

Lisabeula

By Karen Borell

For the Washington Water Trails Association: Cascadia Marine Trail.

Lisabeula is an important historical site on Vashon Island. Its history includes an early homestead, post office, stop for the Mosquito fleet, resort, and boatbuilding. In 1986 it became a park and in 1998 it became a Washington Water Trails site conveniently located on Colvos Passage.

The first known human residents of Vashon were the S'Homamish Indians, a precursor band of the Puyallup Tribe. The Suquamish Indians, who were friendly with the S'Homamish, fished and hunted in the north half of Colvos Passage. The first known Europeans to see Vashon Island were Capt. Vancouver and crew, who explored the area in 1792 and named the island after a British sea captain friend, Capt. James Vashon. Lt. Charles Wilkes, who surveyed the area in 1841, named the Passage for crewmember George Colvocoressis. Wilkes shortened the name to fit better on charts.

In the early 19th century, the west side of the island was densely covered with great banks of ferns and fir trees as tall as 300 feet. Logging began in the 1860's. Benjamin Gardner filed a preemption claim that allowed him to log, settle, and take title to the Lisabeula area, but he failed to establish residence and the claim failed. Thorkeld Hammersmark filed a homestead claim in 1883 for the site. The Hammersmarks anchored out a float as a stop for Mosquito Fleet boats, called Hammersmark Landing, and grew raspberries nearby.

A post office opened just up the hill in 1892 with John Brink as the first postmaster. There are two accounts as to how Lisabeula (pronounced "liza-byoola") got its unique name. In one account, Brink originally named the post office Hopville, which was rejected by the Post Office Department because there was another Hopville post office in Washington State. A post office official renamed it for two girls working in the office named Eliza and Beulah. In another, more likely account, a later postmaster, George A. Butt, named the post office after his two daughters, Elisa and Beulah, dropping the first and last letters.

In the 1890's, a Unitarian Church, a school, and a second church were established up the hill as more homesteaders moved to the area. Anton Baunsgard, his wife Emma, and his brother Maurice began developing the waterfront in 1902. Anton became the postmaster in 1904 and moved the post office down to the waterfront. They added two large houses with a general store on the first floor and the post office in the back of the second. King County added a dock in 1907.

Just south of Lisabeula, Nels G. Christensen homesteaded at the cove and creek now named for him. He had married the Baunsgards' sister Margaret and moved his family to the cove in 1908. He found in the cove an abandoned mill, cedar rail skid road, and a bunkhouse left over from logging days, which he later demolished. At first he was

commuting to Seattle for work and, like many Vashon residents then and now, realized the need for reliable transportation to and from the island. His response was to form the West Pass Transportation Company with partner John Holm. The company made its first trip to Seattle in 1910 with 8 passengers in the boat "Virginia Merrill", which they renamed "Virginia". So began the "Virginia" ship building and shipping business that lasted 27 years. The "Virginia II" was built in 1912 on the beach at Lisabeula by Morris Shain, who had married the Baunsgards' daughter and taken over Holm's interest in the company. The last boat in the series, the "Virginia V", is the only existing operational wood-hulled steamer of the Mosquito Fleet and is docked at the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) in Seattle. It was built in 1922 across Colvos Passage at Maplewood, and christened with water from Christensen's Creek. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Sites in 1973.

The Lisabeula beach was popular for picnics and in 1914 it hosted 2000 people for the annual strawberry festival. In the 1920's John Webber purchased the site to build a convention resort and added sixteen cottages along the waterfront. Expansion continued and in the 1920's and 1930's Lisabeula became a family fishing and vacation venue with a dance hall, general store, boardwalk, cabins, and boat works. Eventually the resort had twenty-one buildings in all, including a school, church, and feed store. There was also a dairy, blacksmith shop, vegetable and flower gardens, berry fields, and chickens. Vacationers would rent rowboats, play miniature golf, and do group calisthenics on the beach. Campfire Girls from Camp Sealth would arrive on day trips, paddling huge canoes and singing "Till We Meet Again" when they left. The Virginia boats would bring ice cream and music bands, and the dance hall became "the place to go". Trucks with noise makers would crisscross the island advertising the evenings' activities, which often included picnics, beach fires, and costume parties.

After the 1930's, the resort was never very successful. It limped along into the 1970's with a succession of owners. By the 1980's the resort buildings were dilapidated. The Vashon Park District acquired the site for a park in 1986 and demolished the buildings. Parking, picnic areas, and beach access were added and improved. During the same time, the site was designated by King County as a Historic Landmark of Local Significance.

The conditions of grant funding for the park district's land purchase required installation of a motor boat launch, but the feasibility study found two obstacles which sank that plan. First, the long, steep, winding road down to the park is not suitable for boat trailers and the lack of funds for the very expensive upgrade made the plan economically infeasible. Second, the beach was classified as a Class I wetland and the Shoreline Master Plan prohibited such development.

There is a great view of the sunset across Colvos Passage from the park. The estuary area at the south end of the park, Christensen Cove, is private property but observable from the park. The estuary is sensitive habitat and supports eelgrass. Birding is good and more than 40 species have been observed in Audubon bird counts.

In recent years the road to the park has been closed at night to discourage the noisy parties that disturbed nearby residents. This means boaters arriving by human-powered or wind-powered craft can camp there without expecting visitors in motor vehicles.

Sources and acknowledgements

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