



Coupeville Wharf and Lady Washington, photo by Michele Kempees of Atelier Michele, 2004

Coupeville Wharf History

By: Roger Sherman

April, 2009

Coupeville has always been called the “City of Sea Captains” and for good reason. The 1850s captains were mostly world travelers and they knew paradise when they saw it. Coupeville, with its deepwater protected cove, its lush farm land, virgin stands of Douglas Fir and abundant fisheries was an ideal place to settle and many did.

Coupeville could also be called the “City of Wharves.” Downtown Coupeville has had at least five wharves built at different times and that does not include the sawmill or the marine railway at the boat works in east Coupeville. Prior to 1900 information is sketchy but the first wharf was supposedly built around 1860 at the foot of Main Street.¹ In 1875 the Bellingham Bay Mail said: “Coupeville has three wharves accessible at high tide only and warehouses.” The first wharf built to deep water was completed in the mid 1880s. The Northwest Enterprise reported that in 1883: “Mr. J. C. Sullivan has taken contracts for building two wharves at Coupeville, one for Mr. J. Robinson and the other for Messrs. Pearson and Powers.” In January of 1883, The Puget Sound Mail said: “Col. Blowers intends to enter into partnership with D. Pearson in the dry goods business, and

¹ Gail E. H. Evans-Hatch and Michael Evans-Hatch, *Historic Resources Study, Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve*, 2005, 156.

as soon as the weather will permit will commence the construction of a much needed wharf with a T 50 by 70 feet. Robertson will also build a wharf to deep water in the spring.” In March, of the same year, the Puget Sound Mail reported that Hollbrook & May had the contract for piling for the Robertson Wharf and Hastie had the piling contract for the Pearson and Blowers Wharf. Why would two deepwater wharves be built the same year in a town the size of Coupeville? Can we surmise that Pearson-Power’s and Robertson did not get along? The Robertson Wharf was built but there is no evidence that the Pearson-Power’s Wharf was built.

Two wharves were short, not much longer than the front street buildings. They could only be used at extreme high tide. Another was owned by John Komadino. John known as Happy Jack was a boat builder. His wharf was a little longer, about half the length of the present wharf, but it was only used for his boat building business.² Another wharf which is not really a wharf is the Gellespie Livery. It was a Livery for horses but over the years it was used for several different businesses. At high tide, barges were pushed up to the back door and loaded with straw, hay and sacks of whatever. Dried potatoes were also processed in the building and shipped to Alaska.

During the 1920s the pioneer Flora Pearson Engle wrote a series of articles for the Island County Times about Coupeville’s early history. She wrote: “There was a substitute for a wharf here in town, so short a substitute however, that in case of the tide being out when the steamer came in, the men passengers were compelled to jump into the shallow water to land. Gallantry prompted them to assist the ladies ashore by carrying them ‘pig-a-back’ to the dry land.”

There are many conflicting reports about the numbers and types of wharves built in Coupeville, especially during the last half of the nineteenth century. The Robertson and Pearson Wharfs are a good example. The menu at Toby’s Tavern has a nice article about the Robertson Wharf and how it was built in the shape of a U so the horses and wagons did not have to turn around. The available research, pictures and drawings have not been able to substantiate that theory. The Sanborn Fire Insurance maps of Coupeville show three wharves in Coupeville in 1909 and only one in 1930.³ The Robertson Wharf was still there in 1909 but it had been abandoned.

A January 1904 news article in the Island County Times said: “The Coupeville Wharf Company has been organized and proposes building a wharf immediately. The new company is composed of the substantial farmers and business men of this vicinity. It looked at one time as though the farmers and steamboat company would settle their differences by the local wharf company purchasing the tide lands and the dock from the LaConner Trading and Transportation Co, but not so.” Joshua Green of the L. T. & T. Co. sharpened his pencil and started dickering with Coupeville’s finest. On March 18, 1904, the Island County Times reported that the Coupeville Wharf Company purchased the dock and adjacent tide lands for \$7,000. The actual purchase was on March 16th and

² George and Annie Hesselgrave, oral history interview by Roger Sherman, January 6, 2000, 7.

³ University of Washington, Newspaper Division, Microfilm and Newspaper Collection, Suzallo Library, Sanborn Fire Insurance map of Coupeville, 1909, 1930.

