



A Cascadia Marine Trail Site History Honoring over 5,000 Years of Marine Travel

The Cascadia Marine Trail site in Oak Harbor is in City Beach Park, about one block from the downtown shops and restaurants of Oak Harbor. The location is in a protected inner harbor on northeast Whidbey Island, at the north end of Saratoga Passage near the south entrance to Skagit Bay. The urban location makes it a good spot to start or end a trip, or re-supply.

The first Europeans to explore the east side of Whidbey Island were Captain VanCouver and his crew in 1792. They found Oak Harbor inhabited by Skagit Indians who called it Texq!o'tsid, meaning "closed mouth" (local white settlers spelled it "Klatoletsche"). Joseph Whidbey, Master on VanCouver's voyage, encountered Skagits on his circumnavigation of the island. They cordially welcomed the strangers and offered them food and assistance. The Indians assumed that the strangers had covered themselves with white ash, and were astonished when Joseph Whidbey opened his waistcoat to show them the color of his skin. The next European known to visit the area was a French Catholic missionary, Father Blanchet. Blanchet visited in 1840 at the invitation of local tribes, stayed about a year, and baptized over 200 people.

The first European settlers of Oak Harbor were disappointed California gold seekers--the Norwegian Zakarias Martin Toftezen, the Swiss Ulrich Freund, and the New Englander Clement "Charlie" Sumner. In 1850 they arranged for Indians to bring them to North Whidbey. They were dropped off at Crescent Harbor, east of Oak Harbor. Toftezen, the first Norwegian to settle in the Washington territory, is said to have climbed a ridge to see Oak Harbor and exclaimed to his companions, "Eureka!... we have found our earthly paradise!"

In 1850 the area was prairie with scattered Garry oaks, inspiring the name "Oak Harbor". The three settlers each took up claims along the waterfront. Sumner filed his claim, but left after more settlers arrived, stating "When you can see the smoke from your neighbor's cabin, it's time to leave." Part of Sumner's claim was sold to Captain Edward Barrington, one of the many ship captains that settled Whidbey. Barrington and his business partner Charles Phillips developed the claim, building a pier, warehouse, cabins, ships, trading post, store, and saloon.

Like many of the early Whidbey settlers, Barrington took an Indian wife and started a family. She later died, and he married an Irish woman. Barrington was an imposing figure, big of stature with vivid red hair and beard, and became known as the arbiter of disputes between the Indians and settlers, doling out punishment if appropriate and sometimes saving Indians from wrongful accusations. One story about Barrington has become local legend. Indians from British Columbia menaced local Indians and settlers alike with surprise raids--killing, stealing, burning villages, and

taking slaves. One day an Indian girl ran to Barrington's cabin to tell him that Haida canoes were sighted entering Oak Harbor. Barrington got to the scene as the Haidas were coming up the beach, screaming and brandishing weapons. At that time, local Indians "buried" their dead by placing the bodies in canoes tied up in trees or on poles. Barrington cut the thongs that held up one such a burial, and the canoe and bones clattered to the ground. Grabbing the skull and placing it on the end of a stick, he began bobbing and weaving, waving the skull, then rushed toward the Haidas with a shout. Exclaiming that he must be an evil spirit or devil, the Haidas raced back to their canoes and left, never to return. The reaction of the Skagits is not recorded.

A number of Skagit Indians continued to live in Oak Harbor well into the 20th century. In 1894 there was a congenial gathering of several hundred Indians and settlers for a 4th of July picnic at City Beach, with settlers providing fried chicken, blueberry pie, bread and butter, and the Indians hosting a clambake and grilling game, and all sharing. The festivities included boat races, horse races, tug of war contests, foot races, 3-legged races, speeches, and music provided by a mandolin orchestra. Chief Billy Barlow gave a speech, putting forth an original take on creation of the universe that combined Genesis and Indian legend.

Many of the first settlers were Irish families. In 1895 the first Dutch families arrived. To stimulate more real estate sales, a local real estate promoter traveled to Michigan with foot-long potatoes and promotional flyers in Dutch and convinced Dutch immigrant farmers to relocate to Whidbey. Hollanders from Michigan and various other states began to arrive and take up farms, and soon there were over 200 Hollanders in the area. Their thrift and hard work is credited with helping Whidbey weather the hard economic times of the 1890's after the Panic of 1893, the worst national financial collapse before the Great Depression. As late as the 1930's, there was at least one church service in Dutch in Oak Harbor, and there is still an annual Holland festival.

