

Vashon College

By Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

With the arrival of the railroad in 1883 the Puget Sound region rapidly grew in population and began the move to what historian Carlos Schwantes termed the “post frontier world.” Vashon was part of this change as settlers developed towns, businesses, schools, clubs, organizations, and in 1892 built Vashon College on the hillside to the west of Burton.



Vashon College, 1901 – Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum

Miles Hatch, an early island entrepreneur and founder of Burton, spearheaded a group that formed Vashon College, hired A.C. Jones as its first president, and began constructing the campus on land donated by Hatch. The first building was Old Main, a four-story building with 46 rooms used as classrooms, offices, dining hall, and student residences. Old Main is seen on the left in the 1901 photograph. The three-story Commercial Building (in the center of the 1901 photograph) was added in 1894 with classrooms and residences for 90 young men, and then expanded in 1898. The Armory (to the right in the 1901 photograph) was added in 1901 and was the largest drill hall in the state at that time. The building to the far right of the photograph is the Burton Methodist Church. None of these building remain today.



Vashon College, 1898 – Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum

Vashon College was founded as a non-denominational Christian college for “young people of both sexes” who were of “good moral character”. The college advertised itself as “safely removed from the temptations and evil associations of large cities.” The early college catalogues proudly announced “There are no saloons, gambling houses, dance halls, or other place of evil influence within eight miles of Vashon College.” “Not a drop of liquor is for sale on the island.” And, that “The use of tobacco, intoxicants and private card playing are positively forbidden.”

The College was one of the first ten colleges founded in Washington State, and along with The University of Washington, The College of Puget Sound, Whitworth College, and Washington Agriculture College (WSU) formed The Western Washington Intercollegiate Athletic Association in 1893. Vashon College had men’s and women’s basketball teams, track and field teams, and in 1895 played football twice against the University of Washington, losing 44-4 on November 9th, and then again losing 34-0 on December 7th.



Vashon College “Old Main” 1893 – Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum

The founding faculty in 1892 included A.C. Jones, President; Mrs. Anna Farrow, Matron; Nora A. Gilmour, librarian; O.S. Van Olinda, stenography; L.P. Venen, languages and higher math; Mrs. A.C. Jones, elocution; D.E. Crandall, commercial; Cora Teatt, music; and W.H.P. Redinger, military tactics. The College formed a successful Cadet Corps which led to the construction of the Armory in 1901.

The costs to attend Vashon College was modest, even by 1890 standards, with tuition for a 15 week semester in 1896 costing \$22.50 (\$593.00 in 2010 dollars) and tuition, room, board, heating and lighting costing \$72.00 for 15 weeks (\$1,900.00 in 2010 dollars).



Vashon College, 1904 – Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum

In 1906 there was a dormitory fire in the Commercial Building that began the slow death of Vashon College. Decreased enrollments, competition from more easily accessed mainland colleges, and the opening of Burton High School which drew away Academy students all put financial pressure on the College. A crippling fire on November 19, 1910 destroyed Old Main and the College never recovered. The Commercial Building and Armory were used in 1911 as a school for Chinese students, but in 1912 the College closed. The buildings sat empty for the next 20 years, with several unsuccessful attempts to open them as a tuberculosis sanatorium, until the Commercial Building burned in 1930. The buildings were then leveled and the site remained empty until houses began to be built on the old site in the 1940s. Today, the only remaining building from that era is the manse for the Burton Methodist Church which sits just to the north of the corner of 106th Avenue SW and SW 238th Street.



Vashon College Armory Burns, 1930 – Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum

In 2006 Vashon College was reopened as a non-profit educational organization using the original 1892 charter. The new Vashon College offers non-credit classes including Vashon 101 and Island Studies.



2010 Photograph – Terry Donnelly

In the 2010 photograph, the Old Mock Hotel building at the corner where Vashon Highway turns west along Burton Beach, and the white gable of the Masonic Hall/Silverwood Gallery are the only remaining visible landmarks. The Burton Dock is gone, the Methodist Church is gone, and the College buildings are gone. The Burton Methodist Church sat above and to the left of the Hotel, and the Vashon College campus was on the hillside to the left of the Church now covered by trees and homes.