Carl Engle filed it with the auditor on March 19th. The Wharf Company purchased 4,600 feet of second class tide lands and the Robertson Wharf. They agreed to maintain the wharf or replace it and give Joshua Green and his company free dockage and the same wharfage rates as their competitors. A clause was included to allow Green to inspect the Coupeville Wharf Company books.⁴ The article also said that the conveyance would end a dispute between the transportation company and Whidbey Island farmers.

The Coupeville Wharf that is still standing was built in 1905. Central Whidbey Island had been settled for 55 years and the only means of getting to and from Whidbey Island in 1905 was by water. All exports and imports from, and to, central Whidbey went over the wharf. Cattle, horses, sheep, pigs, squash, grain, building supplies, food and dry goods for the stores, mail, everything went over the wharf. It was also the preferred route for passengers. The wharf was a social gathering place where the locals hung out to meet their friends, get the latest news and pick up their mail. The children loved the excitement and begged their parents to take them. William T. Howard, editor-owner of the Island County Times met the boat daily to get the latest news from off island.

When the wharf was built, it was different than it is now. The approach pier was similar, but the wharf and warehouse were smaller. By 1909, the Sanborn Fire Insurance map showed that it had its present configuration. Nearly all of the wharfs, of that era, were in the shape of a T with a wide frontage where the boats moored. The Coupeville Wharf had a large L shaped warehouse with a walkway around the perimeter and a large open area on the outboard side. This is the same configuration that it has today. One major problem with all of the wharfs on Whidbey Island, except Langley, was that the horses and wagons had to be backed around. Langley had a U shaped dock, much more expensive, but there were fewer emotional problems for both the horses and their owners. In Coupeville, the turn around had to be inside the building, which limited space for storage. The passenger waiting room was an enclosed area in the north west corner of the warehouse. It had a wood stove and was quite comfortable. Rest room facilities were enclosed and consisted of two holes for both men and women. They flushed with the tide. Waste from the horses was taken care of with a few loose planks.

One of the early functions for the new wharf was to supply fuel for the steam boats. The sternwheeler "Fairhaven" was a wood burner. Many a young man earned money cutting four foot long cord wood for the "Fairhaven." This was during a period of time when most steamers had been converted to crude oil (probably bunker C). In November 1906, the Island County Times reported: "An iron tank 8' long, 4' wide and 4' deep, has been placed on the dock here by the Island Transportation Company. Crude oil will be kept in it for use on the steamer 'Camano' so that she can be replenished without having to wait for the 'Fairhaven'." Eventually, refueling was done at Clinton; later at Edmonds. The Union Oil Company put in bulk tanks on shore and built a distribution center. The different types of fuel came in over the wharf and was pumped up to the tank farm. Tugs brought in fuel barges and had the capacity to pump eight to ten thousand gallons a trip. Captain Graydon Gaudy operated tugs in Puget Sound for many years. During one part of his career, he was towing fuel barges and stopped in Coupeville every ten days. When

⁴ Indenture (warranty deed), Island County Auditors Office, Roll #6A, 1902-1912, March 16, 1904.

he would dock at Coupeville and some of the other small towns, he'd walk ashore and go up to the grocery. He said: "We were kind of an attraction in these small towns. Not much going on in Coupeville."⁵

Elmer Calhoun was born in LaConner in 1874. His family moved to Coupeville two years later and he resided there for the rest of his life except for a couple of trips to Alaska as a prospector. He was a farmer, gold minor, businessman, hotel owner and wharf owner. Calhoun was also active in community events and was Mayor of Coupeville for many years. He purchased the Coupeville wharf in 1914. A few years later he added a partner. In 1918 Calhoun and Rosenfield advertised: "CALHOUN & ROSENFELD, Dealers In Grain, Potatoes and Farm Products, at the Coupeville Wharf. We make deliveries in small lots with our launch to points not on the regular boat line."⁶ Jack Rosenfield had helped build the wharf. By 1933 Elmer Calhoun was the sole owner. An add said: "E. E. CALHOUN, Dealers In, Grain, Potatoes and Farm Products, Coupeville, Washington."⁷ This author had relatives working on the dock for Calhoun in 1935, Uncles Wilbur Sherman, Raleigh Sherman and my grandfather William (Billy) Sherman. On October 5, 1935, Wilbur Sherman said that the steamer "Gleanor" was in to load straw.⁸ Wilbur Sherman did not complete his high school education and Elmer taught him how to divide on the dock walls. The division lessons are undoubtedly still there, buried behind modern paneling.

