

Blake Island State Park

Blake Island is a marine state park south of Bainbridge Island, northwest of Vashon Island, and northeast of the Southworth ferry terminal. It is popular with boaters and it hosts concessionaire Tillicum Village on the east side of the island. The Cascadia Marine Trail site is on the northwest corner of the island, which has never been developed. It is a favorite with first-time kayak campers paddling over from Vashon or Southworth, and it has great views of the sunset and the Olympic range.

Blake Island is part of the traditional territory of the Suquamish Nation and was used by the Suquamish as a summer camp. The Suquamish name for the island was Ta'tcu, meaning "bullhead", a type of fish. Most historical accounts cite it as the birthplace of Chief Seattle, who reportedly said that he was born there in a house built by his father.

Legend has it that as a boy, Seattle was in one of the canoes that greeted Captain Vancouver and crew, the first known Europeans to explore Puget Sound in 1792. Hudson's Bay Company explorers travelled through the area in the 1820s, but most histories record Lt. Charles Wilkes, U.S.N. as the next explorer to see Blake Island in 1841. Chief Seattle was still alive when Lt. Wilkes and crew came through. Wilkes named the island after the commanding officer of the U.S. Coast Survey, George Smith Blake.

In the second half of the 19th century, the island was used by a few Norwegian fishermen, who built shacks on the beach, and by smugglers who stashed goods there to avoid import duties. Locals called it "High Island" or "Smugglers Island".

As land was made available by the federal government to settlers in Washington, two sections of every township were set aside to support public education. Land that included Blake Island was allocated to the University of Washington. The University traded that land to George Meigs and W.P. Sayword, owners of the Port Madison mill on Bainbridge Island, for building materials to construct campus facilities. By the end of the century, Blake had been completely logged to feed the lumber mill operation. Meigs and the Port Madison mill went into bankruptcy in the 1890s, and except for a portion that remained school lands, Blake Island was acquired in foreclosure by Dexter Horton Bank of Seattle.

About that time, William Pitt Trimble and his wife Cannie Ford Trimble appeared on the scene. Trimble was the scion of a prominent East Coast family, who had come west to seek his fortune. His expertise as a lawyer was eminent domain law and tidelands real estate. In addition to miles of shoreline, he owned many buildings and an entire block in downtown Seattle. He had a genius for investing, promoting, and flipping developable shoreline properties, and was one of the wealthiest men in Seattle by 1920.

The Trimbles were prominent in the local political scene. They maintained a fine house in Seattle and apartments in New York and Washington D.C. Cannie campaigned for women's suffrage. William was active in local politics, ran for mayor but lost, and was mentioned as a candidate for Governor or Congress. He believed Seattle needed underground public transit and brought in East Coast experts at his own expense to study its feasibility.

William and Cannie enjoyed yachting around Puget Sound to identify possible real estate investments. In 1905 they noted and then acquired considerable acreage on Bainbridge and Blake islands, as a result of the foreclosure of the Port Madison mill business. They fell in love with Blake Island, and spent 15 years creating a magnificent estate that included a large two-story house, outbuildings, caretakers' quarters, flower and vegetable gardens, a tennis court, and a dock. The house had 12 rooms, including a huge living room, several fireplaces, wide verandas, and a library said to hold the best collection of Northwest history and Americana in the country. The 35' x 40' living room included, in addition to large pieces of furniture, two coats of chain mail, suits of armor, and a fireplace large enough to stand up in. The formal gardens were full of roses, wisteria, and decorative plants. Although William had a fine collection of guns, Cannie made the island a bird and wildlife refuge and prohibited discharge of firearms. Consequently, the deer population grew. Deer would swim to the island during hunting season. Trimble commuted on his yacht from the island to work in Seattle while Cannie raised their five children.

Since 1890 place names have only been assigned or changed through the U.S. Geological Survey, but William did his best to rename the island by establishing a post office there and calling it "Trimble Island". The post office had scant business and consequently would have been disestablished but for the fact that William began to mail apples to his son, who was attending school on the East Coast, to create post office business.

On Blake, the Trimbles entertained the social and political elite of the city and, indeed, the country, and their estate was the scene of high society parties, dances, and picnics. One visitor was William Howard Taft, when he was Secretary of War. In addition, in 1924 the Trimbles invited the Campfire Girls to set up a summer camp on part of the island. That camp was the first Camp Sealth. It lasted only one summer before moving to Vashon Island where it had more room to expand.

But in 1929 tragedy struck. Cannie was drowned when their car rolled off Coleman Dock into the water. William and the children survived, but after the accident, William never went back to Blake Island. He eventually traded it for a building in Tacoma, trying to stay solvent during the Depression. He lived the rest of his life quietly in Seattle, still looking the aristocrat with his walking stick, gloves and derby hat. He died in 1947, and left a handwritten note about Blake: "To Cannie and me it was the most beautiful place on earth."

Blake Island next came into the hands of four New York investors. They would visit infrequently and had onsite caretakers looking after the property, deputized to arrest trespassers. During Prohibition, Blake became a drop off point for liquor smugglers and a bootlegger set up operation on the south end of the island.

