

Historical Overview

NATURAL HISTORY

Washington State’s saltwater shores have long served as the setting for unique and compelling chapters of our national story. Like all such stories, they begin with the landscape. The shores of western Washington are a complex intermingling of freshwater and saltwater, of land and sea—ranging from driftwood-strewn beaches to steep stone cliffs, from tidal marshes to forested mountainsides sloping directly into deep waters. The shores are bound by basalt and sedimentary marine deposits, outcroppings, and deep intrusions of ocean currents, carving and shaping the landscape.

The underlying geography of the area—including the places known to non-Natives as Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca, extending north throughout the Salish Sea—is glacial in origin. At least seven times in the past two million years, ice sheets from Canada stretched southward across coastal Washington. In the most recent of these ice ages 18,000 years ago, known as the Vashon Glaciation, glaciers extended through Canada across present-day Seattle, Tacoma, Olympia, and the entire Salish Sea. The thickness of these ice sheets was immense; as historian David B. Williams notes in his book *Homewaters* (2021), the glacier covering present-day Seattle reached approximately 3,000 feet—the height of five Space Needles.

As these glaciers advanced southward, they carved the landscape into coastal Washington’s signature rugged topography of craggy fjords, dramatic ridges



Image: Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve, Whidbey Island. Photo by Robert Steelquist.

and bluffs, scattered islands, and numerous bays, hills, and valleys. When temperatures warmed and the glaciers receded approximately 2,000 years later, large freshwater lakes were filled by the glacial melt, covering most of the lowlands between the Olympic and Cascade Mountains. At the same time, ocean water flowed in from the Strait of Juan de Fuca to fill Puget Sound. Today, thanks to this glacial activity, Puget Sound is the largest fjord system in the continental United States.

Glacial activity also contributed to the region's submarine topography. Puget Sound itself is a deeply gouged glacial trough, averaging 230 feet deep—more than 10 times the average depth of San Francisco Bay or Chesapeake Bay. The Sound is comprised of four deep basins: Hood Canal, west of the Kitsap Peninsula and east of the Olympia Peninsula; Whidbey Basin, between the east side of Whidbey Island and the mainland; South Sound, south of the Tacoma Narrows; and the Main Basin, which is further subdivided into Admiralty Inlet and the Central Basin. These basins are separated by shallower aquatic sills, submerged ridges or barriers that limit the flow of water. These sills can impede the circulation of water through the Salish Sea, reducing its ability to flush out pollution and restore healthy oxygen levels.

In addition to ice, volcanic fire has also shaped the region. The Pacific Ring of Fire spans the length of Washington's coastline in the form of the Cascadia Subduction Zone, located 70 to 100 miles offshore. In the Cascadia Subduction Zone, the oceanic Juan de Fuca lithospheric plate is being pressed toward and beneath the much larger mostly continental North American plate. Friction between these two plates causes earthquakes, tsunamis, and submarine landslides. In fact, the Cascadia Subduction Zone has produced 41 major earthquakes in the last 10,000 years. Even distant activity within the zone can have a sizable impact on Washington: the 1964 Alaskan earthquake, which took place east of Anchorage and measured 9.2 in magnitude, caused a tsunami that was nearly 15 feet high when it reached Washington's shores.

All of this glacial and volcanic activity over thousands of years has resulted in a vibrant Salish Sea ecosystem unlike any other in the country. More than 10,000 rivers and streams—most notably, the Skagit, Stillaguamish, Snohomish, and Nisqually—feed the Puget Sound estuary system. Combined with large quantities of deep water flowing in from the Pacific, these rivers drive a constant exchange of saltwater and freshwater that combines plankton from the ocean with nutrients and sediments from the mountains, resulting in a fantastically productive habitat for diverse plant and animal life.

One of the most iconic species living in this convergence of salt and freshwater is the salmon—important for its critical role in supporting and maintaining ecological health, its cultural significance to local Tribes, and its impacts on the history and economies of the region. The Salish Sea is home to five different salmon species, including Chinook (also known as “king

salmon”), Coho, Chum, Sockeye, and Pink salmon. Salmon support numerous aspects of the Salish Sea’s ecosystem and serve as a major food source for another of the region’s most famous animals: the orca or “killer whale” (particularly the Southern resident ecotype). The waters also support more than 200 species of fish; marine mammals including harbor seals, whales, and porpoises; and numerous types of seaweed, eelgrass, and kelp. Above sea level, the landscape was historically dominated by native coniferous trees: Douglas fir, western red cedar, Sitka spruce, and western hemlock, which could grow to heights of more than 300 hundred feet.

Inextricably linked to the ecosystem and its life forms is, naturally, the climate. The climate of the Puget Sound ecosystem is characterized by winds which typically blow west to east, inland from the Pacific Ocean, bringing mild, moist air to the region throughout much of the year. At the same time, the area’s mountain ranges often serve to block the passage of colder air from the interior of the U.S. The result is a general pattern of wet, mild winters and dry, cool summers. Western Washington has a reputation for rain, but rainfall can vary widely across the region. Some areas, such as the northeastern tip of the Olympic Peninsula and the San Juan Island archipelago, can remain relatively dry due to their location in the rainshadow of the Olympic Mountains. By contrast, the western slopes of the Olympic and Cascade Mountains can receive huge amounts of precipitation during the winter. The Hoh Rain Forest, one of the finest remaining examples of temperate rainforest in the country, located on the western side of Olympic National Park, receives an average of 140 inches of rain each year.

