

Vashon-Maury Island Ferry Revolution

by Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

During the late 1980s and early 1990s a dramatic 31% increase in ferry auto capacity came to Vashon-Maury Island largely unannounced. At the time there was little recognition of the impact this “ferry revolution” would make and how irrevocably Vashon-Maury Island would change. These increases led to a gentrification of the Island brought about by urban professionals, retirees, and increased wealth. With the uncertainty of the commute largely eliminated, with the increase in technological commuting, and with the increased congestion of regional traffic as area infrastructure improvements lagged behind growth; it was now as easy to get to mainland jobs from Vashon as it was to get to them from Duvall, Issaquah, or Auburn. As the Seattle economy boomed in the 1980s and 1990s, and as Seattle housing cost soared, Vashon-Maury became a rural haven in a rapidly expanding urban sprawl that engulfed Vashon-like places such as Marysville, North Bend, and Covington.

The “kiss of death” for the old Vashon-Maury Island, in the eyes of those who preferred the Island not change, began in the mid-1980’s when the Washington State Ferry System made dramatic changes to the capacities of the Vashon ferry fleet and introduced a passenger only ferry run to downtown Seattle.



The *Quinault*



The *Klahanie Galley*



The *Klahowya*

Well into the 1970s the Vashon Heights Dock was served by two Steel Electric ferries, the 59-auto capacity *Quinault* and *Klahanie*, and by the 87-auto capacity Evergreen State Class *Klahowya*, for a total capacity of 205 autos and 2002 passengers. With the forced retirement of the Steel Electric ferries and the launching of the, initially troubled-plagued, Issaquah Class ferries, capacities began to change. By the mid-1980s the Vashon Heights Dock was served by two 87-auto capacity Evergreen State Class ferries, the *Klahowya* and *Tillicum*, and the 124-auto capacity *Issaquah*, for a total capacity of 298 autos and 3092 passengers. This 31% increase of 98 automobiles and 54% increase of 1090 passengers was expanded even more when in 1990 the 230-passenger-only ferry *Skagit* was added with a Vashon Heights-Downtown Seattle route bringing the total increase in passenger capacity to a whopping 66%.



The *Klahowya*



The *Tillicum*



The *Issaquah*



The *Skagit*

This ferry revolution, which took place in less than a decade, dramatically changed the North end commute to Vashon-Maury Island. At about the same time, between 1986 and 1993, at Tahlequah, on the South end of the Island, the 34-auto ferry *Hiyu* was replaced by the 55-auto ferry *Olympic*, and then the 48-auto ferry *Rhododendron* adding an additional capacity of 14 autos and 346 passengers. Expanding the impact of this increased ferry capacity at both ends of the Island was Metro's and Tacoma Transit's co-ordination of bus routes with the ferries. Buses from the Island rode ferries to Fauntleroy and multiple buses met arriving ferries at Fauntleroy; while at Point Defiance, buses linked ferry commuters to the new Transit Center at Tacoma Community College. Together this increased bus service worked with the increased capacities of the ferries to boost commuter ridership even further.



The *Hiyu*



The *Olympic*



The *Rhododendron*

The net effect of this mini-transportation revolution was to make Vashon much more accessible to commuters and led to a dramatic 26% population growth during the 1980s compared to the 13% population growth during the previous decade of the 1970's. As the Puget Sound Basin emerged from the economic recession of the 1970's, and, as transportation access increased dramatically, Vashon felt the impact as more and more people sought to live the rural-suburban lifestyle of the Island. Vashon-Maury Island became another "gated community" in a rapidly expanding upper middle class land rush in the Puget Sound region, with the ferry system providing the gates. Retirees and individuals with significant wealth (some times both together) "discovered" Vashon and began a gentrification of the Island that many see beginning to turn Vashon into a "Martha's Vineyard West."



The Fauntleroy Ferry Dock – Terry Donnelly

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