

# Lake Union & Portage Bay:

## A History By Water — Historic Sites of Interest

**1 Aurora Bridge**—Monongahela, Mosholu and Tonawanda are not trolls living under the Aurora Bridge. They were the last tall barquentineships to leave Lake Union before the final span of the bridge was put in place in 1932. Although the Aurora Bridge was built high to allow large vessels to pass through, it could not accommodate these relics of commercial sail—even with their top masts lowered, they still were higher than the bridge.

A fleet of surplus and seized vessels was moored in the middle of Lake Union during the time of World War I (right). It was a rite of passage for young boys to row out to the ships in the middle of the night, climb aboard, and bring back a souvenir, such as a lantern, dining ware, or other relics. Courtesy of MOHAI.



**2 Ship Canal**—The entrance to today's Ship Canal was once the outlet of a small stream that flowed from Lake Union to Puget Sound. The creek was dredged and channelized with the creation of the Lake Washington Ship Canal, providing passage between Lake Union, Lake Washington, and the Puget Sound via the Chittenden Locks. On July 4, 1854 Seattle's founding fathers gathered at Thomas Mercer's house overlooking the lake. On that day they gave a new name to the lake that for thousands of years was known as ha-ah-chu. They chose the name Lake Union because they believed it would become the union between Puget Sound and Lake Washington. Without any tools aside from shovels and axes or any technical knowledge, they predicted the creation of the locks that, nearly 65 years later, radically changed the nature and economy of Lake Union.

**3 Electric streetcar**—Along the southern shore between the Aurora and Fremont Bridges, close observation reveals an old trestle overgrown with bramble and ivy. These are the remains of an electric streetcar line built in 1880 along the lake. Because of the steep forested hillside, the tracks were built over the water on pilings. In time, the area under the track was filled with industrial waste and finally created the flat road called Westlake Avenue.



Captain S.P. Randolph on Lake Union in the steamboat Maud. Photographer Arthur Churchil Warner (1864-1943). Courtesy of MSCUA, UW Library, photo collection 273.

**4 Red nun buoy**—It's not Atlantis, but 10 feet below the #2 red nun buoy lies a submerged island. As Seattle prepared for the 1962 World's Fair, an entrepreneur began filling the lake to build a waterfront hotel. Every day, dirt was dumped in the lake but it never seemed to fill in, until one morning an island appeared offshore. Now all was built to retain the dumped dirt and the hotel project was abandoned. A clan of college students claimed the island as their autonomous property and occupied it temporarily. Eventually, the island eroded back into the Lake.

**5 Queen Anne Hill**—An 1889 fire that claimed over twenty-five city blocks, every wharf and mill from Union to Jackson Streets, and one million rats, spurred Seattle to ban wooden buildings in the business district downtown. The decree caused a land rush to the closest source of clay, at the southwest corner of Lake Union. Excavation of Queen Anne Hill to make clay bricks transformed the southern slope of the hill, originally steeply angled down to the lake. In 1911, Mayor Hiram Gill proposed to blast Queen Anne Hill into the lake with high-pressure water. He wanted to fill in Lake Union in order to create a flat plain for commercial expansion. The citizens felt they had lost enough hills, and wisely voted down Gill's vision.

**6 Lake Union Park**—A visitor to Lake Union Park sees a lake buzzing with activity. Kayaks, rowboats, yachts, and sailboats criss-cross the water, seaplanes launch and land, and people picnic on the lawn or stroll the lakeshore. This scene is of a city that values its waterfront. It may take imagination to recall a time when present-day Lake Union Park was home to Seattle's first garbage incinerator, built in 1908. Burning waste, including about one horse a day, ran the steam machinery for the nearby laundry and asphalt plant. Instead of a placetorecreate, the lake was a convenient dumping ground for industry. A look at the history of Lake Union reveals a changing relationship between the city and a vital body of water.