NATIVE AMERICAN ORIGINS

Native memory has explored these complex relationships between land and water since time immemorial. In many of the first peoples’ oldest stories, Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca were carved out and connected to the Pacific by the travels of the Transformer (also known as the Creator or the Changer), who shaped the land and the waters. The Transformer then created animals and people, allowing them to shift shape, communicate, and share responsibilities among their villages. Eventually, the Transformer changed all animals and people into the forms they have today. The relationship between human and non-human beings—and between humans and the marine landscape—remained central to the complex and successful Native cultures that developed throughout the region.

One of the heritage area’s most significant archaeological sites, the Manis Mastodon site, revealed fossils of a mastodon buried along the coast of the Strait of Juan de Fuca more than 12,000 years ago. Although inconclusive, potential evidence of a spear tip found in one of the mastodon’s ribs suggests that people and animals were inhabiting the region just as the glacial ice was first retreating northward.

For thousands of years, Native people have flourished along Washington’s coastline, developing technologies, cultures, and lifeways that are deeply rooted in and shaped by this unique place. The first peoples of Puget Sound and extending to the mid-Pacific coast are primarily affiliated with the Coast Salish cultural and linguistic group, which also ranges north along both sides of the Georgia Strait into British Columbia.

A variety of Coast Salish (Salishan) languages are found within the area, including Northern and Southern Lushootseed, Twana, Klallam, Quinault, Lower and Upper Chehalis, Straits Salish, and Nooksack. Along the Pacific Coast, the Makah people and language are more closely affiliated with first peoples on the southwest tip of Vancouver Island, British Columbia than the Coast Salish. The Chimakum language group is also prevalent around the Olympic Peninsula, and the Quileute along the Pacific Coast speak their own dialect of the Chimakum language.

The oldest known name for the Puget Sound area is a Lushootseed word, *xʷáɫč*, sometimes written in English as “whulge.” Often defined as “a stretch of saltwater,” *xʷáɫč* was used to delineate a relationship to place for the area’s Coast Salish people. It defined not only the area but the Coast Salish deep and respectful connections with the sacred landscape.

The ocean, sea, and waterways provided an abundance of food and resources, and Native cultures developed practices and technologies to both care for and live from these rich stores. Salmon weir and net systems, halibut hooks, and even the strategies and technologies to hunt the large baleen whales off the coast were first invented and then refined through generations of attention and improvement. Fish, shellfish, seaweed, marine mammals, and octopus were diet staples. Salmon in particular occupied (and continue to occupy) a



Image: Swinomish canoe pulls water quality sondes for U.S.G.S. to measure Salish Sea water quality during Canoe Journey, 2008. Courtesy of Swinomish Tribal Archive.

central location in the Salish diet, culture, and worldview. Tribal communities also created clam gardens to provide a reliable source of shellfish. Shells, furs, baleen, bones, fish skin, and any other usable parts were incorporated into tools, clothing, and art. The inland forests of western red cedar, Sitka spruce, Douglas fir, hemlock, and other plant and animal products that provided the raw materials for canoes and other maritime technologies, from open-sea harpoons to river salmon weirs. Tribes managed this terrestrial landscape, burning prairies to keep them clear for deer hunting and cultivating camas bulbs to supplement the area's rich marine resources.

Before contact with seafaring Europeans and later Euro-American trade and political relationships, Native social organization in the Pacific Northwest was largely oriented around kinship and language communities. Individuals connected to many different villages throughout the Salish Sea by family relation, marriage, canoe travel, trade, and diplomacy. While individual families might retain the right to fish and harvest shellfish or gather seasonal plants such as camas and tiger lily from a specific location, they did not claim exclusive use or ownership of that area. Coast Salish relationships with the land and water were and are centered around stewardship and maintaining productivity, rather than individual ownership.

The abundant salmon runs and other food sources allowed the development of permanent villages and camp sites. Most coastal peoples lived in villages at the edge of the water, and winter structures were mostly plank houses built of cedar. In the spring, summer, and fall, salmon returned to the rivers, berries ripened, upland animals were available for hunting, camas bulbs matured, and travel was easier. During this time, first peoples traveled widely to maintain trade and social relationships, as well as to manage their plentiful harvest. Native people set up traditional summer camps throughout the region, with structures often made of tule mats overlaid on wood frames. They returned to the same seasonal villages and camp sites for many years to gather, hunt, smoke and dry, and steward next year's harvest. In winter, when rain made it uncomfortable to spend time outside and winter storms made canoe travel more difficult, most Native cultures in the region spent time in winter villages with longhouses, indoors, warm, and dry. Winter was the time of story and dance, of culture and art, as Native people practiced spiritual ceremonies, maintaining and renewing the traditions of their community.

In a rugged land where overland travel was frequently difficult, canoe travel offered the most accessible transportation, with large waterways like the Strait of Juan de Fuca serving as major highways and inland streams and rivers acting as smaller side roads into the wooded and mountainous interior. These waterways served as the main source of familial, economic, and cultural connection for many of the area's first inhabitants. Native people masterfully developed technologies and practices for travel on the region's saltwater, with canoes of various shapes and sizes adapted for inland waters and rough open

ocean, short trips and long. Canoe paddles were shaped to slice the water silently and release water smoothly. Sails were often utilized to ease travel across the open water, first made of cedar mats and then of canvas.

