Stop #5 - Wyckoff Creosote Plant & Japanese Exclusion: The Intersection of Greed, Fear & Ignorance

Welcome to Stop #5 on our Maritime Heritage Water Trail! You have now arrived at əlaləd͡altx "Home of Eagles" (Eagle Harbor).

The Wyckoff Creosote Plant, located on Bill Point, is a place where the promise of progress collided head-on with the harsh realities of environmental destruction.

Now, imagine it is the turn of the 20th century. The Pacific Northwest is booming. Railroads are stretching across the nation, ships are sailing, and cities in the Salish Sea and the entire Pacific Coast are growing like wildfire. And all of that growth needed one thing: treated lumber. Wood rots, gets eaten by bugs, and falls apart in water. But creosote, a dark, oily, toxic sludge, can stop all that. This is where Bainbridge Island, with its deep-water access, became the perfect, or rather, imperfect, location for a creosote plant.

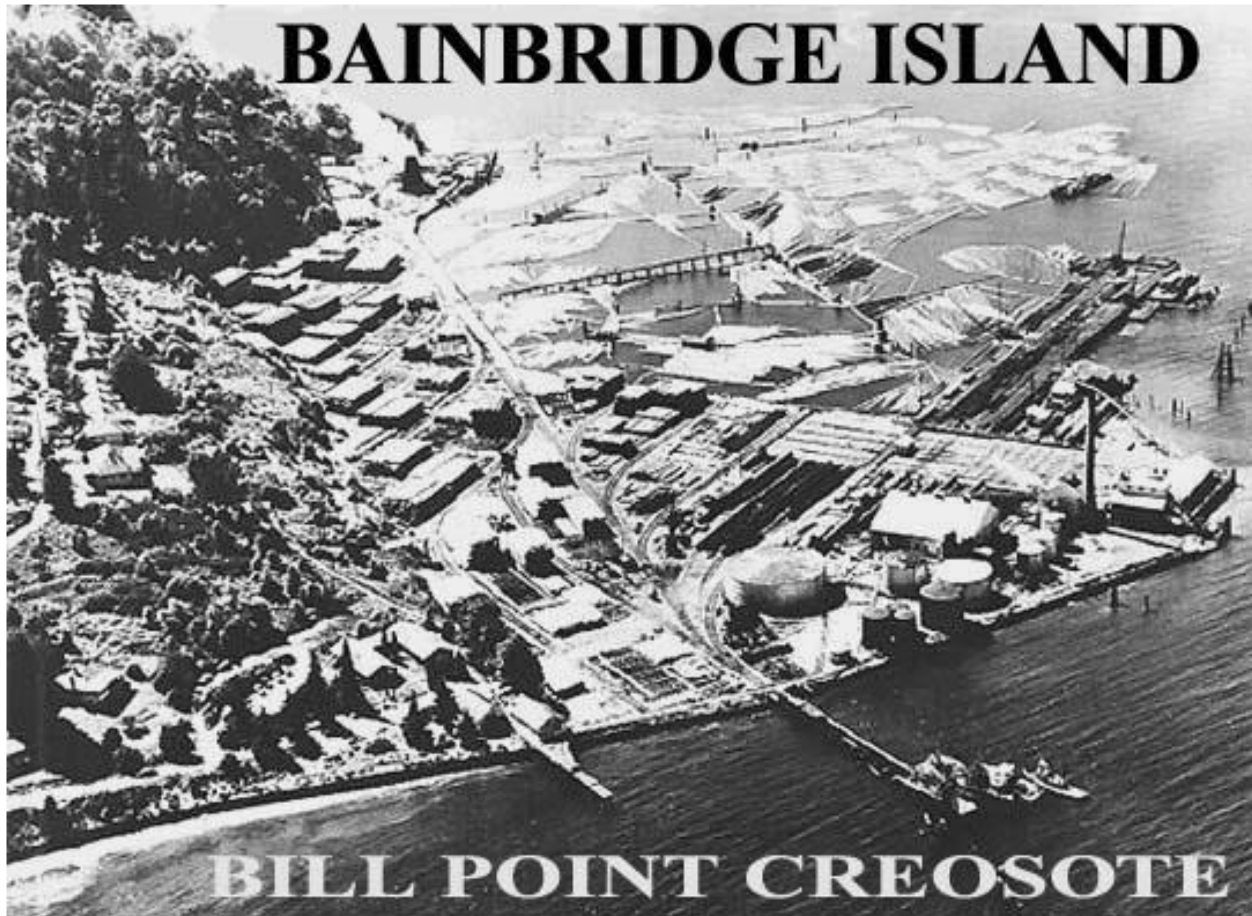
Creosote, derived from coal tar, was the miracle cure for preserving lumber in harsh environments. It waterproofed wood, killed termites, and stopped rot. Perfect for rail ties, dock pilings, and telephone poles. But, like many supposed miracles, it had a dark side. Creosote is loaded with polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, or PAHs. These are the bad guys: carcinogenic, persistent, and deadly to aquatic life. Imagine, the very stuff that kept our infrastructure strong was slowly poisoning the very waters that sustained us.