**7 Naval Reserve Base**—Southern Lake Union once extended to what is today Mercer Street. Industry's waste filled in the lakeshore over time, including the byproducts of a coal landing, sawmill, garbage incinerator, and asphalt plant. The first industry to begin filling the lakeshore was the Western Mill Steam Sawmill built in 1880 by one of Seattle's founders, David Denny. The mill gradually filled its pier with yardscrap creating the small peninsula where the Naval Reserve Base stands. The base operated from July 4, 1941 to July 4, 2000, when the Navy turned over the property to the City of Seattle and it became a park.

**8 Historic Ships Wharf**—The wharf directly in front of the Naval Reserve is home to four Historic Ships (in order west to east):

Virginia V—125' wooden double-decked passenger vessel built in 1922 powered by an 1898 oil-fired steam engine. The last remaining steamer of the Mosquito Fleet, she provided passenger & freight service to & from Seattle, Tacoma, and many small communities until 1972.

Swiftsure—129' iron lighthouse ship with a red hull, with her original coal-fired steam engine, built in 1904. She saw duty off the coasts of California, Oregon and Washington.

Duwamish—123' riveted steel fireboat built in 1909, served Seattle's waterfront until 1985.

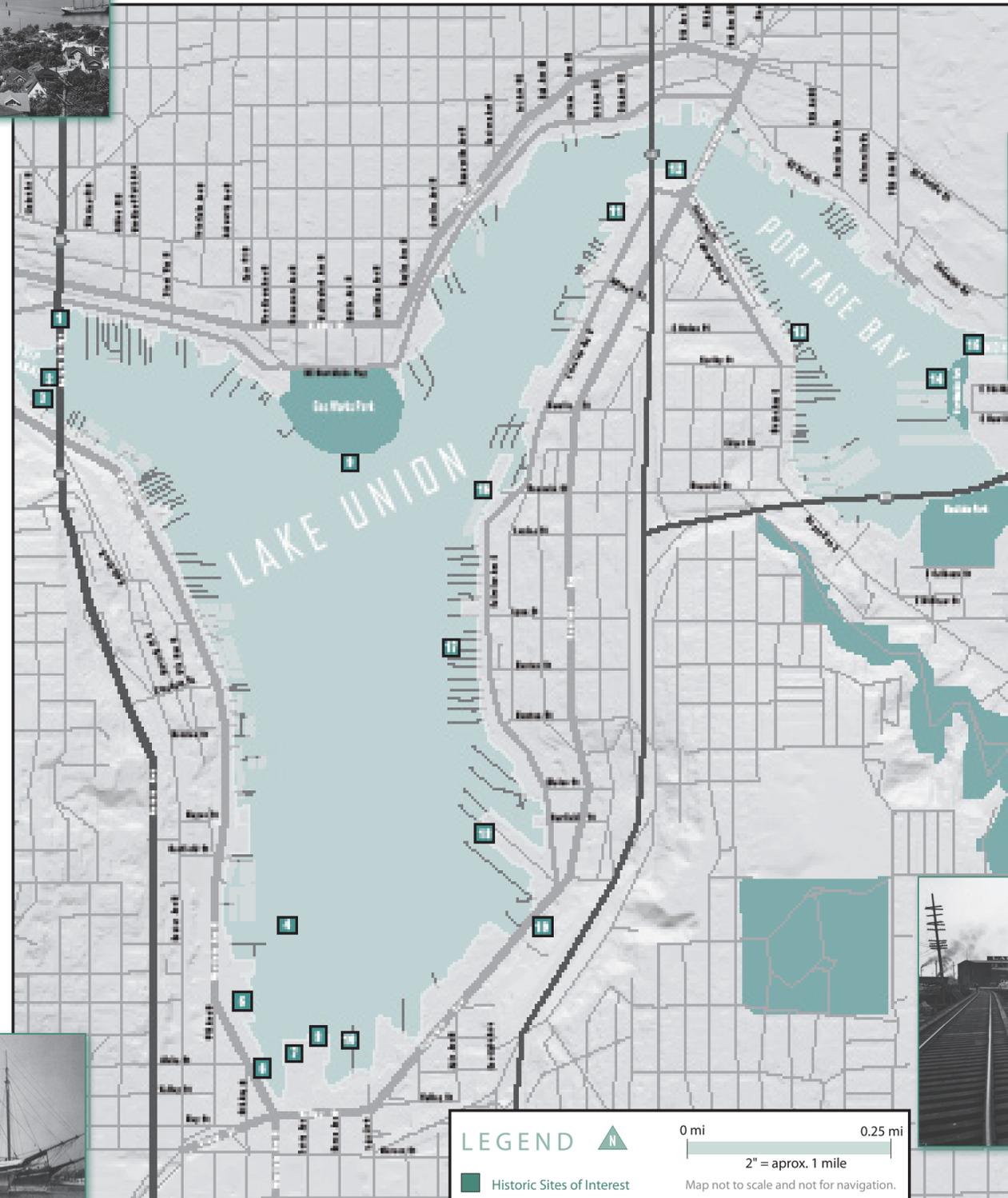
Arthur Foss—112' wooden tugboat with a green hull built in 1889, used mainly for towing logs. She was also the star of the 1933 film Tugboat Annie.



