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History of Bainbridge Island

When Charles II was restored to the English throne in 1792, Captain George Vancouver was anchored in Blakely Harbor on Bainbridge Island repairing his ships, Discovery and Chatham. The Suquamish, led by Chief Kitsap, were at their nearby summer camp, later named Restoration Point by Captain Vancouver. This is the first recorded meeting between Europeans and the Suquamish Indians. In 1855, as part of the Treaty of Point Elliott signed by Chief Sealth (Seattle), the Suquamish ceded their claims to Bainbridge Island.

In 1841, Captain Charles Wilkes (photo courtesy of Historylink.org) visited the island while surveying the Northwest with the US Exploring Expedition. Captain Wilkes named the island after Commodore William Bainbridge, commander of the frigate Constitution in the War of 1812. Captain Wilkes named Port Madison in honor of the US President, Port Blakely after another naval hero, and Agate Passage for an expedition artist. He also named Bill Point, Wing Point and Eagle Harbor, the latter after a Lieutenant.



An area slightly larger than the present State became the Territory of Washington on March 2, 1853. At the urging of local sawmill owners, the Territorial Legislature in 1857 created a new county, Slaughter County, from parts of King and Jefferson Counties. Following strenuous objection to the name chosen by the Legislature, the 397 residents were granted the right to choose their own name by popular vote. The county officially became Kitsap County, to honor the Suquamish chief who greeted Captain Vancouver.

The first county seat was at Port Madison on Bainbridge Island. Business was conducted from the office of Commissioner George Meigs, owner of the Port Madison sawmill. Far from today's quiet residential community, Port Madison was a bustling place in the mid-19th century. A New England geography textbook published in 1850 described Seattle as a "flourishing milltown across Puget Sound from Port Madison."



By the late 1800's, Port Blakely boasted the world's largest sawmill. Mill workers came from many nations. Japanese and Hawaiian communities and an Indian village were located near the harbor. Many Filipinos immigrated to Bainbridge Island during the 1920's; others came as shipyard workers during World War II.

The Hall Brothers Shipyard (photo courtesy of Museum of History & Industry), which moved in 1902 from Port Blakely to Eagle Harbor, was world famous for four and five-masted "West Coast Schooners" ideal for carrying lumber. The town of Madrone was renamed Winslow in honor of Winslow Hall, and incorporated as a city in 1947. In 1898, the federal

government built Fort Ward to protect the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard and the Manchester oil depot. Fort Ward became a state park in 1960.

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In March, 1942, fifteen Army trucks evacuated the 220 Japanese-Americans living on Bainbridge Island. The first group in the country to be interned during World War II, they were sent to Manzanar on the edge of the Mojave Desert in California, and then to Minidoka in Idaho. Many islanders were appalled at this treatment of their friends and neighbors. They supported the Japanese-Americans and welcomed them home at the end of the war. Since then, Japanese-Americans continue to be an integral part of the island business, civic and cultural community.

With few roads, most early island travel was by water. Steamers of the "Mosquito Fleet" (photo



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courtesy of Submerged Cultural Resources Exploration Team) carried passengers and freight between island landings and Seattle and Kitsap destinations; completion of State Highway 305 and the Agate Passage bridge in 1950 gave Bainbridge Island its first land link with the rest of Kitsap County. The advent of the Washington State Ferry System, providing service to Seattle, began the transition of the

island from its early isolation to a Seattle-oriented community.

As island population grew, and the transition from summer cabins and ruggedly individualistic year-round residents to the Seattle-oriented rural community continued, dissatisfaction with the County government simmered. Some islanders felt they were paying an undue portion of the County's taxes and receiving indifferent service from the county. Others were concerned that major decisions affecting the island were made with little input from islanders.

Beginning in 1963, movement toward all-island incorporation commenced steady growth. In 1969, a bid for incorporation of the area outside of Winslow failed at the polls. Another effort in the early 80's did not reach the polls, but in 1988, a citizen's Home Rule organization became active, culminating in a 1990 vote.

The original effort to incorporate separately from Winslow was revised when the City of Winslow reversed its position and favored annexation of the remainder of the island into the City of Winslow. By a very small margin, (a vote so close that recount was needed) islanders voted in favor of annexation. In 1991, residents voted to change the city's name to the "City of Bainbridge Island".