The coal tar used to create creosote was a byproduct of the gasification process, used to light and heat our cities at that time. Companies like Seattle Gas Light at their facility at what is now Gas Works Park at the north end of Lake Union, and American Tar, were churning out this toxic substance, and no one really understood the long-term consequences.

So, why here, at Eagle Harbor? Washington was a timber giant. Puget Sound was the heart of logging and milling. Bainbridge Island, strategically positioned near Seattle, offered easy access to shipping and rail. Eagle Harbor, with its deep waters, was perfect for large ships. There was an established workforce. And a nearby naval shipyard, all contributing to the demand.

The Perfection Pile Preserving Company, later Pacific Creosoting, moved here to Bill Point at the entrance to Eagle Harbor, in 1905, driven by the need for better transportation and

a suitable industrial site. Horace Chapin Henry and Walter Wyckoff, these names became synonymous with industrial progress and, unfortunately, environmental disaster.



Aerial view of the Wyckoff Creosote plant at Bill Point at the entrance to Eagle Harbor in the 1940's.

Now, what exactly *is* a creosote plant? Picture this: massive logs, cut lumber, arriving by ship and rail. They're air-dried, then loaded into huge steel tanks called retorts. Air is sucked out, and hot, liquid creosote is forced in under high pressure. Imagine the smell, the fumes, the sheer scale of this operation. Then, the excess creosote is drained, the wood is left to cure, and finally, shipped off to build the Panama Canal, wharves in San Francisco, and flood control channels in Los Angeles.

But here's the problem. Spills, leaks, contaminated waste dumped directly into the soil and water. Creosote seeping into the ground, the groundwater, and eventually, Eagle Harbor. This oily, dense liquid sank into the sediments, becoming a long-term environmental hazard.

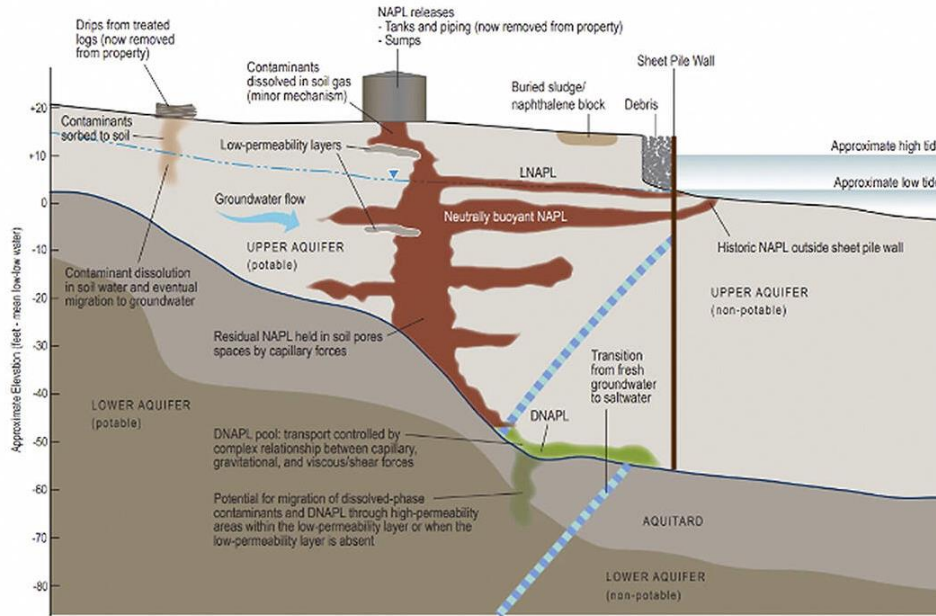
And in those early days? Awareness was minimal. The dangers of creosote weren't fully understood. The focus was on economic growth, not environmental protection. The toxicity

was secondary to its usefulness. And while workers and residents might have noticed the unpleasant fumes, the long-term risks were largely ignored.