Life before the arrival of Europeans was neither simple nor static for the people of Washington’s shorelines. Change and conflict occurred as different cultural groups expanded their territories and others were displaced. This region was contested ground: inter-Tribal warfare extended well beyond the shorelines of present-day Washington, and coastal Tribes from as far north as present-day Alaska often raided Coast Salish villages and communities. Tools and practices changed frequently as Native societies developed better technologies to adapt to the unique opportunities and resources of the coast. Many of these innovations—including canoe carving methods, fishing techniques, and aquaculture strategies—can be seen in Washington’s maritime landscape today, utilized by both Tribal and non-Tribal communities.

EURO-AMERICAN EXPLORATION

Contact with European and American explorers, traders, and claims of land ownership permanently changed the character and development of Native American cultures.

Although earlier seafarers or drifters may have landed on the shores of what is now Washington State, the first evidence of continuous relationships with non-Native peoples came with the arrival of Europeans. Over several centuries, European explorers, eager to locate new territorial and trade possibilities, began with a few periodic visits to the Northwest coast and then established the permanent forts, posts, and towns that would become the foundation for Euro-American settlement of the region.

The first sighting of the region’s Pacific Coast



Image: the Lady Washington, a reproduction of an 18th-century Euro-American tall ship owned and operated by the Grays Harbor Historical Seaport.

by a European was likely on Sir Francis Drake's voyage of 1577 to 1580. Other British and Spanish ships also made voyages along the coast before 1600. One such voyage was a Spanish expedition in search of the fabled Northwest Passage, the much-hoped-for water route connecting the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans across North America. Greek pilot Apostolos Valeriano—better known as Juan de Fuca—told of a voyage north from Acapulco in 1592 during which his group of mariners found a broad inlet of sea extending east from the Pacific Ocean at a latitude between 47 and 48 degrees. Although his account has been contested since nearly its inception, the inlet that Juan de Fuca called the Strait of Anian became well known, enticing centuries of explorers to the Northwest. Later European and American voyagers renamed this waterway, connecting the Pacific and the inland sea, in his honor. This new title did not take into account the words that Native peoples had used to identify this waterway for thousands of years, such as ha-c̓ʔiq tup̓aʔ (“the long salt water”), a name used by the Makah Tribe.

European mariners turned away from the region for more than 150 years, until Spain, England, Russia, and then the newly independent United States began active competition for the far Northwest and its trade resources—primarily sea otter, beaver, and seal fur—in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Although earlier expeditions may have made landfall in the region, the first well-documented European visit to what became Washington State was by Spanish ships near the end of the 18th century. Concerned by Russian exploration of what is now Alaska and northern Canada, a Spanish ship captained by Juan Perez traveled up the Northwest coast in 1774, making contact with the Quinault Tribe and continuing as far north as Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island.

The British also returned to the region around the same time, with Captain James Cook mapping much of the coast from California to the Bering Strait in 1778. His expedition became responsible for the establishment of the fur trade between the region and China, after Cook and his crew brought sea otter furs to Canton (now Guangzhou) and found them to be highly profitable goods. This discovery coincided with the end of the American Revolution, which had left great numbers of discharged British and American naval veterans looking for work. A competitive rush began from both nations, and the fur trade with China ultimately brought many British and American merchant ships to what became Washington's coastline, accelerating exploration and enhancing competing territorial interests.

These European ships also brought with them diseases like smallpox, measles, and influenza, to devastating effect on the Native people of the area. Evidence indicates that the first outbreak of disease amongst Native Americans in the region was likely as early as the 1770s and that different pandemics swept through communities for almost a century. Later episodes of illness are documented by early non-Native settlers and travelers, like George Vancouver,

and later, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who describe entire villages wiped out and abandoned. Estimates of mortality differ widely, but some scholars place the overall death toll as high as 90% of the region's Native American population.

Through the 1790s, both Spain and England continued their exploration of the region, including the British Captain George Vancouver's extensive voyage through Puget Sound. Vancouver is responsible for many of the area's modern geographical names, following the Royal Navy tradition of naming sites in honor of a colleague or patron as a signal of ownership. For example, Vancouver chose the name "Puget Sound" in a nod to his lieutenant Peter Puget. There is no evidence that Vancouver asked or cared what local people called these waterways, such as the Lushootseed *xʷálč* ("whulge").

This renaming of water and landscape staked a claim of colonial ownership. It also represented a different worldview and relationship to place. While Native names like *xʷálč* generally describe the physical place and waters, European and American titles—like Puget Sound or Strait of Juan de Fuca—are often named after individuals, prioritizing ownership rather than the physical place itself. This layering of names throughout the region provides fascinating opportunities to explore the long tale of imperialism, colonialism, and Native resilience in Washington State.