A University of Washington crew team practices in Pocock shells, circa 1925. Courtesy MSCUA, UW Libraries. Photo collection 700.

**9 Gas Works Park**—Tomato seeds are apparently indestructible, even after sewage treatment. When Seattle bought the Gas Works Park property to create Lake Union's first park, the soil was too polluted to grow grass, so the city coated the site with sewer sludge. The grass grew well and, during the first summer, an added bonus of tomato seeds sprouted in the park. Gas Works Park displays rusting remnants of a 1902 gasification plant that converted coal to liquid fuel for streetlights and cooking stoves. The last gas was made in 1957 when a new pipeline brought natural gas from British Columbia.

Ice skating on Lake Union (right), circa 1910. In the background, smoke billows from the gasification plant at present-day Gas Works Park. Courtesy of UW Libraries, special collection UW4734.



**10 Center for Wooden Boats**—An ancient cedar becomes a canoe, a rotting rowboat is renewed, a fleet of children sets sail, and modern urbanites master ancient seafaring skills. It all happens at the Center for Wooden Boats, a hands-on maritime museum open to the public at no cost. Paddlers can pull up to a low-floating dock behind the Center's workshop and store their boats on a kayak rack while they explore.

**11 Blanchard Boat Company**—Newfound wealth from the timber, fishing, transportation, and retail businesses in the 1920's fueled demand for luxury boats. The Blanchard Boat Company was one of the leading yacht builders of Seattle. Prohibition, in effect from 1920 to 1933, generated business for Blanchard with many orders of fast boats for runs to Canada on moonless nights. The U.S. Coast Guard contracted Blanchard to build equally fast boats to apprehend the smugglers. Partly due to the growing popularity of fiberglass, the Blanchard shop closed in 1969, as did many of wooden boat shops in the region.



The launch of Gadget, 1928. Courtesy of MOHAI.

**12 George Pocock**—In 1912 there was one boat shop on the lake, in the Tokyo Tea House on the University of Washington campus shoreline. Built in one day by Japanese carpenters for the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, the Tea House was a delicate post and beam structure with rice paper sliding screen walls perched over the water. In 1912, the University wanted a varsity rowing team and recruited the best rowing shell builder in the Northwest, George Pocock, to build eight oared shells in the Tea House. When business for shells was slow, Pocock was hired to build Boeing seaplane pontoons. Later, Pocock would build shells for nearly every racing college in the country and his boats won countless national and Olympic championships.



Forrest Goodfellow, in his beloved Peterborough canoe, drops the last few feet at the end of the old logging flume into Portage Bay. This photo, circa 1907, looks west across Portage Bay from at the southwest corner of the Montlake Cut, what's now the finish line of the crew racecourse. Courtesy of Bill Walker.