When the U.S. entered World War II, the Army took over the island, quartering soldiers in the Trimble mansion. Plans were made for artillery emplacement on Blake to support Fort Ward, but ultimately the island's only military use was ammunition storage. By the time the Army left at the end of the war, the Trimble estate had deteriorated. It was subsequently neglected and abandoned, and finally looted and vandalized. About 1948, a couple of local high school boys, waiting out rough weather, put a fire in the fireplace to warm up before getting back in their boat

to paddle home. After they left, the house caught fire and burned to the ground. The cause of the fire was a mystery for decades until one of them, at about age 80, came forward with the story.

After the fire, the property was eventually acquired by an out-of-state corporation with plans for an extensive commercial development: luxury hotel, residential development, shopping center, golf course, etc., despite the lack of sufficient potable water. After much controversy, the State acquired the land in the early 1950s for a state park. It was a welcome addition to the state park system, given its proximity to Seattle.

Today an amenity in the park is concessionaire Tillicum Village. Shortly after establishment of the park, a local caterer, William Hewitt, convinced the State to allow him to build a longhouse replica and restaurant with a Northwest Native theme. It was completed about the time of the 1962 World's Fair. It serves a traditional cedar plank salmon dinner and presents Native dancing, crafts, and story-telling. For many years a number of tribal members from Washington and British Columbia have been directly involved in development, cooking, and cultural presentations at the village. It's become a popular tourist attraction.

Tillicum Village received international attention in 1993 when it was chosen by the Clinton Administration as the site for the Association of Pacific Economies Cooperation conference which hosted leaders from 15 countries, including President Clinton. Visitors to Blake Island, who have encountered the numerous deer, will not be surprised to learn that the event planners, who had ignored warnings, found they had to keep watchmen active all night to shoo away deer that were determined to eat the plants and flowers used to decorate the grounds for the event.

The CMT site on Blake is about a mile and a half away from the hustle and bustle of Tillicum Village, but connected via several trails. Campers are unlikely to be visited by many tourists from the Village, given the distance. The most regular visitors will likely be deer or some pesky raccoons. Store your food securely!

© Karen L. Borell

Sources and Acknowledgements

Bagley, Clarence B., History of Seattle, from the earliest settlement to the present time, Vol. 2. S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1916

Bainbridge Island Historical Museum, William Pitt Trimble files, reviewed July 8, 2017

Blackburn, Evan, "Bootleggers of Blake Island". <https://yukonharbor.wordpress.com>, accessed 1/21/2018

Buerge, David M., Chief Seattle and the town that took his name: The change of worlds for the Native People and settlers on Puget Sound. Sasquatch Books, 2017

Bowden, W.B., Port Madison Washington Territory, 1854. n.p., 1976

"Council History", <http://campfireseattle.org>, accessed 5/3/2018

Hansen, David M., *Battle Ready: The National Coast Defense System and the Fortification of Puget Sound, 1894-1925*. Washington State Univ. Press, 2014

Hewitt, Mark, *The Story of Tillicum Village: 35 years of myth and magic, Tillicum Village and tours*, n.p., 1997

Holmes, Don, ed. Russell Neyman, "Boyhood Memories of Blake Island".
<https://yukonharbor.wordpress.com>, accessed 1/21/2018

Kitsap County Centennial Committee, *Kitsap: A Centennial History*. Perry Pub., 1989

Kitsap County Historical Society Book Committee, *Kitsap County History: A Story of Kitsap County and its Pioneers*, ed. Rangvald Kvelstad. Dinner and Klein, 1977

McClary, Daryl C., "Blake Island—Thumbnail History." HistoryLink #5491
<http://www.historylink.org>, accessed 6/30/2017

Neyman, Russell, "The 1948 Blake Island Mansion Fire is Finally Solved!"
<https://yukonharbor.wordpress.com>, accessed 1/21/2018

Perry, Fredi, *Port Madison, Washington Territory 1854-1889*. Perry Pub., 1989

Puget Sound Regional Archives, Kitsap County grantor/grantee indices

Roberts, Bob, William Pitt Trimble—The Baron of Blake. *Seattle Times*, April 6, 1969

Skaret, Morey, "Morey Skaret: The Story of the Bootlegger", HistoryLink #3368,
<http://www.historylink.org>, accessed 1/21/2018

Swanson, Jack, *Picture Bainbridge: A Pictorial History of Bainbridge Island*. Bainbridge Island Historical Society, 2002

U.S. Board on Geographic Names site, <http://www.usgs.gov/core-science-systems/ngp/board-on-geographic-names>, accessed 9/11/2019

U.S. Bureau of Land Management Land Patent Search site, www.glorerecords.blm.gov, accessed May, 2018

Washington State Archives, Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission Records, 1853-2001, Boxes 69 and 177

Waterman, T.T., *The Geography of Puget Sound*, ed. Vi Hilbert, Jay Miller, Zalmi Zahir. Lushotseed Press, 2001

Watson, Kenneth Greg, "Chief Seattle (Seattle, Chief Noah [born si?al, 178?-1866])". Historylink #5071, <http://www.historylink.org>, accessed July 5, 2017

Wilma, David, "Kitsap County—Thumbnail History". Historylink #7864,
<http://www.historylink.org>, accessed May 7, 2017

I owe thanks to the librarians in the Seattle Room of the Seattle Public Library, and the staffs of the Washington State Archives, the Puget Sound Regional Archives, and the Bainbridge Island Historical Museum Historical Museum. I am especially grateful to the historians at HistoryLink and the Yukon Harbor Historical Society who have brought many great stories to light and made them accessible to researchers. Many thanks are due to Russell Neyman for reading and commenting on my writing. As always, any errors are solely my own.