

Three men in a boat

Oak Harbor's first three white settlers were neither Irish nor Dutch. One of them, Martin Taftezon (sometimes spelled Toftezen or Taftson) was born at Leanger, in Norway in 1821. He sailed from Hammerfest, Norway in 1847 to become a seaman, and from England he sailed to New Orleans, in the United States.

In New Orleans, Taftezon and a friend were attracted by news of the California Gold Rush, as were men all over the States, and they set out by horseback by way of the Santa Fe Trail for California.

The two men, traveling the Santa Fe Trail by horseback in the mid-80s, found it a perilous journey, with hostile Indians along the way. During one such confrontation, the two were separated and Taftezon went his way alone.

He lost the Santa Fe Trail but picked up the Oregon Trail to Portland, then took the trail north to Fort Steilacoom in Washington Territory in 1849. There he made friends with two

other disappointed gold-seekers, Ulrich Freund, a Swiss Army Officer; and C. W. Sumner, a "Yankee." Northward, there was free land for the taking and the three set out in a canoe oared by Indians. Free land was second best to free gold!

Traveling north in Puget Sound, the three adventurers' canoe headed for what was to become Oak Harbor, but the Indian oarsmen were at odds with the Indians who camped there, so they took a tack east of today's Maylor's Point, at the "Big Spring" in Crescent Harbor. The Indians knew the Big Spring well; Indians traveling all over this part of the Sound knew where the Big Spring gushed out of the high bank on the west side of the harbor and where there was always good water.

(The Big Spring is still at Crescent Harbor, although its flow has been reduced to a trickle. Reeds and brush have overgrown the creek bed where the water gushed out of the bluff a century and a half ago.



It is located on the Navy's Torpedo Road on the Seaplane Base.)

When the three adventurers landed near the Big Spring bluff, Taftezon climbed to the top, and then scaled a tall tree to view the land to the west. He shouted "Eureka" as he viewed the harbor, oak trees, and the prairie land that ran north.

The three took their claims from the east, Taftezon, then Sumner, who claimed the central part of today's Oak Harbor; and Freund, whose claim extended to the west and to the rise of ground on Indian Ridge. All three built cabins on their claims, but Sumner did not stay. Of an adventurous spirit, he is said to have remarked that "when you can see the smoke from your neighbor's cabin, things are becoming much too crowded."

The Freund family still lives on the original Freund claim, the only claim on Whidbey Island thus distinguished.

Taftezon built his cabin, married an Indian girl, and the couple had two little boys. Measles was one of the "white man's diseases" against which their Indian brothers had no defense. When Taftezon had to make a trip by canoe to Olympia for supplies, he instructed his wife that in case the children came down with measles, she was to call the white doctor (Dr. Lansdale, who named both Oak Harbor and Crescent Harbor) instead of taking them to the Indian "doctor."

When the boys became ill,

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Oak Harbor's first settlers

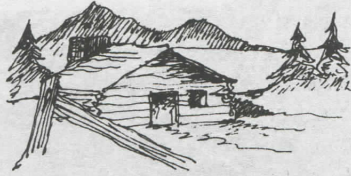
the frightened mother ignored the instructions, and took the little boys to the Medicine Man at City Beach, where he administered the rite of sweating in a tent over a fire, then rushing the patient to the cold water of the Sound for immersion. Both little boys died.

When Taftezon returned, the little boys had been buried, and in a rage he drove his wife from his cabin. He remained an embittered man all of the 51 years he continued to live in Oak Harbor.

Martin Taftezon was a shoemaker by trade, and Thomas Maylor once paid him \$20 for a pair of shoes. Taftezon often was seen walking along the beach to Oak Harbor from his home, carrying a sack of repaired shoes over his shoulder. He would return home with a sack of groceries.

Later Taftezon bought 16 acres of land on the northeast corner of the Ulrich Friend claim in 1867. Today the old Walter Pasek home still stands on the property. Taftezon later sold the land to Captain Jonathan Adams, and then went traveling. Returning to Oak Harbor, he bought several more acres from the then Arnold Freund, nephew of Ulrich Freund.

After his death in 1901 Martin



Taftezon was buried in the pioneer Freund cemetery beside the grave of his old friend, Ulrich Freund.

Some years later, Taftezon's body was moved to the Norwegian settlement of Stanwood, by relatives who had arrived later to settle on both Whidbey Island and in the Stillaguamish Valley.

Zakarias Martin Toftezen was made a citizen of the U.S. in the District Court of Port Townsend, on April 25, 1863. Later that year, records show that his mother, Emmerence; a daughter, Bernhardine; a brother, Ole Christianson Toftezen with wife Sophia and stepdaughter Marie, embarked on a sailing vessel from Norway for Oak Harbor, via New York, Cape Horn and San Francisco.

Ole and his family remained in New York, but the rest of the family arrived in Oak Harbor in 1865, with Ole and family following to Coupeville in 1874, moving later to Utsalady and then on to Stanwood. Ole Christianson Toftezen died there in 1884. Martin and Ole's sister, Bernhardine, married Ellert Graham in 1866, and they filed

a claim on the north side of Hatt Slough below Hatt Slough bridge on the mainland. Her mother lived there with them.

Toftezen's mother, Emmerence, born in Norway in 1792, died at Hatt Slough in 1871 and at the time was the only known white person to live in that district who was born in the 18th century.

According to a report in the Farm Bureau News in May of 1939, the memory of Zakarias Martin Toftezen was honored by the presence of Crown Prince Olaf and Crown Princess Martha of Norway at the unveiling of the "Toftezen monument" at the Lutheran cemetery in East Stanwood. The monument was erected through the efforts of the Sons of Norway to perpetuate the memory of the first Norwegian settlers in the Pacific Northwest.



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This is Oak Harbor as it was in the 1890s, looking east from Maylor's Store. Along Pioneer Way with the Ely farm on the left, L.P. Byrne's store at center, and various buildings along the waterfront.

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