**13 Speakeasies**—During Prohibition, Portage Bay became a tolerance zone where houseboats provided alcohol and companionship. Entrepreneurial students from the nearby University of Washington ran a 24-hour rowboat taxi service to the houseboat speakeasies.

**14 Seattle Yacht Club**—The last home inhabited by a Native Duwamish family stood near the site of the present-day Seattle Yacht Club. The cabin was home to Chief Chi-Siak-Ka (also known as Chodups John) and his wife Madeline until at least 1909. John and Madeline were some of the few Duwamish people who did not move to the Port Madison Reservation. The chief carved traditional lake canoes from red cedar logs. The Center for Wooden Boats has such a canoe, possibly made by Chi-Siak-ka, on display in its Pavilion.

**15 Montlake Cut**—Imagine waking upon one morning to discover that your house, next to lapping water the lowering of Lake Washington happened overnight when the

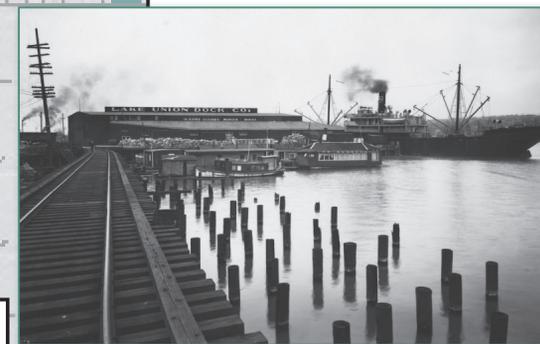


Boeing started his airplane company in this hangar he had built on the shore of Lake Union in December 1915. Courtesy of MOHAI.

when you went to bed, was now next to a wide mud beach. The lowering of Lake Washington happened overnight when the Montlake Cut was completed in 1916 through the natural isthmus between Portage Bay and Lake Washington. Washington dropped nearly 9 feet to match Lake Union's depth. Before the cut provided passage to large ships, a crude canal and log flume moved timber from Lake Washington shores to the sawmills on Lake Union.

**16 Bill Boeing's airplane business**—A seaplane carrying 60 letters launched from Lake Union in 1919 en route to Victoria, British Columbia, where it completed the country's first international mail flight. The historic flight took off from a floating hangar at the foot of Roanoke Street, the first location of Bill Boeing's airplane business.

**17 Houseboats on Lake Union** comprise Seattle's most unique and coveted real estate. Now cherished features of the lakeshore, houseboats were not always accepted by mainstream Seattle. The first houseboats on Lake Union in the early 1900's were floating shanties for workers at the Lake's various industries. Post World War II, the houseboats began attracting writers, artists, musicians, and students. About 1,200 houseboats were moored in Lake Union, Portage Bay, and the Ship Canal in 1957. Houseboats regularly came under siege by those wishing to rid the waterfront of "bohemians" or make way for more industry. In 1967, the city required houseboats to connect to the municipal sewer system. The law eliminated about half the houseboats, which were squatting on public waterfront. Later, the passage of the 1972 Shoreline Management Act threatened to ban houseboats all together, but houseboat residents organized and lobbied to retain their colorful communities. Today over 450 houseboats float on Lake Union.



Lake Union Dry Dock. Courtesy of MOHAI.

**18 Lake Union Drydock Company**—During the heyday of cod fishing in the early 1900's, spring was marked by the departure of huge schooners on their way to the Bering Sea. Each fall the schooners returned full of salted cod. Many of these vessels wintered at the Lake Union Drydock Company to prepare for the next season. The cod schooners are gone, but today you will find ferries, tugboats, Navy vessels, and modern fishing boats receiving overhauls and repairs. The oldest continuously operating boatyard on the lake, Lake Union Drydock Company was founded in 1919.

