

San de Fuca is the site of first Island

San de Fuca . . . originally named Coveland, was Whidbey Island's first settlement of more than two homes. Located at the head of Penn's Cove, a deep-water site most attractive to ships which were the only mode of transportation during the last half of the 1800s.

Note was made by Captain Vancouver in 1792 when Master Joseph Whidbey, his first mate, made detailed reports on the terrain and harbor. Whidbey noted pleasant, rolling landscape, dotted

with oak trees and tall grass, where Skagit Indians came to meet him, friendly and hospitable.

In March 1852, Captain Richard B. Holbrook, with Capt. Eli Hathaway, sailed into Penn's Cove from Port Townsend. Capt. Holbrook homesteaded 160 acres, in the center of which San de Fuca now stands.

According to an account of his life by his daughter, Frances Holbrook Pfeiffer, Capt. Holbrook pitched a tent among the willows and rose bushes at a landing place near the head of the Cove on the west shore, and lived there during the summer. In the fall he built a small log cabin directly up the rocky hillside, against a large boulder with a shelf-like projection, upon which he set his water pail.

Coveland had the first trading post, opened by Capt. Benjamin Barstow in 1853, on the point that bears his name where now the Captain Whidbey Inn is located. For this commercial venture, Capt. Barstow gave up the sea.

Holbrook and Hathaway opened a trading post on the mainland across from the

southern point of Lummi Island. They invested \$1,300 each to stock their store but were burned out by Haidah Indians and barely escaped with their lives. After that Holbrook returned to his Coveland claim to farm. He built another cabin, just over the rocky hillside, west and south of his first one, two rooms to which he added a third room after his marriage in 1860.

In 1874 Captain Holbrook built the two-story house near the water that still stands just above the dock in San de Fuca. Trees that still stand were sprouts taken about 1880 from the Roeder tree and planted by Capt. Holbrook. Even though these sea captains were a continent removed from the tree-shaded streets of New England, they still remembered them.

Coveland became a popular harbor. The first county courthouse was built at the head of the cove, and is still standing, a two-story structure privately owned and somewhat modernized with new siding and windows. The "county seat" was later moved to Coupeville. ➤



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Psalm 119:105



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settlement

The rolling hills of San de Fuca continued to be a farming area. A small tidewater mill was located at the point where the waters of Kennedy's Lagoon ran in and out. Several mills were built in Coveland, and later San de Fuca.

Dr. Lansdale, who located his claim at the head of the cove and to whom credit is given for the naming of Oak Harbor, took a major part in northwest explorations of the Cascade Mountains.

Captain Holbrook served two terms in the territorial legislature. He was assistant Indian agent under Captain Fay in 1857. He was active in politics and a great lobbyist for the territory.

He later was treasurer of Island County (which at that time included the present Island, Snohomish, Skagit and Whatcom counties) and kept the county funds in a sugar bowl in the china closet of his log cabin home! This had caused him some worry, and when he was offered the choice of treasurer for the territory, he refused!

Samuel Libbey came to Coveland in 1853, from the goldfields of California. He came to Whidbey aboard a ship in command of his brother-in-law, Capt. Barstow. Libbey filed a donation claim on the west shore of Penn Cove, and in 1860 sent for his wife and two sons, George and Joseph.

Mrs. Libbey was terrified of the Northern Indians who made the shore a frequent landing place, and within a few years the family moved to Smith's Prairie where they



The first county courthouse still stands at the head of the cove in San de Fuca. Note the poplar tree at left. The roof peeping out behind at right is on the Libbey house.

lived for about five years. They finally moved back to the Coveland farm, into the cabin built by Captain Barstow next to the old county courthouse.

The poplar tree was planted by a Captain Roeder who lived next to the Libbey family.

Roeder brought a drove of cattle to his place, and carried a poplar switch to help drive them. After lunch at the Libbey home, he stuck the stick in the earth, saying to Mrs. Libbey, "I have planted a tree for you." It grew.

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Here come the British . . .

Or history repeats itself. The Island county Times of October 16, 1896, quoted Chief of Army Engineers General William P. Craighill, regarding the delay in fortifying Puget Sound against British intrusion.

He said the delay was caused by the inability to secure needed sites for the fortifications. "We thoroughly realize the importance of fortifying Puget Sound. Today it is entirely undefended, while the British have a number of stations in threatening positions as near the Sound as they are able to get."

