

From Canoes to Ferries, Boats are Essential to Island Life
By Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

David Guterson in his reflective essay, "The Citizens of Paradise," writes, "Islands are paradoxical places: They simultaneously liberate and confine. ... The moat of water that keeps others out also keeps islanders in; the moat of water that makes an islander feel secure also makes an islander feel imprisoned." Because of this paradox, boats are essential for all island dwellers. Whether they be the canoes of Vashon's Coast Salish S'Homamish, the Mosquito Fleet steamers of the Euro-Asian-American emigrants, the modern diesel-electric ferries or the myriad pleasure boats that dot the harbors and inlets of the island, boats are a fact of everyday life on the island.



"Indian Camp on the beach, Burton, Wash.," Abby Williams Hill, 1901

The first boats on the island were the canoes of the S'Homamish, the Coast Salish people who lived on Vashon-Maury Island. Artist Abby Williams Hill captured the look of these canoes with her drawing of S'Homamish canoes on the beach in a work drawn in 1901. The Salish concept of capsizing (sp'alac') described the change that replaced the ancient world, where humans and animals existed in interchangeable forms, with the natural world of the S'Homamish at Contact, when Europeans first encountered the Pacific Northwest coast. For a canoe culture, the concept of capsizing represents a fundamental loss of stability. In 1901, when these canoes were drawn, the world of the S'Homamish had capsized and been changed forever by a wave of American emigration westward and Asian immigration eastward.



Virginia V, Maiden Voyage, 1922, Puget Sound Maritime Museum Photograph

Once these new emigrants settled Vashon, they were dependent on the many steamers that made up the Mosquito Fleet. These steamers swarmed over Puget Sound and provided transportation before roads and automobiles changed the world once more. The 1922 photograph of the Virginia V on her maiden voyage is a good representative of these Mosquito Fleet steamers that served both sides of Vashon-Maury Island and Quartermaster Harbor.

Today most of the boats on Vashon are no longer boats that residents depend on for survival and transportation. There are, of course, important working boats, including the Washington State Ferries and the King County Water Taxi, as well as fishing boats that make the annual trek north to work Alaskan waters, but most of the boats on Vashon today are pleasure boats: boats that we use for sport fishing, crabbing, cruising, water skiing and just generally "messing about in," as Kenneth Graham's Water Rat noted in the classic "The Wind in the Willows."



Today most of the boats on Vashon are no longer boats that residents depend on for survival and transportation. Most of the boats on Vashon today are pleasure boats: boats that we use for sport fishing, crabbing, cruising or water skiing. Terry Donnelly Photograph

Terry Donnelly's photograph of boats at anchor in Quartermaster Harbor captures well the kinds of boats we see around the islands. These are pleasure boats — sloops, ketches, yawls, trawlers, speedboats, and dinghies — that all sit patiently waiting for us to bring them to life when we cast off and take them to sea.

When you compare the S'Homamish canoes, the Mosquito Fleet's Virginia V, the modern Washington State ferry and the pleasure boats in Donnelly's photograph, the difference is more than just the 100 plus years that separate them. The difference is that of worlds that collided, capsizing each one and replacing it with another.

— Terry Donnelly is a landscape photographer. Bruce Haulman is an island historian.