One of the most interesting happenings during Calhoun's era lies on the bottom of Penn Cove, off the northeast corner of the wharf. During the 1960s scuba divers found a small military truck loaded with ammunition. No documentation has been found, but it is surmised that it fell off a boat or barge while off loading. During the 1980s the Navy's Explosive Ordnance Disposal team removed as much of the ammunition as possible. The divers were from Naval Air Station Whidbey Island and stationed on the Seaplane Base. They said the ammunition was a 30-06 caliber. They made it clear that they probably did not find all of it.

Several sources say that Calhoun purchased the wharf in 1914. But, what happened to the Coupeville Wharf Company? Did they still have an interest? On October 18, 1928 the Coupeville Wharf Company purchased a small tract of land, at the head of the wharf for \$100 from Abram Alexander. Calhoun filed the warranty deed the next day.⁹ This is the last documentation that was found that mentioned the Coupeville Wharf Company.

From the time the wharf was built to 1936, revenue was rather constant. Most of the income was from wharfage fees that were charged for freight. Boat moorage was charged and there was also income from processing grain and for storage. Calhoun also had a retail business, selling building materials. On November 10, 1936 he sold

⁵ Theresa Trebon, interview with Graydon Gaudy of Cottonwood Arizona, October 27, 1996.

⁶ Island County Times, August 9, 1918.

⁷ Ibid, 1933

⁸ Wilbur Sherman, diary excerpts from the Purdue Family Christmas letter, 2002, October 1, 1935 through October 5, 1935.

⁹ Abram Alexander, grantor to the Coupeville Wharf Company, warranty deed, October 18, 1928, recorded October 19, 1928, volume 33 of deeds, page 485, Island County.

shingles, sewer pipe and cement to the Methodist-Episcopal Church in Coupeville.¹⁰ In July of 1935, Deception Pass Bridge was completed. Cars and trucks were in general use and car ferries were operating from two different places on Whidbey. The little steamers could not compete. In 1936, the last steamer to run the Whidbey Island route was the “Atalanta.” She discontinued business and another part of island history disappeared. Although the combination passenger-freight boats were gone, Puget Sound Freight Line was waiting for the opportunity and began to haul freight from Coupeville, mostly agricultural products, into the 1960s. It was easy to tell a PSFL boat. They were all orange. PSFL was founded by Captain Ed Lovejoy, a descendant of the pioneer Lovejoy family that homesteaded in Coupeville in the 1850s. Calhoun sold the wharf to Dick Hansen in 1949. Elmer was 75 and lived to be 95.

Hansen purchased the wharf for \$10,000. About 4,000 feet of first class tidelands and the Gillespie Livery were included in the sale.¹¹ His company name was the “Coupeville Wharf and Seed Company.” The population of Coupeville was 384, not exactly a thriving metropolis. This was thirteen years after the daily steamboat discontinued the Whidbey route. Most of his business was from the agricultural community. Times were tough, but he supplemented the family income by farming in the west beach area, where the Sierra development is now. Dick and Faith Hansen had seven girls and they all helped on the dock and farm.

When the wharf was purchased, it had a small screening mill for local grains. Hansen’s father-in-law was president of the Lilly Seed Company and they were interested in growing grass seed in the central Whidbey area. This was during a time when a type of grass called Alta Fescue was popular. During the early 1950s, Hansen bought a used Clipper Mill from Lilly’s and installed it in the wharf building. Larger bin capacity was needed so an extension was put up through the roof called the dog house. Another mill was added that could do a better job of screening Alta Fescue.¹² Hansen trucked the seed into Seattle on his 1937 Ford truck that had mechanical brakes. He had many hair-raising experiences on the steep Seattle hills. During the 50s and 60s, freight continued to be moved by Puget Sound Freight Line boats. These boats, like the “Warrior” and “Indian,” had freight elevators on their bows which enabled the freight to be lowered from dock levels. The predecessor of the fork lifts, called jitneys were used and manual labor was kept to a minimum. These boats worked around the clock which was sometimes an irritant to Hansen: “They’d come in the middle of the night, call me up on the radio telephone; We’re coming in, in a couple of hours.”

Hansen was innovative with some of the things he developed. When a truck backed out onto the wharf with sacked grain, it all had to be unloaded by hand, inconvenient when the truck bed was about four feet high. He lowered a section of the approach pier so trucks could back down into the depression and be level with the wharf floor. This worked well, but was really scary for the truck driver.¹³ This author had the experience,

¹⁰ Invoice, E. E. Calhoun, November 10, 1936.