SETTLEMENT, DISPLACEMENT, AND DEVELOPMENT

While Spanish and English military and commercial representatives explored the region, creating outposts such as Fort Núñez Gaona at Neah Bay, American capitalists and merchants took advantage of its lucrative trade opportunities, particularly around the fur trade with China and the Pacific Islands. By the early 1800s, the Hudson's Bay Company had expanded into the Pacific Northwest, and the Lewis and Clark expedition had made its way to the West Coast overland. As early as 1824, Hudson's Bay Company explorers traversed the Puget Sound region as they traveled north to explore the Fraser River and locate additional fort sites north of present-day Washington. Fort Nisqually, the first non-Native settlement on Puget Sound, was established by the Hudson's Bay Company as a trading post near present-day DuPont, Washington, in 1833. The Fort's Granary (now a National Historic Landmark) and Factor's House have been preserved and are today included in a reconstruction of the fort and living history museum in Point Defiance Park, Tacoma.

In addition to early communities such as Fort Nisqually, Tumwater, and Olympia that were settled by overland travel, many of the earliest newcomers to Washington's shores arrived by sailing ship. The Hudson's Bay Company brought employees from distant origins—ranging from eastern Canada to the Hawaiian Islands— and many put down roots here in the 1830s. Manuel

Lopes—the first Black man in Seattle whose identity is fully known—was an African from the Cape Verde Islands who arrived in Washington by whaling ship in the mid-1850s. From the late 1840s on, non-Native travelers continued to arrive in the Pacific Northwest and settle along the shorelines, taking advantage of the same conditions that made those sites so attractive for Native American villages and seasonal camps.

Throughout this period, ongoing pandemics continued to decimate Native communities in the region, destabilizing traditional social structures and disrupting Tribal systems of medicine and governance. The arrival of early European fur traders and the Hudson’s Bay Company also brought with them new goods—changing coastal Tribes’ material culture, economic systems, and labor patterns. The introduction of firearms throughout the region altered the balance of power and reduced the defense capabilities of Native peoples, while intermarriages with new cultures further changed Native social structures. The arrival of missionaries on Puget Sound in 1838 forever altered Native cultural, educational, and spiritual practices.

Early European and American settlers also brought with them a new model of ownership, one based on private claims to land, water, and resources as a source of status and power. While early traders like the Hudson’s Bay Company sought cooperation with Tribal entrepreneurs and middlemen in order to facilitate trade, American settlers emphasized homesteading and economic pursuits such as logging, which operated by taking traditional lands from Native Americans. Because they did not see evidence of traditional European agriculture, they did not view the Native American claims to the land and shoreline as rightful or legitimate, despite Tribes’ thousands of years of inhabitation and stewardship. Likewise, the newcomers imposed the model of governance with which they were familiar, refusing to recognize any other, and perceived treaty-making as a means of attempted conquest.

Treaties played a critical role in solidifying American governance of the area that became Washington Territory and would become Washington State. A series of agreements in the early 1800s ceded Spain’s claims to the region and established joint British and American occupation of the territory between California and the northern tip of Vancouver Island. After much geopolitical maneuvering and heated debate, England ceded its claims to the territory south of the 49th parallel to the United States in 1846, and Washington Territory was created in 1853.

Not until the 1850s would treaties be signed with the region’s Native American Tribes. Hurried negotiations, led by Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens, permanently reshaped the relationships of coastal Tribes to the land and sea. With a series of treaties, Tribes ceded their traditional lands to the United States, amidst large imbalances in power and poor translation of the treaties themselves during the treaty councils. In exchange, the Tribes received parcels

of land as reservations on which to live, as well as promises of medicine, money, and education. Significantly, in these treaties, Tribes also reserved their right to fish, gather, collect shellfish, and hunt at their “usual and accustomed grounds and stations.”

Although they were intended as short-term solutions to the “Indian Problem,” these treaties ultimately designated significant portions of western Washington for permanent tribal sovereignty

and continue to grant access to critical cultural and natural marine resources, such as shellfish, salmon, and, in the case of the Makah Tribe, whales. These treaties set the stage for continued conflict through the 1800s and then for ongoing Native resistance and resilience. Today, these treaties continue to govern the legal obligations of the United States government with respect to Tribes and remain active, living, and important federal documents in which Tribes reserve their rights and relationships with land and water. Continued conflicts and legal disputes—such as the influential “Boldt Decision” of 1974 (discussed in more depth [on page 99](#))—as well as increasing negative effects on treaty-protected resources caused by industrialization, climate change, extraction, and overuse ensure that the treaties of the 1850s remain a key area to defend Native rights into the present day and beyond.

With Tribal treaties signed—and ownership of the San Juan Islands settled in 1872 after the nearly bloodless Pig War between the United States and Britain—the general outlines of federal control had been resolved from the American point of view. In 1889, Washington became the 42nd state of the United States of America.

These new borders had profound effects on the peoples who had lived on both sides of this line since time immemorial. Since long before the arrival of Europeans, Americans, and state governments, Native American kinship networks and relationships spread throughout the Salish Sea, knit together by common waters, marriage and kinship, fishing, ceremonial activities, festivals, language, and custom. The new U.S.-British (later Canadian) border cut that world in half. Despite forced changes to traditional canoe routes, trade patterns, family associations, and identities, Tribes and First Nations on both sides continue to this day to advocate for the right to travel across the border, protect treaty rights that transcend a man-made line on paper, and participate in cross-border activities.