The quote continued, "We are going to take every precaution to more than equal the strength of their fortifications. There will be plenty of money spent on Puget Sound as soon as we get the sites we need."

This was the first indication that soon there would be three Army forts guarding the Straits of Juan de Fuca: Fort Casey, Fort Flagler and Fort Warden.

The British were situated on Vancouver Island in British Columbia. Capt. Vancouver had named many of the San Juan Islands and Whidbey Island.

The Pig War of San Juan had been settled, but an uneasy truce existed between the British and Americans.

Fort Casey was named by the Army Headquarters Adjutant General's office in 1899, in honor of Brigadier General Thomas Lincoln Casey, the former Army chief of Engineers.

General Casey died March 25, 1896, before the fort was named in his honor, but was remembered as one of the best known and best loved officers in the

War Department.

Fort Casey, along with Fort Warden and Ford Flagler, guarded the entrance to Admiralty Inlet, the key point in the fortification system designed to prevent a hostile fleet from reaching prime targets on Puget Sound, such as the Bremerton Navy Yard and the growing cities of Seattle, Tacoma, Olympia and Everett.

As wars always leave their

mark on the areas affected, Fort Casey's complement left its mark on Whidbey Island during two World Wars. Many families living on Whidbey today had fathers and grandfathers stationed at Fort Casey.

The girls who danced with the soldiers at community and fort affairs married them and many came back to the Island to live when their military duty was completed.



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Sea captains played a big part in the

North Whidbey has long associated sea captains with history. Many of the early pioneers were deep-sea captains, and many others received their captain rates from sailing vessels on the sound, as this for many years was the only method of transportation.

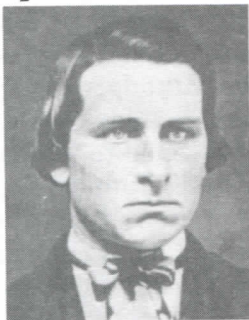
Deep-sea captains who sailed their ships around the world and brought home cargoes of many beautiful and exotic things from far places, chose Whidbey Island as their retirement homes.

Captain George W. Morse was such a captain. His ship brought the first rails from Wales to Canada for the Atlantic and St. Lawrence railway.

Morse helped build the "Growler," a schooner built in Oak Harbor, and in 1861 was appointed Indian sub-agent under Samuel Howe, stationed at La Conner and Tulalip.

Morse located in Oak Harbor on the place where the Roller Barn now stands, and which later was the James Neil ranch. He was county commissioner when the territory became a state, and he was elected to the State Legislature four times. His first voyage at the age of 20 was made as a carpenter, and he sailed around Cape Horn to San Francisco, arriving there in 1830.

One of Morse's daughters, Sadie, was a sparkling, vivacious person. She told of accompanying her father to the state balls at Olympia while he was a legislator. She had kept as a keepsake, a pair of satin slippers in which she danced at the Governor's ball in the early days of statehood for Washington.



George W. Morse

Captain Morse was one who saw far into the future. In fact, his prophecies of the future, although accurate in many instances, were ahead of his times. When he saw the small island between Fidalgo and Whidbey (Pass Island) he visualized it as a pier for a bridge which, he told his children, would someday be built.

As a state representative in 1907 he introduced the first bill calling for the erection of Deception Pass Bridge and the following year he obtained an appropriated sum of \$20,000 for building its approaches.

The money was never forthcoming in that early day, and it wasn't until 1935 that Capt. Morse's visualized bridge over Deception Pass was dedicated.

George Morse married Mary McCrohan, who came to the Island with her family from Ireland via Australia, in the late 1850s.

Great-great-great grandchildren of Captain Morse still live on the Island, the offspring of Elspeth (Polly) and Norman Dyer. Norm's father was Yorke Dyer, an Oak Harbor businessman who lived to see his grandfather's dream bridge built.

The fifth generation children are Dawn, Debbie and David Dyer, and their children are of the sixth generation.

On Pioneer Way in Oak Harbor, until 1972, was a small recreation spot called "The Pastime." The owner was Capt. Hill Barrington, who was then in his late eighties, and who had spent much of his life aboard ships to and from Alaska.

Capt. Hill was the son of one of Oak Harbor's first settlers, Capt. Edward Barrington.

Capt. Ed, the pioneer, was a big, red-bearded man who made friends with the Indians, administered justice among them, and saved many of them from hanging. It was said that many an Indian also lived to regret his quick decisions.