**19 City Light Plant**—An evening on the lake reveals a sparkling city skyline. One hundred years ago, most of the shoreline was dark. You may have seen flames shooting from the gas plant burners at the north end of the lake or spied glowing brick ovens along the western shore. At the southeastern corner of the lake, golden light bulbs spelled out "CITY LIGHT" below the six smokestacks on the City Light Plant, built in 1913 (now Zymo Genetics). After most households were in bed, a viaduct drew water from the reservoir in Volunteer Park on Capitol Hill and fueled water-powered generators, helping to increase the glow of an emerging city.

## Common Creatures of Lake Union



Kingfisher

### Mammals

- Beaver
- Muskrat
- Nutria
- Raccoon
- Cats
- River Otter

### Fish

#### Year-round

- Black Crappie
- Brown Bullhead
- Largemouth Bass
- Northern Squawfish
- Yellow Perch

#### Seasonal

- Donaldson Trout
- Chinook Salmon
- Sockeye Salmon
- Steelhead Trout

### Birds

#### Year-round

- American Crow
- American Goldfinch
- Bald Eagle
- Belted Kingfisher
- Black-capped Chickadee

### ○ Bushit

- Canada Goose
- Double-crested Cormorant
- European Starling
- Gadwall
- Glaucous-winged Gull
- Great Blue Heron

### ○ House Finch

- House Sparrow
- Killdeer
- Mallard
- Northern Flicker
- Pied-billed Grebe
- Red Tailed Hawk
- Red-winged Blackbird
- Ring-billed Gull
- Rock Pigeon
- Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- Song Sparrow

### ○ Yellow-rumped Warbler

#### Periodic

- American Coot
- American Wigeon
- Barn Swallow
- Bewick's Wren
- Bufflehead
- Canvasback
- Caspian Tern
- Cliff Swallow
- Common Goldeneye
- Common Loon
- Common Merganser
- Cooper's Hawk
- Dark-eyed Junco
- Lesser Scaup
- Northern Shoveler
- Osprey
- Red-necked Grebe

### ○ Sharp-shinned Hawk

- Turkey Vulture
- Violet-green Swallow
- Western Grebe
- White-crowned Sparrow
- Yellow Warbler

### Bottom-dwellers

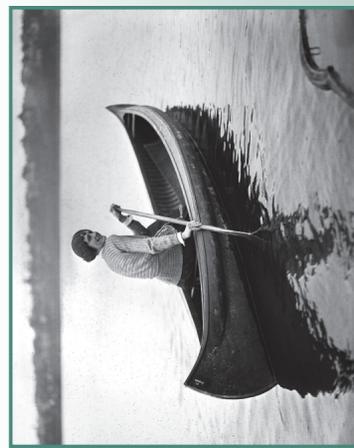
- Clams
- Crayfish
- Snails
- Worms

### Cormorant



Illustrations by Martha Rogers

Woman paddles Lake Union. Courtesy of MOHAI.



## Lake Union & Portage Bay: History in the Heart of Seattle

### Historic Sites of Interest and Access Points for Hand-Carried Boats



Explore the Lakes-to-Locks Water Trail, a network of launch and landing sites for hand-carried boats. The trail extends from Lake Sammamish to Lake Washington and Lake Union, through the shipping locks to Puget Sound.



Alice Eldridge on the Alanwee, 1929. Courtesy of MOHAI.

Lake Union and Portage Bay: A History By Water is your self-guided tour to some of the historic sites of interest on Seattle's bustling waterfront. The Lakes perhaps best experienced at water level, in small, hand-carried craft. This map highlights launch and landing sites for people using human-powered boats. Don't have a boat of your own? There are numerous businesses that rent kayaks, rowboats, or small sailing vessels.



A collaborative project of Washington Water Trails Association and the Center for Wooden Boats, this map was made possible by funding from the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods. Special thanks to Seattle Trails Adventure Maps, the Museum of History and Industry, REI/PEMCO, Duckin, Northwest Outdoor Center and the Lake Union Rotary.