U.S.-Tribal Treaties of the 1850s

- Treaty of Medicine Creek, 1854
- Treaty of Neah Bay, 1855
- Treaty of Point Elliott, 1855
- Treaty of Point No Point, 1855
- Treaty of Olympia (sometimes referred to as “the Quinault Treaty”), 1856

Cross-border relationships remained important for the new American settlers as well, and early trade established the region as an exporting area—both for international and domestic destinations. The first non-Native settlements along Washington’s shorelines were generally founded to harvest, process, and export the region’s natural resources. A strong economic base was initially built on timber products shipped by sea and marine products including barrel-packed salmon, canned fish, clams, and even live oysters—with more than a million pounds of Olympia oysters shipped annually to San Francisco between 1850 and 1879. The primary export industries also began to support secondary local producers of the goods and services necessary to maintain growing communities. Throughout this growth in industry, newcomers and Native peoples continued to build a new common ground. Tribes entered a new wage-labor economy that supplanted their traditional means of support from water and land, providing traders and explorers with critical guidance and technical training. Native workers also supported trade and transportation for the Hudson’s Bay Company and other exporters, as well as for newly arrived pioneer settlers.

With the growth of shipping traffic, navigation and lifesaving also became increasingly important. The Pacific Coast of the Olympic Peninsula is part of a stretch of coastline extending north to the far tip of Vancouver Island and south to Tillamook Bay in Oregon that is often called the “Graveyard of the Pacific.” Hundreds of vessels were lost here over the years, especially near



Image: Burrow Island Lighthouse, Skagit County.

particularly dangerous sites like Grays Harbor and the entry to the Strait of Juan de Fuca at Cape Flattery.

Those on land have worked to ease these treacherous voyages with various methods and technologies. The Cape Flattery Lighthouse was one of the earliest lighthouses in the region and is also illustrative of the effects of the 1850s U.S.-Tribal treaties. Makah representatives, during the treaty negotiations in 1855, described the importance of Tatoosh Island and understood that it would be retained as a part of the Makah Indian Reservation. The Territorial Governor, however, included it as land that was to be ceded to the U.S., and a lighthouse was built on the island in 1857. The Makah people continued to utilize the Island for traditional purposes, and over a century later, in 1984, an act of Congress returned Tatoosh Island to the Makah Indian Tribe. From the 1850s onward, the region was studded with more lighthouses, and the Pacific Coast became home to several lifesaving stations dedicated to assisting vessels in need.

Throughout the region, communities new and old lined the shoreline and were dependent on water access. The uniquely protected shores of Puget Sound, the great fjord system of the Pacific Northwest, offered quiet waters and safety from storms alongside access to the great seaways. Settlement focused primarily on Puget Sound and, to a lesser extent, on the shorelines of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. The more exposed shores of the Pacific Coast remain sparsely settled even today, with the largest communities on Grays Harbor. While the first pioneer settlements on Puget Sound relied on overland connections to Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River, the next wave of settlement was by boat. Often coming north from San Francisco and Portland, or south from British Columbia, new arrivals traveled by schooner or steamer to Port Townsend, where they passed the U.S. Port of Entry and continued on to Seattle or Olympia docks. Then travelers frequently hired Native American guides and canoes to find likely places for homesites or townsites.

A few of the early townsites focused on agricultural development, but most were founded to harvest and export the region's timber or marine resources. Mill towns were established at nearly every deep inlet in Puget Sound and along the Strait. The developing California cities and the mines of the 1849 California Gold Rush had a voracious appetite for timber, and the unique coastal geography of the Sound and Strait made Washington's shoreline the easiest place for harvesting and shipping. Demand for timber and lumber was followed by coal and later iron, shipped to Washington ports from further inland areas. Washington was an exporter of raw materials—making an efficient shipping industry the central component of settlement and development. The town of Steilacoom, founded on an economy of timber export bound for California, became the first incorporated city or town in Washington Territory in 1854, and demand from Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles continued to drive the development of Washington's

communities in the latter half of the 19th century.

These industries attracted immigrants from around the world—ranging from Scandinavia to Hawaii, China to Austria, Italy to the Philippines, and beyond. Beginning in the early 1800s, Pacific Islanders, including Native Hawaiians, were often recruited by trading companies to work as sailors, fishermen, and laborers. In the second half of the 19th century, thousands of immigrants moved to what would become Washington State to work in lumber mills, canneries, fishing boats, and railroad construction. Scandinavian immigrants were often attracted by an environment similar to their homelands, bringing with them skills as farmers, fishermen, seamen, and loggers. Many Chinese immigrants were recruited to work on railroad construction or in canneries alongside others from throughout Asia and the Pacific Islands. Later, particularly after the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924 severely curtailed Chinese and Japanese immigration, many Filipinos (exempted from the Exclusion Act due to the Philippines’ status as a U.S. Territory) immigrated to work jobs on railroads, canneries, or farms or to study as “pensionados” (scholars).

These waves of immigration came largely by water, with many passing through Port Townsend, a long-time customs station at the entrance to Puget Sound. Docks throughout the region—from Seattle to the San Juan Islands—were ports of embarkation for these new settlers. Some immigrants came as seasonal, short-term workers, but many settled in the region permanently, often along the coastlines. As male workers became secure in their jobs, many brought wives to join them. These immigrants often formed their own towns or ethnic enclaves, such as the Hawaiian village of “Dagotown” on Bainbridge Island or Seattle’s Nihonmachi (Japantown), Chinatown, and Scandinavian settlements in the Ballard neighborhood.

