

**Vashon: Race And Ethnic Diversity**  
**By Sequoia Gregorich, Co-Content Editor**  
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It is a question pondered by many: How can Vashon be so ethnically diverse, yet so racially homogeneous?

The first inhabitants on Vashon were the Sx̣wəBABš (Shone-MAH-mish), with an estimated population of 650. However, around 1720, George Vancouver “discovered” the island, and soon the ethnic and racial demographics changed drastically, as smallpox, malaria and various other foreign diseases spread rapidly among the native population, who unlike the Europeans were not immune.

In 1855, the Medicine Creek Treaty was signed, which effectively granted land around Puget Sound to the United States in exchange for the establishment of three Native American reservations, and generated arguments between white settlers and the tribes involved. The tribes, including the Sx̣wəBABš, were interned on nearby Fox Island.

According to Vashon historian Bruce Haulman in his book, “A Brief History of Vashon Island,” between 1865 and 1893, the first major Euro-American settlements here ended up “establishing Euro-American patterns of settlement, society, transportation, business, and with those changes, discrimination that has influenced the island ever since.”

As the white settlers claimed the land and began to industrialize, more workers became necessary.

By the 1890s, most of the native population was off the island — about 4-5 families remained. During this time period, the first Chinese and Japanese immigrants came to the island. The last Indians left, and the Chinese and Japanese immigrants fueled the economy by making up the majority of the logging and fishing workforce.

In 1885, anti-Chinese riots took place in Seattle and Maury Island, and the once-home of Vashon’s Chinese population was deserted.

Around the 1920s, several hundred Filipinos came to the island and joined the Japanese in logging and fishing camps and made up most of the workforce in the strawberry fields.

In the 1930s, the first African Americans joined the island population, but all 20 of them fell short of joining the small town community. There were no organized retaliation efforts to force out the newly settled African Americans. However, the exclusion of the new residents in community activities was common.

Still, the island was predominately white, with Civil War veterans making up a large percentage of the population.

Often overlooked in the history of Vashon's population are the Japanese. Leading up to WWII, the Japanese were often respected and integrated into society. However, in 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared all ethnic Japanese and Japanese-American "aliens" to be interned because they were a danger to the country. Then a second internment of Vashon citizens took place.

After 2 ½ years of internment, only one-fourth of Vashon's Japanese population returned.

From the 1940s to 1980s, Vashon's population grew steadily, on par with the rest of the U.S. And with the baby boomers came the hippie culture that has come to define Vashon Island today. Vashon began voting for more Democrats, who introduced more racially-tolerant policies, lessening racial tension.

The African Americans, Filipinos, Chinese and Japanese were soon more welcomed and accepted by the predominately white community. This, of course, came after the realization that they were necessary to maintain a sizable workforce.

According to Haulman, one of the things that Vashon was — and still is — very good at is keeping an "underground economy," in which people can be paid cash without being charged an income tax or Social Security.

Within the last 25 years, Vashon has seen exponential growth within the Hispanic population, with an estimated population close to 1,000. It is to be expected that the island, like the rest of the country, is home to some undocumented immigrants, the majority of which are Latino/a. These members of the community contribute a considerable amount to the economy but are hard to see in census data.

The many different parts of Vashon that used to be home to many different ethnicities are still reflected in the culture today.

Dockton housed many Austrians and Croatians; Colvos housed many Norwegians and Swedish; Maury Island used to be referred to as “Hong Kong” for its many Chinese residents; and there were the Filipinos, Latinos, Koreans and African Americans located in various other regions of the Island.

It is essential to remember the many different ethnicities within each racial category.

With regards to race, the island community has stayed largely homogeneous in race throughout the centuries due to a few factors.

First, the island itself acts in part as a gated community — not accessible by anything other than a ferry. This creates a society cut off from a large portion of the country, and did so especially in the times before television and radio. This effect also contributes to the creation of a largely middle and upper-class population consisting of mostly white Americans who can afford to live here.

A community that is predominantly white often seems like a discouraging place to live for a racial minority. This is often what leads to de facto segregation — not only on Vashon but also in areas all around the world.

“No one wants to be the first one,” Haulman said.

While ethnic diversity has developed gradually on Vashon over the past 300 years, it seems that the island’s racial demographics are — more or less — here to stay.