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

The history of a place is in many ways a reflection of its location. Nowhere is this more true than Point Roberts, where geography—political and biological, play an outsize role in its history. Lighthouse Marine Park and its Cascadia Marine Trail site are at the southwest corner of a peninsula that is part of the United States, but can only be reached by land through Canada.

For thousands of years Point Roberts was a common meeting place and shared fishing area for Central Coast Salish Indians, who would travel great distances to camp and fish there together in the summer. In the first half of the 19th century, many longhouses could be found along the shore and as many as 200 canoes would arrive for summer fishing. The tribes included Tsawwassen, Musqueam, Sto:lo, Cowichan, Katzie, Lummi, Semiahmoo, Swinomish, Saanich, Snohomish, Samish, and more. There are creation stories centered in Point Roberts and it was a place of sanctity and purification rituals. The Lummis described it as a “center from which the underground passages radiate”. They believed that it was connected by underground waterways to lakes and other bodies of water, and that people who drowned elsewhere could be found floating off Point Roberts.

The first Europeans to see Point Roberts were most likely Spanish explorers of the Francisco de Eliza expedition in 1791. Eliza thought it was an island and called it Ysla de Zepeda. This was corrected by his compatriots Galiano and Valdez, exploring the Strait of Georgia in 1792, to Punta de Zepeda. Vancouver was exploring and surveying the Northwest coast at the same time and anchored his ships in Birch Bay to travel north by longboat. He camped overnight at the Point and named it after his fellow officer in the British Navy, Captain Henry Roberts. Although trappers, traders, and missionaries followed Vancouver to the area, the next European explorers recorded were James McMillan and crew of Hudson’s Bay Company, who passed through in 1824 and established Fort Langley B.C. in 1827.

First Nation stories tell that the first European to live on the Point was called Portugee Joe. He lived in the vicinity of the present Lighthouse Marine Park and CMT site for a few years and married an Indian woman. Joe fished with lines rather than nets, and the stories tell that he introduced this as a new way of fishing to the Indians at the Point.

The Treaty of Oregon of 1846 established the 49th Parallel as the boundary between the United States and British territory from the Rockies west, but the negotiators apparently did not realize that a peninsula of land about 5 miles square, Point Roberts, would be United State territory, attached to British territory but cut off from the rest of the United States. When this was realized

later, the British referred to Point Roberts as an “inconvenient appendage”, and hoped to trade other land for it, but the Americans refused. Point Roberts remained U.S. territory.

The Point saw a flurry of activity in 1858 with the short-lived Fraser River gold rush and the arrival of British and American survey teams. The survey teams hired locals, set up astronomical stations, and cut trees to mark the border. A town to supply miners with provisions and liquor grew up near the future site of Lighthouse Marine Park. Canada was charging $2 a head plus a boat tax for traveling up the river, and to avoid this, miners would come to Point Roberts and then sneak in along an inland route to get up the river. When the gold rush petered out about a year later, and the surveyors finished, the town was abandoned and the Point had little activity but fishing.

The Point was designated a military and lighthouse reserve in 1859; however, there was never any military presence. Because property rights could not be acquired in a military reserve, few settlers arrived, but outlaws, smugglers and transients found it convenient. After a few notorious murders, the Point developed a reputation as a lawless no man’s land. There was an old outlaws’ shack still standing at the Lighthouse Marine Park area until at least 1913.

Despite its reputation and lack of obtainable property rights, the Point came to the attention of a few Icelandic immigrants, living on nearby Vancouver Island in the 1890’s. Icelanders had begun to leave Iceland for Canada in the 1870’s after a few years of severe natural disasters, only to find an economic downturn in Canada. The soil on Point Roberts was swampy and poor quality, but it was at least as good or better than what they had known in Iceland. The Point could be lashed by storms but nothing like Iceland’s cold and ice, and the glorious views of the mountains and sea reminded them of home. Soon more Icelanders arrived on the Point as the word spread.