Railroad cars with logs and retort at Pacific Creosoting Company, Eagle Harbor, approx.. 1909. Property of University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections.

Fast forward to the mid-20th century, and the concerns began to grow. By the 1960s and 70s, the environmental movement was gaining momentum. People started questioning the long-term effects of industrial pollution. By the 1980s, the scale of the contamination became undeniable. Discolored water, declining fish populations, chemical smells, and health problems.

In 1984, the EPA stepped in, revealing the severity of the contamination. By 1987, the Wyckoff/Eagle Harbor site was designated a Superfund site. Cleanup efforts began, but the damage was done. The Suquamish people, whose ancestral fishing grounds were devastated, became powerful advocates for environmental justice.



Current conceptual model of contamination at the Wyckoff Creosote plant on Bill Point. From Endangered Species Act Section 7(a)(2) Biological Opinion and Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act Essential Fish Habitat Response for the Wyckoff/Eagle Harbor Superfund Site, Perimeter Wall Replacement, Kitsap County, Washington (6th Field HUC 171100190404).

Creosote contamination seeps can be seen on some beach areas along the Wyckoff-Eagle Harbor Superfund site on Bainbridge Island, Washington. The creosote often shows up in small seeps or patches on the lower beach, usually during very low tides in the summer. The creosote looks like motor oil with a rainbow sheen.

The history of the Wyckoff Creosote Plant is a cautionary tale. A story of industrial progress at the expense of environmental health. A reminder that we must balance economic needs with sustainable practices. This site is a legacy, a scar on the landscape, but also a call to action. We must learn from the past to protect the future of Puget Sound.

So, as we stand here, let’s remember the lessons of Wyckoff. Let’s strive for a future where progress doesn’t come at the cost of our environment or our humanity.

Upheaval of the Traditional Maritime Economy due to Prejudice and Fear

Let's take a moment to reflect on a deeply painful chapter in Bainbridge Island's maritime history: the forced removal of its Japanese American residents during World War II. If you've walked the path from Pritchard Park to the Japanese American Exclusion Memorial, you've stood on ground that bears witness to this injustice.

How did the removal of the Japanese population from Bainbridge Island affect its maritime history? While the impact might not be immediately apparent, this forced relocation profoundly and permanently altered the island’s cultural and maritime heritage.

Map of trails between eastern parking lot, kayak take-out point, and Japanese Exclusion Memorial. The roundtrip hike from the kayak landing is about 1 mile.

Imagine this: one moment, you're a part of the community, your hands skilled in the crafts of the sea, your family rooted in the rich soil of the island. The next, you're given mere days to pack your life into what you can carry, told to abandon your homes, your boats, your livelihoods.

Executive Order 9066, a stain on our nation's history, authorized this forced relocation. The U.S. government, gripped by fear and prejudice, deemed Japanese Americans a threat, even though many were born citizens. On Bainbridge Island, the military delivered these orders directly to homes, abrupt and impersonal, giving families a mere six days to prepare.

Posting notices to assemble and leave for the internment camps. Japanese residents were given 6 days' notice to pack up, settle their affairs, and muster at the ferry dock in Eagle Harbor.

March 30, 1942. That's the date etched in the island's memory. Imagine the scene at Eagle Harbor's ferry dock. Families, carrying what little they could, their faces etched with confusion and fear, boarding ferries to an uncertain future. They were told they were going to Seattle, then onwards by train to internment camps, isolated and distant.

Japanese Americans evacuating Bainbridge Island for internment camps, March 30, 1942 Courtesy MOHAI (PI28055)

This wasn't just a relocation; it was a devastating blow to the island's maritime heritage. Many of these families were the backbone of the local fishing and boatbuilding industries. Skilled shipwrights, seasoned fishermen, their knowledge and expertise were vital to the island's economy. Their sudden removal left a gaping hole, an economic and cultural wound that took decades to heal.

Think about the numbers. Before the war, Bainbridge Island was home to about 5,500 people, 277 of whom were Japanese Americans. That's roughly 5% of the population, a small percentage, but a vital one. They were deeply involved in agriculture and maritime industries, their hands shaping the island's economic landscape. 15-20% of the population directly involved in agriculture and fishing, and a large portion of the agricultural labor was provided by the Japanese American community.