"Big Billy" was an Indian who stood well over six feet tall. Capt. Barrington and a friend was busy butchering one day while Big Billy looked on. Barrington asked him to "hand me that gam stick," and Billy replied that Capt. Barrington had been boss long enough. "Now ME boss!"

Barrington picked up the gam stick, felled Big Billy with one blow, grabbed him by the hair and flung him over the bank. Barrington's friend observed that he was afraid he had killed him.

"That was the intention" replied Barrington as he resumed his butchering. Four days later Big Billy appeared, approached Barrington and said, "Cap'n Barrington, you still boss."

Another crisis between whites and Indians had been averted.

The Indians encamped on the beach at Oak Harbor were very much afraid of the King ➤

Island's early days

George Indians of Vancouver Island. These troublesome boys were not the slave-raiding Haidahs, but spent much time stirring up devilry in the Island camps, fighting and stealing the women.

One day an Indian came to Capt. Barrington to tell him the King George Indians were back again, full of "fire water" and making much trouble.

Barrington went down to the encampment to see what he could do about it.

At that time the Indians hung their dead in canoes or hammocks, between two trees or poles placed upright in the ground. There they hung until the thongs securing them had given way, and the remaining bones tumbled to the ground. But soon after the white man came, Indians began burying their dead.

Captain Barrington, being aware of the Indians' fear of death and "evil spirits," knocked down an old canoe containing the bones of a departed brave. He stuck the skull on the end of a stick, and began dancing about through the Indians. The terrified invaders fled to their canoe and never again bothered the little village.

The bay was full of the

retreating Indians, who referred to Barrington as "sike" meaning "devil." They were sure he must have been a devil himself to defy the spirit of the dead.

The family of one of the first Oak Harbor homesteaders stayed on its land.

Col. Ulrich Freund, a former Swiss Army Officer, was one of the first three men to settle Oak Harbor. He came by Indian canoe with C. W. Sumner, a "Yankee" and Martin Taftson, a Norwegian. Freund took the Donation Claim on the west side of what is today the city of Oak Harbor, and never married.

In 1872 he sent to Switzerland for a niece and nephew, Arnold and Elspeth Freund, and they sailed from Antwerp in Belgium for Philadelphia.

Their father had bought second class tickets for them, but being able to speak only German, they were sent to steerage where Arnold became ill and remained so to the end of the journey.

The boy and girl took a train for San Francisco where they spent two anxious weeks trying to learn where Oak Harbor was. They were finally told it was near the Caribou Mines in British Columbia, so they took passage on a boat bound for Victoria.

Uncle Ulrich had asked a neighbor, a Mr. Walker who was going to Victoria, to be on the lookout for the two, and when he found them he brought them to Oak Harbor in a small boat. Arnold was so ill he had to be carried to the home of his uncle. He recovered, and later became a



farmer.

His sister stayed for some time then left for Port Townsend where she was employed in the home of a German family. From the children's textbooks, Elspeth learned English.

Elspeth later married Captain Jonothan Adams who had come to Oak Harbor in 1852. They were married in Coupeville at the State Hotel in 1878, and the wedding party included Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Nunan and Captain and Mrs. Edward Barrington who went to Coupeville from Oak Harbor in an Indian canoe.

Five children were born to Elspeth Freund and Jonothan Adams, Ollie, Warren and Irvin at Coupeville; George and Elsie were born at Port Townsend where Captain Adams bought a home and built a store during the "boom" years.

In 1888 Captain Adams sold his boat and retired, and in 1896 moved to Oak Harbor. He died July 29, 1902. Elspeth died Oct. 13, 1920.

The donation claim taken by Ulrich Freund is the only one still held by members of the family of original settlers. Arnold "Arnie" Freund and his wife Betty live on the Claim, overlooking the city, and their children grew up here.

Arnie Freund was Sheriff of Island County for some years. He has lived all his life on his great uncle's claim.

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The Mystery of Ben Ure

Snuggled close to Whidbey Island near Cornet Bay, is a small island named "Ben Ure's Island." And on the northeastern part of Whidbey Island there is a spot known as "Ben Ure's Spit."

Early records show that this Scottish pioneer who spoke with a Scottish "burr," tried farming of a sort on Whidbey, before he took to his island home. His cattle were reportedly stolen by rustlers from nearby La Conner sometime in the late 1850s or early 1860s.