These immigrants were critical to the development of the region and played important parts in their local communities, but many—particularly Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants—faced deep discrimination, including special taxes, prohibitions against owning land, and exclusionary immigration acts. In the 1880s, violent mobs expelled Chinese residents from Tacoma and Seattle. Later, in the 1940s, the Nikkei (people of Japanese descent) of Bainbridge Island were the first in the nation to be forcibly removed from their homes and incarcerated during World War II. Nonetheless, these communities continued to grow, contributing greatly to the development of the region’s culture, labor force, and infrastructure.

In the late 1890s, the Klondike Gold Rush in Alaska and the Yukon Territory further spurred development of Washington’s coastal towns, as “stampeder” passed through the Pacific Northwest in their rush to Skagway, Dyea, and the lure of the goldfields. For the still-young cities along Washington’s shores, and for Seattle in particular, the 1897–1898 gold rush marked an important transition from a community mostly reliant on exporting logs

and lumber to a true city. Seattle provided centralized goods and services for both the stamperders and, increasingly, the entire region. From 1897 to 1907, about 70,000 would-be miners and other adventurers were outfitted and bought steam or sailing ship tickets in Seattle alone. Soon, population and development in the Seattle area began to boom, with many buildings, neighborhoods, and maritime structures from this period standing until the present day.

Even before Washington was added as a territory, American settlers had looked to a transcontinental rail connection to establish the region as a critical nexus between land and water shipping routes. Washington's first governor, Isaac Stevens, arrived in Washington Territory in 1853 as head of the Northern Railroad Survey for the Secretary of War, surveying routes across the Cascade Mountains to potential ports on Puget Sound. After decades of petitions, proposals, and political jockeying, transcontinental railroads arrived in the region at Tacoma in 1883 and, later, Seattle. Their arrival brought scores of new travelers to the shores of Puget Sound and shifted the role of the region's port facilities from export of local resources to transfer points for the global distribution of trade goods. European exports traveled by ship to East Coast harbors and joined products from the Northeast and Midwest of the United States on trains to a Pacific Northwest port, then by ship to Asia. Asian goods refilled cargo holds for the reverse journey. As this nexus of overland transportation and ocean shipping routes grew, economies of scale supported the development of larger port and mill towns, and many smaller mills closed their doors. Seattle, Tacoma, Everett, Bellingham, Port Angeles, Aberdeen, and Hoquiam developed into busy port cities.

The protected waters of Puget Sound remained critical for local transportation, even as road and rail connections continued to improve in western Washington. From the 1850s to the 1950s, thousands of coastwise steamers swarmed among Puget Sound communities carrying everything that local residents needed and providing much-needed transport to the larger cities around the Sound. This privately-operated "mosquito fleet" covered Puget Sound with hundreds of stops all along the shoreline. For many places, mosquito fleet boats like the Carlisle II (now operating between Bremerton and Port Orchard) and National Historic Landmark Virginia V (now operating out of Seattle) were the only reliable connection to supplies and markets. Passengers often shared the journey with livestock, mail bags, produce, and building materials. The mosquito fleet was largely privately owned and eventually consolidated under a few major lines including the still-extant "Black Ball Line" (Puget Sound Navigation Company). In the 1950s, Washington State purchased most of these routes, ferries, and terminals, creating a public ferry system that is now the largest in the U.S.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the fishing industry also grew and changed. Communities throughout the region were home to small fishing

fleets that worked Puget Sound and the Pacific Ocean. Many immigrants brought with them longstanding fishing traditions and lifestyles from their homelands. Croatian settlers, for example, used their traditional purse seining methods to catch salmon, cod, red snapper, and other fish, settling in areas like Gig Harbor, Anacortes, and Bellingham. Itinerant Scandinavian immigrants were also attracted to the region, moving their small fishing shacks from the Seattle waterfront to the Skagit delta, where they gill-netted the region's legendary salmon runs.

As the relationships between the region and Alaska strengthened and the fishing industry grew in commercial importance, Washington's ports and harbors became home bases for the Alaskan fishing fleet. The annual rhythm of boats leaving for the Alaska season, then returning for rest and repair, became an important part of the regional lifestyle for coastal communities and remains so to the present day. Seafood processing and canning also grew as key industries, with canned salmon and sardines feeding consumers around the world. Native people, who had dried fish for millennia, were some of the first workers hired for new canneries; however, immigrant workers soon made up the vast majority of the labor force. While some were from Europe, most cannery work in the Northwest was done by Asian immigrants—first Chinese, then Japanese, and, increasingly after the 1920s, Filipinos, driving waves of immigration to the area. In the present day, many Hispanic laborers also work in coastal processing plants.