The Barrington property was eventually sold to a Civil War veteran, Jerome Ely, a farmer, development booster and real estate man who became the first mayor and postmaster when Oak Harbor incorporated in 1915. Ely planted an orchard of cherry, apple and pear trees on what had originally been Sumner's claim. When Ely died in 1923, his widow sold the property, and in the 1930's a local businessman acquired the waterfront portion and deeded it to the city for City Beach Park.

Before the Dutch settlers arrived, Oak Harbor had about 20 residents. By 1915 the number had increased to about 400, and the population remained at that level through the 1930's. Big change followed in 1941. With the advent of World War II, the Navy was looking for a location that could accommodate a seaplane base for Catalina flying boats, and Oak Harbor was selected because it is protected, generally has good weather, and is seldom foggy. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, an airport was deemed important as well. Thousands of civilian workers and servicemen relocated to the town to build the base. Many productive farms in the area were converted to runways and other military facilities, and the town rapidly expanded with construction of hundreds of units of Navy housing. Naval Air Station Whidbey Island continues today as one of the most important Naval Air Stations on the West Coast.

From the CMT site, one can see a spit of land, jutting into the harbor from Maylor (Forbes) Point on the southeast. This was known as Crooked Spit, and it had become an Indian burial ground after settlers convinced the Indians to bury their dead in the ground instead of placing them in trees. The spit was much longer at that time, but safe operation of the seaplane base necessitated the removal of 900 feet. The Navy advised the Indians of the plans to disturb the land, and allowed them time to remove and relocate the graves. A site near La Conner was selected as their final resting place.

© Karen L. Borell

Sources and acknowledgements

Cahail, Alice Kellogg, *Sea Captains of Whidby Island*. 1901. USGenWeb Archives, <http://files.usgwarchives.net/wa/island/history/whidcapn.txt>, accessed December, 2015.

Cooke, Jimmie Jean, *A Particular Friend, Penn's Cove: A history of the settlers, claims and buildings of Central Whidbey Island*. Island County Historical Society, 1973.

Darst, Peggy Christine, *Oak Harbor*. Images of America, Arcadia Publishing, 2014.

Hayes, Derek, *Historical Atlas of the Pacific Northwest: Maps of Exploration and Discovery*. Sasquatch Press, 1999.

Island County Historical Society, Janet Enzmann Archives and Research Library, Coast Salish and other folders, reviewed October, 2015.

Kellogg, George A., *A History of Whidbey's Island*. George B. Astel Publishing, 1934.

McClary, Daryl C., "Island County—Thumbnail History", HistoryLink #7523 <http://www.historylink.org>, 2005, accessed December, 2015.

Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, http://www.cnic.navy.mil/regions/cnrnw/installations/nas_whidbey_island.html, accessed December, 2015

Neil, Dorothy, *By Canoe and Sailing Ship They Came*. Spindrift Pub. Co., 1989.

Oldham, Kit, "Joseph Whidbey Circumnavigates Whidbey Island In June, 1792", HistoryLink #5060 <http://www.historylink.org>, 2003, accessed September, 2015.

Waterman, T.T., *Puget Sound Geography*. Lushootseed Press, 2001.

Wilma, David, "Oak Harbor—Thumbnail History", HistoryLink #8223, <http://www.historylink.org>, 2007, accessed November, 2015.

Many thanks are owed to the librarians in the Seattle Room of the Seattle Public Library and the Langley and Coupeville branches of the Sno-Isle Public Library. I must call out special thanks to

the good folks at the Island County Historical Society, in particular Sarah Aldrich, the local archivist who helped me find much valuable material in their well-organized and extensive collections. Whidbey Island has a wealth of local history material due to the work of local historians who have recorded and preserved the memories and local lore that would otherwise have been lost, and due to citizen support that has nurtured the Island County Historical Society. My work would be much poorer, were it not for their efforts.