

Vashon-Maury Island — Thumbnail History

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Vashon-Maury Island is located in the middle of southern Puget Sound, midway between Seattle and Tacoma, within the boundaries of King County. Its history parallels that of the rest of the county, but its growth and development have occurred at a much slower rate, owing in main part to its inaccessibility to the mainland.

Early History

In 1792, during exploratory missions on Puget Sound, Captain George Vancouver named Vashon Island after his friend Captain James Vashon. When Lt. Charles Wilkes surveyed the Sound in 1841, he named Maury Island after William A. Maury, a member of his crew. At the time, there was a portage between the two islands.

Prior to these “discoveries,” Native Americans had lived on the island for centuries. The portage was a preferred hunting ground, with woven nets spanning the short distance between the two islands to catch low-flying water fowl. The portage also played an important part in a vast battle between warring tribes.

Tribes from Vancouver Island and northward oftentimes traveled to Puget Sound to kill local Indians and pillage their camps. Legend has it that the Nisqually tribe grew tired of this and formed a navy of large war canoes within Quartermaster Harbor. When the invaders came down from the north, Nisqually canoes streamed through the portage and sank the enemy fleet, mainly with thrown rocks.

A Slow Start

In 1852, Seattle pioneers cut down trees on the island and placed the logs aboard the ship *Leonesa* for export to San Francisco. Within a few years, treaties forced the Indians to move elsewhere, and all Native Americans on the island were gone. The first land claim on the island was 80 acres, made by Andrew J. Pope and William C. Talbot on August 1, 1864. Others soon followed.

Quartermaster Harbor quickly became a center of activity for fishing, logging, brick baking, and shingle making. Beginning in 1874, the steamer *Lively* began making daily trips to Tacoma. Unfortunately, there weren't enough people on the island, and she was soon taken off the run due to lack of business.

The following year, a farmer brought 1,000 head of sheep to the island, but his venture also proved unsuccessful. He left the island, and for months afterward other settlers would find the nomadic animals roaming amongst the trees. Eventually, more people came to live on the island, but at a much slower rate than those homesteading on the mainland.

Ups and Downs

The 1880s saw enough populace for semi-regular ship service. S. D. Sherman purchased a lifeboat and refitted it as a schooner, naming it *Old Black Joe*. The service brought more homesteaders, and islanders soon built the first school, stores, and crude roads. By the end of the decade, ferry service was available at both the north and south ends of Vashon Island.

The 1890s had its ups and downs, paralleling development throughout the county, as well as the nation. The decade started out well, with prosperous farms and other industries sprouting up, including a drydock at Dockton -- the only one of its kind on Puget Sound. In 1892, Vashon College opened near Burton. One of its faculty members was Oliver Scott Van Olinda, who would become the community's first historian.

Things were going well, but 1893 was a bad year on the islands. As well as being affected by a nationwide economic collapse, a huge fire swept through the forests in the center of Vashon Island, causing many to lose their homes. Recovery took some time, but by the end of the century the community was solid and growing.

An Island Unto Itself?

Once most of the trees had been removed, farming became the main industry. Berries grew well, especially strawberries. Japanese farmers were quite common, although most would lose their farms after being coerced into internment camps during World War II.

Logging and fishing continued, but the island never truly became self-sufficient. Some islanders thought they should secede from King County and form their own county, but many realized that they were dependent on outside resources. For example, when phone service arrived, a cable needed to be laid deep under the waters of Puget Sound. Islanders weren't independent enough to do that themselves.

The main issue facing residents was off-island transportation. The first auto ferry arrived in 1916, when the King County Ferry System began running the *M. V. Vashon* between Des Moines and Portage. Within a few years a paved highway traversed the island north-south. Other paved roads soon appeared, including one connecting the two islands. Although folks could move easily around their community, they were heavily dependent on ferries to go anywhere else.

Vashon Vigilantes

By the 1930s, ferry service was predominantly in the hands of Captain Alexander Peabody, owner of the Puget Sound Navigation Company. Many felt he had a veritable monopoly on Puget Sound ferry service, especially those living on islands throughout the sound. This became all too apparent in 1947, when a strike shut down the system for 6 days, just as Peabody was requesting massive rate hikes.

