

Fort Ward Park

The Cascadia Marine Trail site location at Fort Ward Park has a remarkable history, including many decades of military activity with technology advanced for the time. Designated on charts as Bean's Point, it is located on the south end of Bainbridge Island and beside Rich Passage, a short paddle from several popular put-ins.

The Native Americans were there first. The Suquamish, led by Chief Kitsap, had a summer camp to the west of Bean's Point in the Pleasant Beach area. Their camp area was called "Bebe u xudi", said to mean "dancing place", because "the Transformer on his journeys found people dancing there". Bean's Point was called Xula'os, with various meanings: "looking plain", "like people sitting in a row to be counted", or "picking out different faces".

In 1792 Vancouver and crew stopped at Restoration Point, just to the east, to make ship repairs. There he encountered about 80 Suquamish gathering wild onions in a meadow and met the legendary warrior Chief Kitsap. He named Restoration Point after the restoration of the Stuarts to the throne of England, as he was there on the anniversary of that event. Vancouver did not discover that Bainbridge is an island.

The next white explorers were Lt. Charles Wilkes, U.S.N., and the crew of the U.S. Exploring Expedition, surveying the coast in 1841. Wilkes found that Bainbridge is an island and named it after Commodore William Bainbridge, commander of the U.S.S. Constitution known as "Old Ironsides", and a hero of the War of 1812. A few years later, the U.S.S. Decatur, on its way to protect the City of Seattle from Indian attack in 1856, ran aground on the reef off Restoration Point, and had to come ashore to make repairs. The reef is accordingly known as Decatur Reef.

Bean's Point was named for Reuben Bean, one of the first settlers, who claimed land there in 1861. Swedish farmers claimed land nearby and established farms and dairies in the 1870's and 80's. A group of young men from Seattle bought some of their farm land on Restoration Point and established what they called the "Country Club", their own private resort that included what was probably the first golf course in the Puget Sound area. Just to the west was a major public resort at Pleasant Beach with hotels, a pavilion for concerts and prize fights, and a large restaurant.

Around Restoration Point, and abutting the Fort Ward site on the north, was the harbor Wilkes had named Port Blakely after another War of 1812 naval officer. Attracted by the protected harbor with easy access to logs and deep water, William Renton in 1864 constructed a lumber mill there. It had become the largest lumber mill in the world by the late 1880's. Alongside the mill, the Hall brothers in 1881 established an important shipyard. There they built the first 5-masted schooner, many of the inter-island ferries for Hawai'i, and most of the lumber-carrying schooners that operated in Puget Sound. Ships from all over the world came to call at Port Blakely in its heyday. It was considered one of the nicer towns on Puget Sound, with many amenities and a population of about 2,000. President Rutherford B. Hayes was one of many visitors.

The coming of the railroads, and the depletion of readily available timber, precipitated the decline of the Port Blakely mill. Its location on an island without rail access became a disadvantage when transportation of logs became more economical by rail than by shipping. In 1903 the Hall brothers moved their shipyard to the town of Madrone and built a larger facility. Madrone was renamed Winslow to honor one of the brothers. By 1922 the Port Blakely mill closed and the town of Port Blakely faded away.

The next chapter in the military story of the Fort Ward site begins in the 1890's. East Coast political and military authorities were indecisive about the need to protect and defend Puget Sound, even though every other developed nation in the world at that time had the naval power to invade the Puget Sound area. When the Navy began to acquire land to build the Bremerton Naval Shipyard, and the Spanish-American War brought a bigger military construction budget, the Army was able to plan and build coastal artillery forts to protect the shipyard. The major installations would be Fort Worden, Fort Flagler, and Fort Casey, dubbed the "triangle of fire" and positioned to protect the entrances to Agate Passage and Admiralty Inlet. Should an enemy ship slip past the "triangle of fire" into Puget Sound, Fort Ward was positioned to operate a mine field across Rich Passage, with artillery to ensure the mines would not be disabled.

In 1899, 375 acres of land was acquired on the south shore of Bainbridge Island, and construction for Fort Ward, named after a Union officer in the Civil War, began in 1900. It had 116 enlisted men and 4 officers at the height of activity, manning four batteries of artillery pieces and the mine field. But no enemy ever came, and the guns were eventually scrapped or sent to Europe during World War I. Defense technology had advanced and coast artillery had proved to be ineffective. Ships carried weaponry with greater accuracy and range and thus the capability of destroying coastal forts, while remaining untouched by their artillery. The last mine detonation practice in 1920 only killed many fish, to the benefit of neighbors and wildlife. The fort was inactive in the '20's and '30's except for occasional use by community groups or for military recreation.

The approach of World War II began the next chapter for Fort Ward. The Navy discovered it was a good location for monitoring radio transmissions and ship traffic in the Pacific. Radio technology was a relatively new and increasingly important military specialty. The Army transferred Fort Ward to the Navy, and with much fanfare, the Navy expanded the base and set up a radio school, recruiting ham radio operators as senior technicians and instructors. The unannounced, top secret activity was the radio listening station known as Station S. The Navy had cracked the Japanese Morse Code, and was intercepting military and diplomatic messages, while radio direction finding located and tracked Japanese ships in the Pacific. The base was also one of the first to receive WAVES—Navy servicewomen, and many of them worked as radio message interceptors. These messages would then be relayed to Washington D.C. by the 900-foot transmission tower some miles away at Battle Point on the Island. Station S played an important role during World War II, one which only became known decades later after its full story was de-classified.

The late 40's and 50's saw continued use of Fort Ward as a listening station--this time for Korean and Soviet radio transmissions. Its last mission was as a command and

communications center for Nike-Ajax surface-to-air missiles that were positioned at various points in Kitsap County. Again military technology advanced and the missiles became obsolete. In 1958 the base closed for good. In 1960 part of the property was sold for private residential development and 137 acres were acquired by the State for park purposes. The CMT site was established in 1998 and the park was transferred to the Bainbridge Island metro parks district in 2011. It is still possible to see some of the original fort construction, although some of it is now private property. Nonprofits groups are preserving and restoring some of the historically significant military facilities, and more public access is planned for the future.

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