## People of the Little Water Imagine...

Steep forested hillsides slope to a wild, driftwood-littered beach. Cougar tracks lead to the lake, you follow them to a mound of sticks and reeds - a beaver lodge. Listen. A fish jumps. A loon chuckles. You hear canoe blades dipping into the water. Along a marsh, where a stream flows into the lake, two people in a long cedar canoe cast a fishing net. Smoker rises from the northern shore of ha-ah-chu, where a break in the trees exposes a prairie purple with camas blooms.



Dugout canoe on Lake Union, circa 1880's. Courtesy of MOHAI.

Welcome to Lake Union, known by natives as "Little Water." Lake Union's first people arrived about 5,000 years ago and found a beautiful place to put down their roots. They were a part of the Duwamish tribe called ha-ah-chu AHBSHo' "People of the Little Lake."

### Native Place-Names

The following material is adapted from Native Seattle by Coll Thrush, pending permission from the author.

#### 1 Outlet gWáXWap (lit. 'leak [at] bottom end')

This was the outlet of a stream, known to settlers as Ross Creek, that emptied Lake Union into Salmon Bay and was the passage way of several runs of salmon (chum, pink, Chinook, and coho).

#### 2 Deep for Canoes Tlupeel7weehL

Although this name is similar to Deep (entry 5), the difference matters. Such distinctions were critical to correct navigation and the sharing of information. According to the maps created by the General Land Office in the 1850s, there was a trail near here that skirted the southern slope of Queen Anne Hill on its way to Elliott Bay.

#### 3 Trail to the Beach scHákWshud (lit. 'the foot end of the beach')

A trail from Little Prairie ended here. An elderly indigenous man named Tsetseguis, a close acquaintance of the David Denny family, lived here with his family in Seattle's early years, when the south end of Lake Union was dominated by Denny's sawmill.

#### 4 Small Lake XáXu7cHoo (lit. 'small great-amount-of-water')

This is the diminutive form of the word used to denote Lake Washington, in keeping with the lakes' relative sizes.

#### 5 Deep stLup

This is a typically no-nonsense description of the place where the steep slope of Capitol Hill descends into the waters of Lake Union.

#### 6 Jumping over Driftwood saxWabábatS (lit. 'jump over the tree trunk')

The Lake Union shoreline was thick with logs here. A similar place-name, Jumping Down (saxWsxWáap), was used for a Suquamish gaming site on Sinclair Inlet across Puget Sound; that name refers to a contest in which participants vied to see who could jump the farthest off a five-foot-high rock.

#### 7 Marsh spáhLaXad

The wetlands on the south shore of Portage Bay must have been a fine place for hunting waterfowl. Chesheeahud, or "Lake Union John," owned several acres here from at least 1880 until 1906, a fact commemorated in a "pocket park" at the foot of Shelby Street by a plaque and depictions of salmon by an artist of the Puyallup Tribe.

#### 8 Lowered Promontory skWITsTaq

The "top" of Lake Union seems an odd place for a "low" name, but the word for this place most likely refers to the point's relationship to the surrounding, and much higher, landscape. Long before white settlers envisioned a canal linking Lake Washington and Lake Union, indigenous people used this corridor to travel between the backcountry and the Sound.

#### 9 Croaking waQeeQab (lit. 'doing like a frog')

Perhaps this small creek on the north side of Portage Bay was known for its amphibious inhabitants, or perhaps it bubbled in a way that reminded local people of frogs. The site might also have had religious significance; Frog was a minor spirit power that helped even the most common folks during winter ceremonies. A man named Dzakwoos, of Indian Jim Zackuse, whose descendants include many members of the modern Snoqualmie Tribe, had a homestead here until the 1880s.