The fishing industry, then a cornerstone of Bainbridge Island's economy, was crippled. Families who owned and operated fishing boats, who knew the rhythms of the sea, were gone. The boatbuilding tradition, passed down through generations, was disrupted, leaving a void in the island's craftsmanship.

And it wasn't just about economics. It was about community. Japanese Americans were an integral part of the island's social fabric, their presence felt in the harbors, docks, and

waterfronts. Their removal disrupted the social cohesion of these maritime communities, erasing a vital part of the island’s cultural diversity.

The intergenerational transfer of maritime knowledge, the skills in fishing and boat repair, was severed. A symbolic loss, a painful erasure of the island’s maritime traditions. The knowledge of the water, the contributions to local harbors, all abruptly gone.

After the war, the island's economy shifted. The pre-war focus on agriculture and maritime industries gave way to land development, recreation, and tourism. The population, once around 5,500, climbed to 6,800 by 1950, but the Japanese American community was absent.

Agriculture, once a dominant sector, declined. By the 1990s, less than 1% of the workforce was employed in agriculture, while professional services, education, and healthcare became the new economic drivers. The ferry system, once a vital link for commerce, became a conduit for tourism, transforming Bainbridge Island into a weekend getaway for Seattleites.

Let's delve into the lasting impact of the Japanese expulsion on Bainbridge Island's maritime legacy. It's a story of how prejudice and fear can not only displace people but also erode the very fabric of a community's identity.

The expulsion of the Japanese American community in 1942 marked a turning point. The island's maritime heritage, once vibrant with boatbuilding, fishing, and trade, began to fade. Residential development took center stage, overshadowing the traditional industries that had defined life on Bainbridge Island for generations.

Imagine the changes: the working waterfront, once bustling with fishermen and boatbuilders, transformed into a landscape of luxury properties and recreational spaces. The boatbuilding facilities, the fishing docks, the very infrastructure that supported the maritime economy, were repurposed or abandoned. The commercial ferry terminals, once a part of a larger maritime network, became the island's primary transportation hub, disconnecting the community from its working waterfront.

This shift wasn't just economic; it was cultural. The deep-rooted relationships between the islanders and the water-based industries weakened. The cultural memory of the island's maritime history began to fade, replaced by a new narrative of suburban living and tourism.

This transformation illustrates a broader trend: how rapid development and suburbanization can erode cultural heritage. As Bainbridge Island became a commuter

community, traditional industries like agriculture and maritime trade lost their economic importance. The island's maritime history, once its lifeblood, was relegated to the background.

And here's the cautionary lesson: the importance of preserving cultural heritage. Even as new developments take place, we must recognize the value of working industries and the traditions they represent. The gentrification and suburbanization of Bainbridge Island serve as a stark reminder of what can be lost when economic growth is solely focused on real estate and tourism.

Communities undergoing similar transitions today should take heed. Rapid economic growth can lead to the loss of a community's distinctive identity and historical cultural ties. Bainbridge Island's maritime heritage, with its roots in fishing, boatbuilding, and agriculture, shows how industrial legacies can be sidelined by modernization.

This shift demands ongoing efforts to preserve history while fostering growth. We must find a balance that honors the past while embracing the future. The transition from a maritime and agricultural economy to a residential and service-based economy on Bainbridge Island reflects broader societal changes. The movement toward suburbanization and commuting after World War II played a significant role.

However, it also underscores the importance of balancing growth with preserving heritage, especially in communities with a rich maritime history. As communities continue to evolve, they must take care not to let economic development erase the cultural and historical foundations that shaped their identities.

The Japanese expulsion wasn't just a displacement of people; it was a displacement of a way of life, a severing of ties to the sea, not unlike what happened to the native peoples of the Salish Sea a century earlier. The silent docks, the abandoned boatyards, the faded memories—they all speak to the enduring impact of prejudice and the importance of remembering and preserving our maritime legacies.

Thoughts for the Journey to the Take-Out at the End of the Maritime Heritage Water Trail

As we approach the end of our Maritime Heritage Water Trail journey, you have a couple of options for your final take-out. You can choose to end here at Pritchard Park, a spot that carries the weight of the Wyckoff Superfund site's history, a stark reminder of the environmental costs of industrial progress. Or, you can paddle across the harbor to

Waterfront Park & City Dock, a route that offers a glimpse into the present and future of our maritime heritage.