¹¹ Dick Hansen, oral history interview by Roger Sherman, July 11, 2000, 7.

¹² Ibid, 6.

¹³ Dick Hansen, oral history interview by Roger Sherman, second interview, January 8, 2003, 5, 6.

while a teenager, one he will never forget. Backing into the dock depression was terrifying and then I had to lean over the water and hang on for dear life while exiting and entering the truck cab. I never figured out why my father trusted me to do that. Maybe he figured it was better for me to be frightened than him. Some farmers refused and unloaded the hard way. When Hansen built the “hole in the dock,” as we called it, he didn’t use enough drift pins. During an extreme high tide, it started to float the platform away.

He fumigated for weevil as well as rats, using teargas. As the freighters began to fade away, Hansen removed the ramp that was used for loading and unloading the steamers and built a lift for small boats. He used the warehouse for storage.

He brought logs off the beach to replace the approach pier railings and some of the pilings were jettied in (with water) to support the wharf. This worked fine most of the time but there was one log that popped back out when the tide came in. He obtained four by twelve decking material from the remains of the old San de Fuca saw mill and towed them by boat to the wharf. To save decking material and to slow down rot, he spaced the planks with a one inch gap. The ladies complained. The wide spacing was hard on heels.

The local children liked to fish and play on the wharf. Always accommodating, Hansen would even let them fish through holes under the bins when it was cold outside. His daughter Mary said: “I just remember going down to the wharf and fishing all the time. That was a blast.” Some swore that the fishing was better in the ladies rest room than the men’s. The boating community was always friendly and would give the Hansen children rides. Part of the equipment for the screening mills was the cyclone. It was a dust collector and vented to the outside. A horned owl built a nest in the cyclone. Hansen discovered it and showed the little owls to all of the children and adults. He eventually had to put up a gated fence to keep kids out at night. They did things like build fires on the wharf deck. The Hansen girls remembered playing on the grain sacks that almost went up to the ceiling.¹⁴

Jean Hansen wrote a poem for her dad:

Coupeville Wharf and Seed Company
(For Dad)

Smith’s Prairie would not farm forever
But it did when I was seven.
Fields were full and often in the fall
Where Front Street ended to begin the pier,
I watched big trucks back creak their way
On displaced planks deck spaced for strain.
On the wharf Dad wore no hat
But creosote tar-stained his pants
And he would stand with sweat-farm arms

¹⁴ Ibid, 7.

Cup-handed in directions toward the ramp.
When level, bed to floor,
Two men could move, thrust tongue tilt back and slide
Six sacks a trip, on hand trucks.
Inside, loads were stacked in rows
And sorted to be cleaned, resold.

Dad fought rats with tear gas trays
And in the back he fumigated grain.
I remember Alta sifting in the screen
And agitating free of shavings
And slid the shaft and slipped into the bay,
Where current curled the ribbon
Far down the cove.
Dust floured the floor,
Tide weeds seeped salt in musty wood walls
That tucked us underneath the whine of mills,
Where we gunny sacked clean seed
And I learned to sew with twine.

Now two by fours are missing from the deck,
children fish and do not need to ask,
I move with morning far softening my past
While the rafters sing with sparrows
I can no longer shoot.

This is a beautiful story of the day to day operation of the Coupeville Wharf. Many terms are unfamiliar to the layman, but mean a great deal to those who dealt with agriculture. An example is “Where we gunny sacked clean seed and I learned to sew with twine.” During that era, all seeds, grain, peas, grass and etc. were put into burlap bags and secured by sewing with twine. It took a lot of practice to sew sacks rapidly without poking holes in your hands.

The 1950s were still pretty profitable for agriculture on Whidbey Island. But in the 1960s, prices began to ease and it became harder to make ends meet. Land transportation continued to improve and it was more efficient to haul farm produce off the island by trucks. Hansen was having a hard time supporting a deteriorating wharf. By 1968 the Coast Guard was not happy with the condition of the wharf and the Coupeville Wharf and Seed Company lost its general permit to handle dangerous cargo.¹⁵ The Port of Coupeville had some pretty grandiose plans that were laid out in their Comprehensive Plan which were adopted on March 13, 1967. The Commissioners were seriously considering a major marina and marine terminal at Coupeville. During their meeting on December 11, 1967, they decided to start discussing sale prices with Richard Hansen and other tideland owners. According to a Port Commission letter on March 25, 1968, they were seriously considering that it might be necessary to remove the wharf. Negotiations

¹⁵ Port of Coupeville, minutes, July 8, 1968.

continued through 1968 and the purchase contract was finally approved on February 11, 1969, paying Dick and Faith Hansen \$29, 344 for the wharf and tidelands.¹⁶ It is interesting to note that no value was put on the wharf. The price was set at \$7.10 per foot for 4,133 feet of tidelands.