#### 10 Prairie báWab

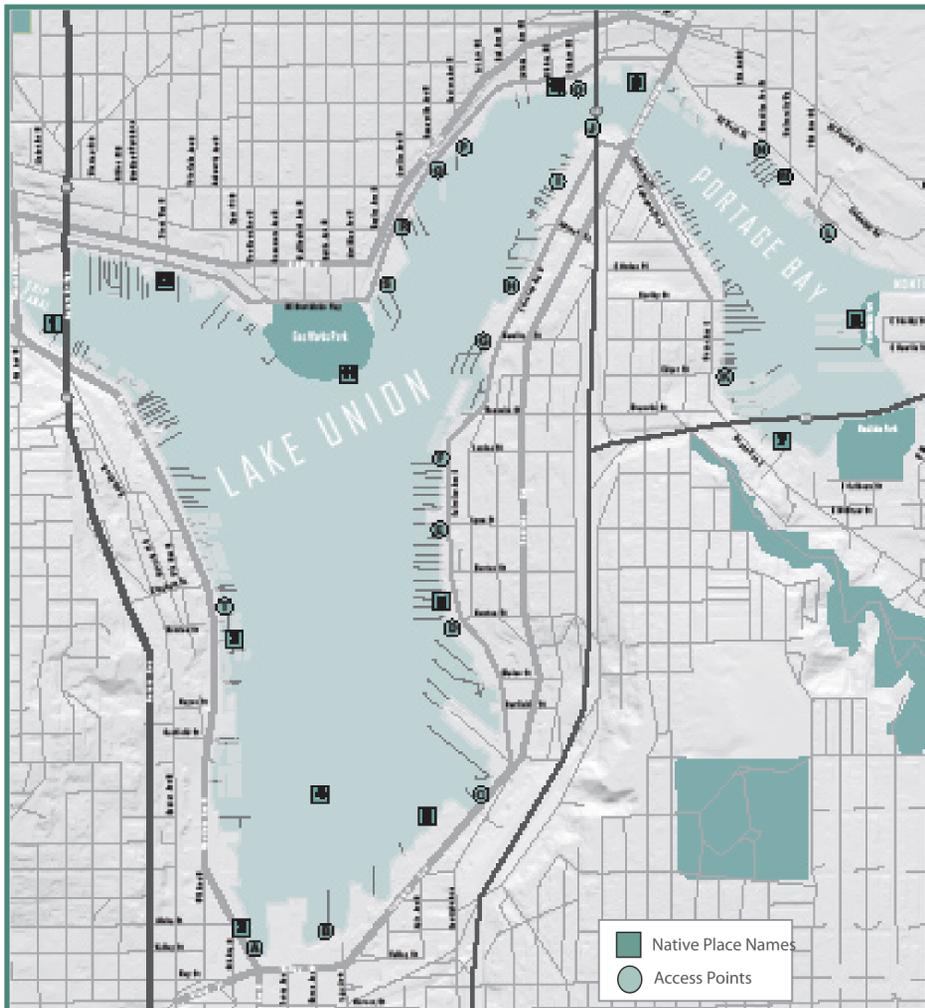
This was one of several small prairies maintained in what is now Seattle; as such, it was likely an important site for cultivating and gathering roots and other food that indigenous people propagated through burning and transplanting. Their right to dig and burn on prairies typically passed down through women.

#### 11 Extended from the Ridge stÁcHeecH

Now the site of Gas Works Park, this point was described as leaning against the slope of the Wallingford neighborhood like a propped up part of a house.

#### 12 Thrased Waters CHaxW7áloo

People drove fish into this narrow, brushy stream by thrashing the water with sticks. The stream now flows in a pipe somewhere under the streets of the Fremont neighborhood.