Vashon Islanders freaked out once they found themselves stranded. To prevent this crisis from happening again, they formed their own ferry system in 1948, just in time for Peabody to shut down the system one more time. When Peabody started up again he tried returning to the island for fares, but vigilantes armed with hoes and pool cues met one of his ferries at the dock, and triumphantly pushed it away.

The Vashon Ferry System ran for three years and then disbanded when Washington State Ferries began operating on June 1, 1951. With all the rigmarole surrounding the past few years of ferry service to the island, some state officials thought maybe the time was ripe to finally connect Vashon-Maury Island to the mainland with bridges.

A Bridge Too Near

At first, a few island residents thought bridges to the mainland might be a good idea. They were proud of having run their own ferries and fighting the system, but it was hard work. The technology for a cross-sound bridge was available -- the Lake Washington Floating Bridge had proved to be a success -- and talks began with the state.

But as the idea set in, people started wondering how much their island would change. They had moved here for a reason -- to avoid urban sprawl. Some pointed out that Lake Washington's Mercer Island had once been farmland like theirs, but the floating bridge was starting to change all that.

The majority of Vashon Islanders began fighting any plans for a bridge. They fought one in 1955, and scuttled another in the mid-1960s. In 1992, a small meeting to discuss another bridge plan was held, and 2,000 of the island's 9,000 residents showed up -- some wearing signs reading: "Don't Mercerize Vashon Island," and "Bridges Bring Death." When the conveners asked how many people in attendance supported a bridge, the crowd responded with dead silence.

A Tree Grows on Vashon

In time, Vashon-Maury Island residents have been able to maintain most of their rural way of life, while moving forward with the rest of King County into the twenty-first century. Of all areas of the county, the island has seen the least development, helped in part by a limited water supply that can't handle the kind of growth that has occurred elsewhere.

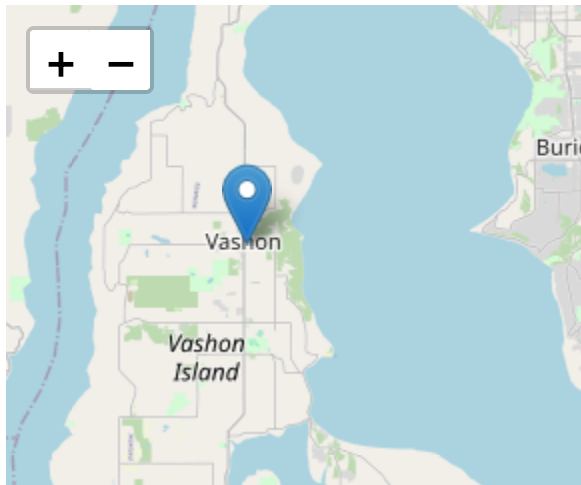
Attempts will likely be made in the future to build a bridge to the island, but unless a major paradigm shift occurs in the community mindset, many will oppose it. As of 2002, there have been talks of widening the highway down the island's center to accommodate the number of families that own more than one car. Islanders have met even that idea with indifference.

In the woods near the town of Vashon grows a tree. Decades ago, someone rested their little red bicycle beside it, and left it there. Over time, the wood grew around it, and the bicycle is now encased in the tree -- five feet off the ground.

Some things happen slowly on Vashon-Maury Island, and more than a few residents wish to keep it that way.

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Vashon School, 1893

Courtesy MOHAI (SHS11860)



Dockton Drydock, Maury Island, 1900s

Courtesy University of Washington



Steamer *Vashon* arriving at the Burton Dock, Vashon Island, 1910s

Courtesy University of Washington



Faculty of Vashon College, O. S. Van Olinda in center, October 5, 1902

Courtesy UW Special Collections (Neg. WAS1198)



Vashon-Maury Island

Map by Chris Goodman



Vashon street scene, 1910s

Postcard



Downtown Vashon, 1941

Courtesy MOHAI (1983.10.18083.9)



Berry picking, Vashon Island, 1943

Courtesy MOHAI (PI23856)

Sources:

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