Final take-out at Pritchard Park. The path goes from the beach and then behind the Wyckoff Superfund site to a small parking lot

If you opt for the Waterfront Park take-out, you'll likely pass by the iconic Washington State ferries, those massive vessels that are a vital part of our modern maritime landscape. They represent the largest ferry system in the United States, a testament to the enduring connection between Puget Sound communities and the water.

Think about it: over 20 vessels, more than 24 million passengers, and 10 million vehicles annually. This ferry system is more than just transportation; it's a lifeline, connecting islands and communities, serving as both a commuter service and a vital link. It's a powerful illustration of how maritime activity continues to shape our region.

As you paddle across the harbor, you might also notice the live-aboard boats, homes afloat, where people have chosen to live full-time on the water. This community, often drawn by the relative affordability compared to the soaring real estate prices on Bainbridge Island, represents a unique and pragmatic way to maintain a connection to the island's maritime roots.

Paddle across the harbor to the Waterfront Park & City Dock.

But this lifestyle isn't without its complexities. In some communities, live-aboards face friction with land-based residents, who may view them as inconvenient or unsightly. Here in Eagle Harbor, however, the live-aboard community is largely tolerated, a reflection of the harbor's longstanding maritime character.

The residents here, both on land and on water, appreciate the harbor's heritage and its connection to the sea. They recognize the diversity that live-aboards bring, the unique stories and vibrant colors they add to the harbor's tapestry.

And it's not just about coexisting; it's about contributing. The live-aboard community actively participates in local events like the Bainbridge Island Maritime Festival, celebrating the island's rich history of water-based commerce and recreation.

As you reach your final take-out, take a moment to reflect on the journey. We've explored the highs and lows of Bainbridge Island's maritime history: the industrial boom and its environmental consequences, the devastating impact of prejudice and expulsion, and the enduring connection to the water that continues to shape the community.

Whether you end your journey at Pritchard Park or Waterfront Park, you'll be leaving with a deeper understanding of the complex and multifaceted maritime heritage of Bainbridge Island. A heritage that reminds us to learn from the past, cherish the present, and strive for a future where progress and preservation go hand in hand.

Echoes of Time: A Paddler's Reverie at Journey's End

Our maiden voyage along the Maritime Heritage Water Trail, a passage through eons, began where the earth itself groaned: the slow, relentless dance of tectonic plates, the Juan de Fuca's descent, a 50-million-year genesis of this sculpted sea. Then came the glacial breath, the Cordilleran Ice Sheet's icy dominion, a silent, white epoch, retreating at last to unveil the Salish Sea's shimmering expanse, a mirror reflecting a newly born world.

We dipped our paddles into waters that held the stories of the dxʷsəq̓ʷəbš (Suquamish), and those who came before, their voices echoing across 13,000 years. At Blakely Harbor, we felt the warmth of their cedar canoes, their deep understanding of the world's interwoven threads, a reverence for the land and sea. We listened to tales of the A'yahos, the earth's restless spirit, and saw their mark etched at Restoration Point, where the land surged, a sudden, dramatic upheaval, a hazard born of ancient tremors.

History's currents swirled, revealing how a grounded warship, a victim of that uplift, became a player in the tides of conflict, shaping the destiny of the Battle of Seattle. The arrival of those who saw the sea as a resource, a commodity, transformed the landscape. Blakely Harbor bore witness to the clamor of sawmills, the birth of boomtowns, a rapid reshaping of the world.

In Rich Passage, we felt the sting of progress, the shadow of environmental cost. Eagle Harbor, a scarred testament to industrial ambition, whispered tales of exploitation and consequence. A walk along its shore led us to the Japanese Exclusion Memorial, a somber reminder of history's wounds, a call to guard both heritage and habitat.

Our paddles traced the lines of modern conflicts, the recent battles over aquaculture, the removal of salmon pens, a reminder that the sea remains a battleground of values. And finally, at Waterfront Park, we glimpsed the living tapestry of maritime life: the ferries, the floating homes, a testament to coexistence, a harmony between land and water, a celebration of shared heritage.

This journey, a paddling through time, leaves us with echoes: the whispers of ancient voices, the roar of industry, the quiet strength of resilience. The Salish Sea, a living poem, its verses written in water and stone, invites us to listen, to remember, and to cherish.