## Access Points for Hand-Carried Boats

- A** Lake Union Park — 860 Terry Ave N
- B** Center for Wooden Boats — Landing only, low float behind boat shop
- C** South Lake Union Walkway — 1177 Fairview Ave N
- D** Terry Pettus Park — E Newton St & Fairview Ave E
- E** Lynn Street Mini Park — E Lynn St & Fairview Ave. E
- F** Louisa Street End Park — Fairview Ave E
- G** Hamlin Street End Park — Hamlin St & Fairview Ave E
- H** Fairview Park — 2900 Fairview Ave E
- I** Good Turn Park — Martin St 7 Fairview Ave E
- J** South Passage Point Park — 3320 Fuhrman Ave E
- K** Portage Bay Roanoke Park — E Edgar St & Fuhrman Ave E
- L** University of Washington Waterfront — San Juan Rd (Near S12 Lot)
- M** Placeholder — new access in progress
- N** Agua Verde — 1303 NE Boat St
- O** Thalali Park — 4th Ave & Northlake Way
- P** Waterway 17 — Eastern Ave N & Northlake Way
- Q** Sunnyside Boat Ramp — Sunnyside Ave & Northlake Way
- R** Waterway 18 — Corliss Ave & Northlake Way
- S** Waterway 19 — Bagley Ave 7 Northlake Way
- T** Northwest Outdoor Center — 2100 Westlake Ave N

## Voices from the Past

“When I was a little girl, I first saw Lake Union surrounded by giant trees. There were deer runs and bear trails, and my parents warned me of cougars that lay on the branches of firs and cedars. I heard the cry of a cougar one night, and it sent chills racing over me.”

— Sophie Fry Bass, 1947  
When Seattle Was A Village

“You know [as a boy] we'd come around in a skiff, and we'd climb up the anchor chains on these sailing ships and get right up on the bowsprit and jump. That was probably back around '32, '34, something like that. We had a houseboat and my dad would pull it with a boat, and we'd come into the moorage and hook up the water and put the clamp on, twist the wires together, and boom we're in business. And we'd stay wherever, and we'd move again.”

— David Coy, Oral History

“I was a teenager at the time of the war and in Lake Union was a beautiful, large, four-masted sailing ship, which was interned throughout the course of the war. Its name was the Fantome. It was at anchor in Lake Union for many, many years until after the war it was towed away... was the highlight of Lake Union in those days.”

— Richard Amberson, Oral History

“The game was not then all destroyed; water fowl were numerous on the lakes and bays and the boys of the family often went shooting. Rather late in the afternoon of a November day, the two smaller boys, taking a shotgun with them, repaired to Lake Union, borrowed a little fishing canoe of old Tsetseguis, the Indian who lived at the landing, and went to look at some muskrat traps they had set.

It was growing quite dark when they thought of returning. For some reason they decided to change places in the canoe, a very ticklish thing to do... the boys nearly drowned but were saved.”

— Emily Inez Denny, 1899 Blazing the Way

“When the streetcar turned west on 34th, I would usually see a couple of ships tied up at the docks along Northlake Way, near the barrel factory. When the streetcar turned to cross the Fremont bridge, on our left, there was this huge screaming sawmill, Bryant Lumber Company.

The streetcar followed Westlake at a rapid 35 mile-an-hour clip, heading south along Lake Union. At the first bend of Westlake, I'd see Able's Dock on the left, which is still there under another name.

The Lake Union streetcar continued around a bend, and looking out on the lake, I remember seeing 40 ships anchored out there, the wooden ships left over from World War I.

So we continued on down in the streetcar... and there would be the glowing fires in the sloping side of Queen Anne Hill – the ovens of the Seattle Brick Company... When the furnace doors were swung open, you could see men shoving pallets of new clay bricks in there.

And then finally, on the left side at the southwest corner of the lake, there was another giant, screaming sawmill... I could see the huge head-saw sticking out the end of those red-painted buildings. We'd see the logs coming up out of the water, slowly, towed up a ramp by a steam-powered endless belt, and they'd come into the headsaw. We'd see the first cut, and then they went inside to the bandsaws...”

— Tom Sandry, Oral History

“We share the houseboat with ducks, geese, and herons. It faces east and the mornings are beautiful. Then the seasons change. You have these times in the summer on beautiful, hot, Sunday afternoons, Portage Bay is just filled with pleasure boats, canoers, kayakers, and little sailboats and that's great fun, but then there are those gray, drizzly mornings in November and February where you are all alone and there's nobody else out there, and those are beautiful too. I'm really fond of those. So the cycles of living on the lake just kind of get engrained with you.”

— Steve Greaves, Oral History