After many years of government neglect and inattention, the Department of the Interior sent an agent to the Point in 1904 to assess conditions and record squatters with a view to legitimizing settlement. To his surprise, instead of a dangerous no man’s land, the agent found an orderly community of farmers and fishermen, 50% of whom were Icelandic immigrants. After a series of missteps, President Teddy Roosevelt granted the squatters homestead rights in 1908. The community celebrated with a picnic at the Lighthouse Marine Park site and sent the President a sheepskin rug, provided by a park site settler, as a gesture of thanks.

One of the squatters was an elderly Chinese man named Ah Fat, who called himself Charlie Chinaman. Charlie had come to Point Roberts in 1893, fleeing anti-Chinese violence in Bellingham. His presence was a well-known secret in the community, and the community shielded him from the anti-Chinese purges going on elsewhere in Washington State. Charlie built a house at the future park site, gardened, and lived out his days there unmolested.

The major industry and economic driver at the Point was fishing. During spawning season, salmon returning to the Fraser River would come through the San Juan Islands and the Strait of Georgia and school up around Point Roberts before heading up river. The bounty of fish was staggering. Point Roberts was known as one of the best fishing spots on the West Coast. Farmers would fish with pitchforks and use the fish to fertilizer their fields or to feed their hogs. Purse seiners netted salmon in the deeper waters and 47 fish traps surrounded the Point. During heavy runs, more fish

would be caught than could be processed and tens of thousands of fish would be discarded daily. Oldtimers claimed that more fish were wasted than canned. Discarded fish would be stacked up on the beaches like cordwood, and the beaches were covered with rotting fish. Sadly, this took place at the same time the Indians were excluded from fishing there by both the Canadian and Washington State governments.

Canneries were built on the Point in the 1890's, and later taken over and expanded by Alaska Packers Association, a California corporation with 32 canneries up and down the West Coast. By 1894 APA had gained control of the industry in the area by buying most of the canneries, traps, sites, leases, etc. The canneries first employed Indian and Icelandic women. Later, gangs of Chinese laborers in "pigtails and sandals" were brought in by labor contractors, "straight from China by way of Seattle". They had their own mess hall and a three-story bunkhouse near a cannery at the southeast corner of the Point. At the end of the canning season, they were shipped back to China.

In 1913 railroad construction and a big rock slide narrowed the Fraser River at Hell's Gate, so that it ran too fast for salmon to swim upriver to spawn. Attempts were made to clear the obstruction, but proved ineffective. The good fishing was over. The runs diminished and the canneries closed, removing a significant source of jobs for the community. The numbers tell the story. Cases of fish canned by U.S. and Canadian packers: 1913, 2,401,488; 1914, 534,434; 1915, 155,714. In 1934 fish traps were outlawed by State law. Although many of the fishermen found seasonal jobs in Southeast Alaska, all of the above created great hardship for Point Roberts residents.

Land had been set aside in 1859 for a lighthouse at the southwest corner of the Point, but in fact a lighthouse was never built. A light or beacon substituted--first an oil burner on a wooden tower and later an electric beacon. At the request of the purse seiners, a cannery opened in 1934 and operated nearby, first for fish and then clams. Neither was profitable, and it closed in 1961. Then it became a nightclub, which operated for a few years and then closed. In 1969 work began to create Lighthouse Marine Park, which was dedicated in 1973. The CMT site was established in the early '90's.

The isolation of Point Roberts from the rest of the United States has been the source of variety of problems. With the virtual demise of commercial fishing and the lack of agricultural advantage compounded by transportation complications, Point Roberts has struggled economically. Utilities are a problem: water, power, telephone, and sewage services must be purchased from British Columbia or managed onsite. All except the youngest school children must be bused to Blaine. Most medical services and shopping must be found elsewhere. Some economic advantage has been found in serving as a vacation spot for Canadians and now Canadians own more than half the land. On nice summer weekends, tens of thousands of Canadians come for the beaches and cheap(er) liquor and gasoline. The advantage that comes from the isolation of Point Roberts is that it is really safe. As local residents put it, the border crossing creates a gated community with a really, really strict gate guard.

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