bay Company in 1824, who hunted on Bainbridge and camped at the harbor at the northwest end of the island on his way north from the Columbia River.

It was Lt. Charles Wilkes, U.S.N., on the 1841 exploring expedition who determined that the land mass was an island and gave the present names to most of its features. The island was named after William Bainbridge, commander of the U.S.S. Constitution, “Old Ironsides”, and hero of the War of 1812. The harbor at the northwest end of the island, first called Soquamis Bay, and later to become one of the most important early white settlements on Puget Sound, was named Port Madison after the fourth President. The sand spit was named Point Monroe after the fifth. Some of Wilkes’ crew members camped on the spit and traded for salmon with the Indians camped nearby.

One of the first settlers at the north end of the island was George Meigs, whose Donation Land Claim is dated 1855. He had acquired a lumber mill and moved it from Apple Tree Cove (Kingston) to Port Madison in 1854. The mill became very successful, and supplied lumber around the world, but primarily to San Francisco. Meigs became known as one of the wealthiest men in Washington Territory. The town he built at Port Madison included a hotel, store, school, and houses for his employees, and was often called the most beautiful town in the Northwest. It was considered one of the three principal ports in the Territory, along with Olympia and Fort Steilacoom, and later became the county seat. Meigs added a shipbuilding business in the 1860’s, which by the 1870’s produced more sailing ships than the entire San Francisco Bay area produced at time.

Nevertheless, a series of fires and other disasters, along with the depletion of readily available timber, put Meigs in financial straits. Meigs sold out to W.P. Sayward, a millowner from Victoria, B.C., but stayed on as manager. By the 1880’s creditors were filing lawsuits and the county seat moved to Port Orchard. The mill was heavily mortgaged. It closed in 1892, and the banks foreclosed. Port Madison became almost a ghost town. Legal battles followed for six years, and Dexter Horton Bank emerged as the new owner.

Among the properties acquired by the bank in the foreclosure was considerable acreage that had been acquired by Meigs and Sayward from the University of Washington. An 1854 Act of Congress allowed states to select sections of land for the financing of schools and universities. In 1862 Meigs had traded building materials valued at \$6,961.32 for 3,000 acres of the university's selected land, including 108 acres at the north end of Bainbridge and all of Blake Island. The bank's liquidation of these holdings offered an opportunity for real estate investors.

One of those investors was William Pitt Trimble, a young lawyer from an old, prominent East Coast family, who had come west to seek his fortune. Trimble specialized in investing in shoreline and in 1905 snapped up both the north Bainbridge Island acreage and Blake Island. Trimble flipped the north Bainbridge acreage, selling 46 acres of it to another young lawyer from an old, prominent East Coast family, John P. Fay.

John P. Fay and his wife Alice Ober Fay had arrived in Seattle just before the Great Seattle Fire of 1889, and he quickly had a busy practice in fire-related cases and redevelopment. His practice expanded to encompass real estate, corporate law, railroads, shipping, and mining, and he was soon considered one of the most successful lawyers and investors in the State. He was known as a well-read and well-spoken orator and was called the "silver-tongued silver Republican". Fay ran for political office, first as a Republican and later as a proponent of the silver standard and a supporter of William Jennings Bryan, who ran for President in 1896. Bryan reportedly offered Fay the Secretary of Interior position in his cabinet if he won, but he lost to William McKinley.

Fay did not win any elections, but he was appointed to the Board of Regents of the University of Washington in 1897 and subsequently became President of the Board. He later said that his years of service on the Board were the most gratifying of his career. A believer in "sound mind in sound body", he was responsible for bringing athletics to UW, and built the first gymnasium for its students. He retired from practicing law in 1915 to concentrate on his other business ventures, and donated his extensive law library to the UW.

The Fays built a large, rambling two-story summer home on the Bainbridge property, and called it "Faybrooke" after the Fay ancestral estate in England. The Fays planted gardens and fruit trees, and spent many happy summers there. Unfortunately the house caught fire and burned in 1909. He suffered burns searching the burning house to ensure all the children were out safely and then handing books out the window until the ceiling caved in. Fay lost 2000 volumes of his home library. The large house, considered one of the finest on the island, was never rebuilt. The Fays replaced it with a summer cottage.

Fay had extensive real estate holdings, mining investments, and shipping interests, and had become quite wealthy. When the stock market crashed in 1929, his financial fortune began a nosedive. He still owned considerable property but it became increasingly difficult to pay its expenses and generate income from it. Trying to hang on to his holdings, he borrowed money and began to sell off part of the Bainbridge acreage, retaining only the northern-most lot for his family.

In 1930 John P. Fay died unexpectedly in his late 60's after a short illness. For many years after, the extended family continued "going to camp" at Faybrooke. The children, grandchildren, and cousins enjoyed the gardens, views, fishing and swimming, picnicking and hiking. But the ownership of Faybrooke was controlled by son Temple S. Fay, a doctor in Philadelphia, and he considered selling. State Senator Gertrude Johnson, who lived nearby on Bainbridge, contacted him and prevailed on the Fays to sell the property at a discount for \$5,000 to the State for a public park. Temple Fay agreed so long as the park would be named to honor his father.

The deal was completed in 1944. Throngs of people turned out to attend the dedication of the park. Little trace of Faybrooke remains; the Fay summer cottage became the ranger residence until termites did it in and it was torn down. Fill dirt created the lower parking area, which took the place of the Fay children's swimming hole. In 1953 the town bell that had hung in Port Madison during the mill era was moved to the park. The Cascadia Marine Trail site was established in 1993 and State transferred the park to the City of Bainbridge Island in 2011. The park is popular with fishermen and families and is well-used in the summer.

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