Naval development and shoreline defense also played an important role in the region's maritime heritage and development. The U.S. Navy had long been interested in the strategic importance of Puget Sound. As early as 1841, U.S. Navy ships of the United States Exploring Expedition (led by Charles Wilkes) conducted a survey of western Washington's marine waters. In addition to charting the region, the crew documented the number of Tribal members and their favorability towards American interests, partially to prepare for potential conflict between the U.S. and Britain over land claims. Later, the old Pacific Squadron participated in the Treaty War of 1855–1856. Beginning in 1871, the War Department began making extensive reservations of shoreline to “inaugurate a complete and extensive system of fortifications for Puget Sound.” Coastal observation stations and fortifications were developed throughout the region to protect Puget Sound from attack by water. American coastal fortifications such as Forts Casey, Flagler, Ward, Ebey, and Worden, followed closely the strategic lookout and defensive locations originally identified and used by the Native American inhabitants of the areas. Many of these facilities remain as historic places managed and interpreted as Washington State Parks. Today, the military maintains a strong presence in the region, with major bases in Everett, on Whidbey Island, near Tacoma, and throughout the Kitsap Peninsula in Bangor, Bremerton, Jackson Park, Keyport, and Manchester.



Image: Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, Bremerton.

The need for a naval repair facility in the Northwest also led to the founding of the town of Bremerton and the development of the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in 1891. The Puget Sound Naval Shipyard has continued to serve the American fleet for more than 100 years, repairing five of the six surviving battleships from Pearl Harbor during World War II. Now recognized as a National Historic Landmark, the shipyard is an active, vital part of the military and Washington's local communities in the present day.

Settlers along Washington's coasts wove maritime activities into the daily life of community and commerce. Shipping and travel by boat, harvest from the sea and shoreline, and recreation on the water become integral parts of life. Local residents might take a mosquito fleet boat, Black Ball Line vessel, or public ferry to work at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, then go salmon fishing with friends and family on the weekend. Middle-class businessmen from Seattle might spend a month-long vacation with their families at one of the dozens of shoreline cabin resorts, whiling away the days fishing for their dinner. Tugboat captains, marine pilots, crane operators at local ports, Coast Guard and Naval officers, and myriad members of the maritime trades were and are part of each community.

CONTEMPORARY MARITIME CULTURE

For the more than four million people who live within 10 miles of the heritage area's shorelines today, maritime activities and culture are embedded, sometimes subconsciously, into the DNA of everyday life. Throughout the region, many inhabitants treasure a view of water from home or work, soaking in a tranquil seashore or bustling waterway. During a typical afternoon, the interconnected ports, docks, and waterfronts of the heritage area buzz with activity. Ferries crisscross to destinations north, south, east, and west—part of the largest and most-utilized ferry system in the United States. Freighters

dock at the gantry cranes of container piers or the tall towers of grain elevators, commercial fishing boats large and small ply the waters, and cruise ships head outbound to tour Alaska's Inside Passage. Large military vessels cruise the waters, tugs tow barges from near and far, and all through the bustling commercial and passenger traffic, sailboats follow the wind, weaving between the giants. Amidst it all, the same Tribes that have worked these waters since time immemorial continue to travel long-standing routes in traditional cedar canoes and modern vessels.

To the south, the ports of Puget Sound are busy with freight traffic. Small recreational boats out of marinas from Gig Harbor to Kingston explore or crisscross the Sound, searching for fish, challenge, or fun. Boats from the Alaskan fishing fleet, harbored in the protected waters of Seattle's Salmon Bay or other winter anchorage, may be heading north for a salmon or crab season opening. One of the U.S. Navy ships from the Everett Homeport, repaired at Bremerton's Naval Shipyards or part of Whidbey Naval Air Station, departs for a mission far from U.S. waters. In protected bays, shellfish farmers check their oysters, mussels, and clams for harvest, maintaining the tradition of commercial shellfish operations that helped build many seaside communities. Even today, Washington State remains the nation's largest producer of farmed shellfish. On Hood Canal, beachcombers may spot a Trident submarine returning from sea, its massive bulk cutting through the water, sailors on deck in dress uniform, coming home to Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor.

Further north, an Alaska State Ferry loads in Bellingham and prepares for the long voyage north, continuing the centuries-old relationship between Washington and Alaska. Sailboats, yachts, and small craft fill every nook and cranny in the San Juan Islands, some beginning their own journey north through the Inside Passage, one of the world's great recreational boating trips. Thousands gather in Port Townsend for the annual Wooden Boat Festival or in Bellingham for the annual SeaFeast celebrating maritime tradition, craftsmanship, and the seafood bounty of our waters.

During fishing seasons, the Strait of Juan de Fuca is filled with small fishing boats, in search of the perfect place to drop their lines for salmon or halibut. Tribal fleets pull in catches of fish and shellfish to process at plants at Swinomish, Lummi, and other Tribal-owned and -operated plants. Recreational fishing and other maritime tourism abound. Residents picnic on seaside beaches and scenic overlooks. Parasailers dance across waves fronting local beaches. Whale watching tours depart from Anacortes and Bellingham, seeking the magic of spying an iconic orca from a "whale wise" distance. Whether their destination is Port Angeles, Seattle, Tacoma, Everett, Vancouver, or one of the region's smaller ports, big cargo vessels also all use the Strait as the connection from ocean to Sound. The freight traffic is heavy here, and smaller boats keep a wary eye on the shipping lanes, while vessel traffic controllers manage the flow of ships and specially trained local pilots and

tugboats help large vessels navigate the difficult waters of the Salish Sea.