Research shows that the name Ure is pronounced either "ouray" or "oureh," but Whidbey Island usage rhymes it with "your."

Ben Ure was on San Juan Island during the joint occupation by the U.S. and Britain, from 1860 to 1872, and surely was familiar with the "Pig War," an incident concerning a pig that brought the two countries to the brink of war.

It was thought that he may have had connections with the Hudson's Bay Company as he operated a small boat in Canadian waters, from which he furnished rum to both American and British soldiers.

What Ben Ure used as cargo, besides the rum, may have been of a very different sort. Many Chinese on Vancouver Island were anxious to evade the U.S. Exclusion Act of 1882, and smuggling of aliens was a lucrative business. Ben Ure was also employed for a time by the United States Customs Bureau!

Ure made enough money so he could invest in property in Anacortes when that city was experiencing a boom, but his investments were swept away in

the panic of 1893. Ben Ure then turned his sailing sloop toward Deception Pass and his previously homesteaded island.

The log cabin on his island was in bad shape, but he soon brought enough lumber from Utsalady to not only fix up his old house but to build a bigger one with a dock extending into the deep channel. The big house later became the area's first dance hall and saloon!

Ure had an Indian woman who was willing to share his bed and board, but with the opening of the dance hall, she was spending most of her time out on isolated little Strawberry Island, in the middle of Deception Pass channel.

She kept a steady fire burning, the wood supplied by Ure. Only when the tide rushed through the Pass so swiftly that no boat could have survived did she remain at home. She just shrugged when anyone asked her why she put in so much time on Strawberry.

Everyone suspected Ure's setup on his island was used by smugglers, and the revenue cutters were alerted, but they could get no evidence. While the patrol boats were helpless, the noisy partying and rowdiness in the saloon went on.

However, a small notice in a Seattle paper, dated May 29, 1902, carried this item:

"White haired Benjy Ure, accused of harboring smugglers and pirates, is now under arrest, formally charged with receiving stolen goods."

Several cases of contraband cigars, whiskey and opium had been found on Ben Ure's Island. When the trial came up the defendant insisted that his only



guilt lay in giving shelter to smugglers in fear of reprisal. When asked who the smugglers were, he named Henry Ferguson, "The Flying Dutchman" and "Pirate Kelly" the king of Puget Sound smugglers.

His answer to why his wife spent so much time on Strawberry Island?

"She sits behind the fire when the patrol boats are around, and in front of the fire when it is safe for the fellows to come through the Pass."

Ure spent only five days in jail before being released on bail bond. He was 72, and shortly after he made a will disposing of all his property, real and personal, but made no mention of his rights to the island. So Uncle Sam took it over and built a small light-house, operated by a keeper.

Ure continued to live on his island and spent the few remaining years of his life quietly. He died Nov. 19, 1908. There is no record of his burial place, but he was probably laid to rest alongside his wife, who had died some years previously.

Only remnants of foundation logs of his buildings remained on the island that bears his name, and few visit the site. All of the loggers and fishermen who made the dance hall and saloon a success are long dead.

Ure left no children, and early records show nothing of his activities in those exciting days of exploration in Puget Sound. This lack of facts contributes to the local Mystery of Ben Ure.

It was a growing town before it burned

May 1912 news item: *"New Byrne Hotel opened to public, 12 airy outside rooms, all finished in white, well furnished, each with a large window and a transom. Halls wide and light and a number of exits in case of fire. A large electric fire gong. Place lighted with gas, plumbing of best, toilets and hot and cold water all through hotel. View from balcony on second floor excellent. Ladies parlor on ground floor, to be used as a rest room whether guests or not. Office, with stock of fine cigars, candies; dining room with white linen, silver and glass, fresh fruit; kitchen, with everything bright and new; drummers sample room, billiard room. An automobile meets all boats and takes guests to and from the hotel free of charge. Mr. & Mrs. L.P. Byrne are well known to the traveling public and Hotel Byrne fills a long felt want In Oak Harbor."*

A trip through the Byrne house and you may hear Katie's piano playing the songs of the day. Oak Harbor was a growing town when the big old house just above Smith (Oak Tree) Park was built on what is now Midway and SE 9th Ave. It was 1894 and Maylor's Store and dock were but two years old on what is today SE Pioneer Way and Dock St.