Bainbridge Island was created during the last ice age as a massive glacier carved out Puget Sound during its advance, a heritage confirmed by the soil structure of glacial till with its underlying layer of hardpan. The island is approximately four miles wide and 12 miles long, with an irregular coastline and many small bays.

The highest point on the island, Toe Jam Hill, is 420-feet above sea level. Gazzam Lake (photo courtesy of Bainbridge Island Parks Department) in the Southwest part of the island is the largest

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body of water. There are also many springs and small streams. Most of the public and private water systems, however, rely on subterranean groundwater. Many feel that water availability will be a determining factor in island growth.

Although the climate is generally mild, several severe storms have impacted the island. Many remember the Columbus Day 1962 windstorm, which damaged trees and homes. The February 1979 storm sank half of the nearby Hood Canal Bridge (hatches in the flotation were left open), but left the Agate Passage Bridge intact (1950 photo courtesy of histroylink.org). On Thanksgiving Day, 1983, another violent storm left travelers stranded and holiday meals uncooked. In December, 1990, freezing snow and high Northerly winds toppled hundreds of giant trees, damaged many island homes, left roads impassable, and some parts of the island without power for nearly two weeks.



Prior to the arrival of the white man, a dense, mature cedar forest covered the island. By the early years of the 20th Century, almost all of the timber had been cut. Today, there is a great deal of second-growth timber. The few tracts of timber remaining in the ownership of commercial forestry companies are likely to be converted to other uses in the near future. In 1991, voters approved a bond issue to purchase 240-forested acres in the center of the island from the Department of Natural Resources.

The Bainbridge Island Park District is also the owner and custodian of several other natural areas which are used as parks. Near Agate Pass, the 150-acre Bloedel estate is now a nature preserve open to the public on a limited basis. Many large trees and areas of natural vegetation have been preserved in residential areas. The Bainbridge Island Land Trust and other groups are actively assisting in these preservation efforts.

Agriculture (photo courtesy of Seattle PI) has been an important part of life on Bainbridge Island. Dotted throughout the island are a number of small farms. For many years, Bainbridge was famous for its strawberries. These continue to be raised commercially, although in diminishing quantities. High quality wines are produced on Bainbridge Island from grapes and berries grown here. Salmon are raised commercially in large aquaculture operation in the Fort Ward area. A weekly Farmer's Market offers homegrown fruits, vegetables, flowers and craft items from local growers. The Bainbridge Island Grange and Rural Bainbridge Inc. are actively promoting preservation of island farmlands and activities.

The island's commercial center and greatest concentration of population is in downtown Bainbridge Island (formerly known as Winslow), the island's only town, which has a variety of shops, offices and several apartment complexes. The ferry terminal and the repair facility for the State Ferry System are also located here. Lynwood Center, Rolling Bay and Island Center also contain some retail shops. There is a large variety of cottage industry, home-based business and an expansive artist community throughout the island, and a light manufacturing area scattered about the Island



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The island is bisected by State Highway 305, which connects the Ferry Terminal and the Agate Passage Bridge, and is a major route from Seattle to the Kitsap and Olympic peninsulas. Increasing ferry traffic congestion, the possible expansion of Highway 305 and discussion of building new bridges generates a great deal of local controversy.

Because of the physical beauty and delicate ecological balances, Bainbridge Island has been the focus of much environmental concern. The Association of Bainbridge Communities (ABC) was formed in 1978 and was instrumental in bringing about the cleanup of industrial sediment from Eagle Harbor. This group continues to monitor environmental issues. In 1992, the City Council passed an Environmentally Sensitive Areas Ordinance, making a strong stand on aquifer recharge, development runoff, fish and wildlife habitats, and wetlands preservation.

Today, Bainbridge Island blends its close proximity to Seattle with a rural life-style. Only 35 minutes by ferry (photo courtesy of the Washington State DOT) from the heart of Seattle, islanders may easily enjoy its cultural and economic benefits. At the same time, Bainbridge has preserved the sense of space, the caring about each other, and the tranquility that is part of the rural atmosphere. The challenge for the future will be to maintain this unique blend in the face of growth.



tranquility. The wisdom and vision that islanders bring to the resolution of these problems will shape the future of the island for generations to come.

Currently, some of our most pressing concerns are preservation of open space and the environment, transportation, housing affordability, and maintaining our island

Source: History of Bainbridge Island by Ragnar Liljequist