On the outer Coast, tribal fishing vessels operate from Neah Bay, La Push, and the Quinault River. The commercial fishing fleet based in Grays Harbor includes crabbers, shrimpers, long liners, and tuna boats as well as a recreational charter boat fleet. Fish-processing facilities in Westport are regularly in the top 10 nationally for the value of the landed catch. Up the Chehalis River, the Port of Grays Harbor continues to ship traditional wood products alongside new grains, biofuels, cars, trucks, and other stock to and from ports around the world.

Marine industry remains critical to both Washington’s economy and culture, contributing billions to the state’s economy and employing nearly 70,000 Washingtonians in fields from boatbuilding to commercial fishing to shipping logistics. Shipbuilders craft and repair vessels for use around the world, while longshoremen handle millions of tons of cargo per year. The next generation of craftsmen and marine technicians train at the Northwest School of Wooden Boatbuilding and at community college campuses throughout the region. Students at the Seattle Maritime Academy and Shoreline’s Maritime High School train for a wide range of careers at sea—from navigation to shipping to marine biology. A new wave of seamen learns critical survival skills at the Northwest Maritime Academy in Anacortes. Washington inventors continue to patent groundbreaking maritime innovations. New initiatives, such as Washington’s Maritime Blue, chart new paths towards sustainable economic growth, ecological health, and thriving communities for the maritime sector. Our maritime past and present have been primarily shaped by the marine economy, and today’s industry sets the stage for a continuing vital role for our waterfronts in the future of the state’s economic success.

Native American Tribes maintain their continuous connection to the region’s marine resources and their maritime traditions. In the 1960s, western Washington Tribes led campaigns to assert their reserved rights, enumerated in the treaties of the 1850s, to fish at “usual and accustomed grounds and stations.” This included “fish-ins” on the Puyallup River led by Robert Satiacum and Billy Frank Jr., who defied Washington State attempts to regulate their fishing. It also included legal challenges, as local Tribes sued to block state regulation that violated their reserved treaty rights. In 1974, federal judge George Boldt issued a historic ruling reaffirming the rights of Washington’s Tribes to fish in their accustomed places. The “Boldt Decision,” which allocates 50% of the annual catch to treaty Tribes, was upheld by subsequent litigation. That court decision also protected Tribes’ rights to co-manage and protect critical habitat, thus ensuring the proliferation of fisheries in Washington State.

An important part of Native peoples’ maritime connection is the annual Tribal Canoe Journey—an intertribal event that brings together Tribes from throughout the Pacific Northwest and beyond for multi-day canoe trips and

celebrations—that has flourished and grown since the original “Paddle to Seattle” in July 1989. Originally conceived as a way for Tribes to participate in the Washington State Centennial, Canoe Journeys have renewed strong relationships amongst Tribes and are especially valued for the positive impact they have had on younger generations. An additional benefit is the opportunity for thousands of non-Natives to take part in this event and learn more about the first inhabitants of this region.

Tribes continue to work the beaches and the water—harvesting salmon, shellfish, and other marine resources. Tribes have also generously shared cultural values with non-Tribal communities, including some traditional ceremonies like the welcoming of the first returning salmon. These rituals have become opportunities to reaffirm and celebrate the values held in common by Native American cultures and the non-Native cultures that have developed in this shared landscape, values that offer renewal.

Climate change, degradation of ecosystems, and other threats to the environment, however, put Tribal and non-Tribal ways of life at risk. Rising sea levels threaten seaside communities and historic structures. Polluted stormwater runoff poisons the Salish Sea. Irresponsible recreation practices negatively impact wildlife. Near shore and upriver, manmade modifications damage critical breeding grounds for salmon—an iconic natural, cultural,



Image: Orcas pass by Mount Baker and Stuart Island in the San Juans. Photo by James Mead Maya, courtesy of the San Juan Islands Visitors Bureau.

and economic resource. These threats impact not just the environment but also the lifeways and resources that depend on healthy ecosystems, such as canoe carving, fishing and shellfishing, recreational boating, and waterfront neighborhoods.

There is a growing recognition that we all must take action to protect the future of this special, irreplaceable intersection of land and water. Collaborative efforts to restore salmon stocks, water quality, and marine habitat emphasize that commercial, cultural, and environmental communities all have a shared interest in the health of the region's marine waters. Throughout Washington's coastal areas, people are working hard to restore and preserve marine wildlife and habitats. Organizations rally around the protection of bull kelp, orca enthusiasts teach boaters how to recreate responsibly, environmental scientists track ocean level rise, and communities come together to clean up their beaches.

As they have for thousands of years, the Pacific Ocean, Salish Sea, Strait of Juan de Fuca, and Puget Sound continue to have a profound influence on the cultures that have grown on their shores. Coastal communities that were founded and developed because of access to water continue to rely on and celebrate their maritime resources and heritage. The common names that now dot maps of the region reflect the multi-layered and contested stories of this place: Salish Sea, Seattle, Grays Harbor, the San Juan Islands, Rosario Strait. Today, there remain many physical reminders of our rich maritime history. Dedicated residents and practitioners from across the region fight to preserve historic sites, vessels, and resources, as well as the intangible practices of maritime trades and culture. Taken together, the physical reminders of our multi-faceted maritime past and continued vibrancy of our contemporary maritime culture are what make Washington State's shorelines such unique, important, and compelling places.