On the corner of Midway and Pioneer there was the new Byrne hotel and store, a livery stable and a dock with a cart that transported travelers from the boats to the shore.

In between, Ely's orchard fronted on the main street, the McCrohan Hotel was a busy place and here and there were

small houses.

Long Tom, one of the last Indians to live in Oak Harbor, had a cabin on the beachside where he made canoes for his tribesmen.

L.P. Byrne, an Irishman who had had considerable experience in trade in New York City and then in California, came to Whidbey Island and invested in the future of a little town named for the Garry oaks that abounded.

Not only did he build a successful business district, but he fell in love with the lovely and talented Katie Nunan, whose parents had come on a roundabout journey from Ireland to Australia to Whidbey in 1858.

The success of Byrne's business venture was enhanced by the home he built for his bride just above a grove of oak trees, a house whose upper windows looked out from a gabled roof over the bay.

Katie Nunan could play the piano and sing. The Irish in those early days made up a large percentage of Oak Harbor, and one can only imagine the fun times that the old house saw.

Its large rooms, its fireplaces, its staircases and dining hall, furnished in the best of the pre-1900s, were a magnet for the early families: McCrohans, Nunans, O'Learys, Byrnes, the Barringtons, Morses, Maylors, the Hills and Elys and Stroops families.

When a special day came along, the big community hall built over the Byrne warehouse on the shore side of the

bay filled up for dancing or programs and receptions.

L.P. Byrne had it all, until that end of the town burned in 1921, destroying everything except his beautiful house.

After Byrne's death as a comparatively young man, Katie Nunan Byrne, then a widow, married Elmer Jackson, the town's butcher. They continued to live in the Byrne house until Jackson built a new home for Katie.

The family of Earl Wade, with five children, moved from the country into the old Byrne house, a great place for a schoolage family.

Pat Wade Dann remembered well the five-bedroom house with the platform on the stairs "we kids used for a stage and put on plays." Mrs. Wade was famous for her doughnuts, and the community knew it. When later the Catholic Church bought the house and used it for a church and parsonage.

Hill Barrington attended, and his first words were "I can still smell the doughnuts."

Kathryn Johnson, a former Ziegfeld Follies dancer, came to Oak Harbor and bought the Byrne House to use the former chapel for a dance studio.

Many were the pas de deux of little feet that echoed through the big house and an addition built specially for ballet.

In 1981 the Johnsons, Tobie and Bob, bought the property restored the old house to its former glory. "We left a couple of doors unfinished, so that folks can see the original wood installed over 100 years ago," says Tobie. The house is now for sale.



The Byrne "Cottage" as it looked shortly after it was built in 1894. The house became a gathering place for the Irish of the town . . . which at that time was most everybody. It still sits on the hill overlooking the bay and Oak Park. The rest of the Byrne complex burned on a hot summer day in 1921. Byrne, entrepreneur, died soon after. L.P., Katie and daughter Pauline are in the cart.

Dorothy Neil's books make great gifts!

Copies of local historian Dorothy Neil's uniquely Island books make great gifts for family and friends. The latest are "The Irish Book" (the Irish were here first) and the Summer edition of "Savoring the Seasons on Puget Sound," a "Cookbook for Readers." Her picture book, "De Ja Views, Historical Pictorial of Whidbey Island," which contains hundreds of old photos dating from the 1860s to 1980, is a companion piece to "By Canoe And Sailing Ship They Came," a comprehensive history of the area. "Canoe" is only \$25 including tax and mailing, or \$21.95 if not mailed.

Besides the above, Dorothy's other books, including three other "recipes and reminiscences" volumes of "Savoring the Seasons on Puget's Sound," Spring, Autumn & Winter editions; "The Daisy Woods & Other Island Verse," and the "Dutch Book, A Celebration of 100 years of Dutch on Whidbey Island," are also available.

"Daisy Woods" (\$10), the four recipe books, Summer, Autumn, Winter & Spring (\$10.95 each), and "Canoe" (\$21.95) may be purchased by mail from Spindrift Publishing Co., P.O. Box 1308, Oak Harbor, WA 98277, or call 360-675-3801 for information. "De Ja Views" (\$20), "The Dutch Book" (\$10) and "The Irish Book" are available from Island Images, Inc., 651 SE Bayshore Dr. C102, Oak Harbor, WA 98277, 360-675-2844. All of Dorothy Neil's wonderful books are on sale at local stores.