As the years went by, the Port Commissioners spent countless hours devising different schemes to subsidize the high cost of stabilizing and maintaining the wharf. The marina idea was discontinued when a survey showed that the people of Coupeville did not want a marina complex in front of their historic town. The Front Street merchants were very vocal about wanting transient moorage, not permanent. Almost everyone was in favor of supporting the existing wharf and willing to do so through property taxes. The Port of Coupeville collected taxes from all properties within Coupeville School District 204 which included all of central Whidbey from San de Fuca to Greenbank.

As repairs and improvements were made, there were many hurdles to surmount, including those caused by the Department of Ecology, Fish and Wildlife, Native American tribes, Army Corps of Engineers, Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve, Town of Coupeville's Historical Advisory Committee, historians and etc.

Repairs were slow, but steady, made as funding became available. The first major repairs were to the approach pier in 1970. The waiting room was removed in 1974 and a new rock bulkhead was installed at the head of the pier in 1983. In 1984, the approach pier was completely refurbished. The year 1985 began a new era for the wharf building. The east end was remodeled and converted into a marine store and delicatessen, complete with bathrooms. This was accomplished with private funding. Mike Williams opened the business in 1986. The grain tower (the dog house) was also removed. In 1997, the Port completely rebuilt the interior of the west wing and made a large foyer and two areas to be rented. A new attraction was added to the foyer in 2000. The Washington State University Beach Watchers salvaged the bones of a stranded 33 foot gray whale and after about 3,000 hours of volunteer labor, "Rosie the Whale" was ready to be assembled. The Seabees from the Whidbey Island Naval Air Station helped put the puzzle together and suspended her from the overhead. The Port District spent about \$15,000 rebuilding and reinforcing the ceiling.

An example of one of the numerous refurbishing problems was a letter to the editor of the Coupeville Examiner by a Front Street Merchant in 2000. In part it said: "In the 1980s they demolished the tower part of the wharf, taking a valuable part of the history of the building." The Coupeville Port District manager, John Coyne, responded to the letter with his own letter to the editor: "It is true that the cupola (tower) of the wharf was removed in 1985, but the cupola was added during the 1930s, for processing grain. However, that addition was made without adequate structural considerations. By 1985, it was readily apparent that the additional weight of the cupola had adversely affected the integrity of the western wall of the wharf. It was deemed desirable to remove the cupola before proceeding with rehabilitation of the section of the structure. An observation regarding the loss of a part of history poses something of a philosophical question.

¹⁶ Ibid, February 11, 1969.

Obviously, there was a period, prior to 1906, when the wharf did not exist. Is that the historical context that should be preserved, or should it be that of the era of 1906-31, or that of the 1930s through 1985, or the configuration since 1997 which now offers community services and attracts thousands of visitors annually?"¹⁷ Another example was the installation of two new 10 by 24 foot floats and a few piling in 2000. It took four years to get the permits.¹⁸

During 1973 the Coupeville Wharf was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as a contributing structure. It is part of the Central Whidbey Island Historic District also known as the Ebey's Landing National Historic Reserve. The listing allows it to be available for historic preservation grants.

Today, the Coupeville Wharf is in reasonable condition and a major tourist attraction. She is standing today because of the efforts of numerous Coupeville area residents, especially those who were elected as Coupeville Port District Commissioners. One person stands out in his dedication to the wharf. John Coyne served as consultant, secretary and manager of the Port for 25 years, volunteering countless hours. He passed away in 2005.

The author wishes to thank the following for their contributions to this article:

Theresa Trebon of Continuum History and Research
John Coyne of Coyne Associates
Dick, Faith, Mary and Jean Hansen
Janet Enzman, Island County Historical Society
Michele Kempees of Atelier Michele
Island County Auditor

¹⁷ Coupeville Examiner, June 30, 2000, letter to the editor by John Coyne, Coupeville.

¹⁸ Whidbey News Times, February 5, 2003, editorial, 4.