Bellingham, WA

This city is the county seat and largest town in Whatcom County, located at the north end of Puget Sound in the NW (aka “Fourth Corner”) of Washington State [Figure 1]. It wraps around the NE and E sides of Bellingham Bay, a well-protected harbor with easy access to both the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Georgia Straight. The former leads to Pacific shipping lanes, while the latter is the start of the Inside Passage to Alaska. Bellingham is approximately the same distance from the Strait of Juan de Fuca as Seattle is, and is the nearest port to Alaska in the continental US (apart from Blaine, which does not have deepwater shipping facilities, and the tanker port at Cherry Point, which is just east of Ferndale) (Pierson 1953, p. 4-5).

Pre-history

Prior to white settlement, the land occupied by Bellingham (and the rest of Whatcom County) was the domain of two bands of Coast Salish, the Lummi and the Nooksack. Lummi Penninsula frames the western boundary of Bellingham Bay, Lummi Island rises to the SW of the Bay, and the Nooksack River empties into the bay in the NW corner (although it used to primarily drain to the west of Lummi Penninsula). The Nooksacks generally lived further up the river and had ties with the Fraser River valley to the north, but may have also used a seasonal camp at the mouth of...
Whatcom Creek, around which Bellingham grew up (Bellingham Centennial Coordinating Committee 2003, p.). The bands lived off fish and shellfish as well as upland hunting and gathering of native plants such as camas, ferns, hazelnuts and berries (Hawley 1945, p. 35). The first white settlers found areas cleared of trees called ‘camas prairies’ which were burned clear by the inhabitants specifically to encourage growth of the bulbs (Oakley 2004b, p.).

Today both bands have reservations in Whatcom County on small parts of their historic lands.

**Discovery and Founding**

The first Europeans known to have visited Bellingham Bay were Spaniards under Captain Francisco Eliza in 1791. Several islands in the area still bear names given by his expedition, but his name for Bellingham Bay, “Seno de Gaston,” did not stick. It was England’s Captain Vancouver and his expedition that named it Bellingham Bay in 1792 (Barrow and Whatcom Museum of History and Art 1970, p. 5). Before land claims were finalized, this area was claimed by Spain, Russia, England, and the US (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Coastal Services Center and Northwest Indian College (NWIC) p.).

After the flurry of exploration in the 1790’s the bay was largely devoid of European activity for almost half a century. There were trappers and fur traders of the Hudson Bay Company in the area, but no permanent settlements were created. It was not until the political situation was becoming clearer that Americans began moving in. The northern boundary of the US was fixed in 1846 and settlers started taking claims north of the Columbia River around the time Oregon Territory was created in 1848. The census of 1850 showed 1,049 whites between the Columbia and the 49th parallel. (Johansen and Gates 1957, p. 266-7, 287, 301). Recorded history returns to the bay in October 1852 when William Pattle, scouting for timber resources, found visible coal on Sehome Hill. He filed a claim under the Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 and started mining with two partners before the end of the year. The first shipment of low-grade coal went to San Francisco in 1853 (Bellingham Centennial Coordinating Committee 2003, p.).

In December of 1852 Henry Roeder and Russell Peabody were guided to the mouth of Whatcom Creek. They had come from California via Portland and Olympia and were looking for a spot to build a sawmill from which to ship timber to California. Lumber prices were high there because of the gold rush and demand for building material in San Francisco after a large fire, and they were looking to make money (Bellingham Centennial Coordinating Committee 2003, p.; Western Washington University: Center for Pacific NW Studies 2003, p.). Whatcom Creek empties into Bellingham Bay and has a substantial waterfall not 100 yards from its mouth. With the nearby shore thickly forested with old growth Douglas Fir and Red Cedar, all three of the key items needed to realize their goal were at hand. They acquired the site from the Lummi chief, filed a donation land claim, and proclaimed the town of Whatcom [Figure 2]. In the spring of 1953 they built a mill and began logging operations.

1853 also saw another coal claim, between Roeder & Peabody’s mill and Pattle’s mine. Called the Sehome Coal Mine, it was located in what is now downtown Bellingham\(^1\) – today the

\(^{1}\) Pattle’s mine was on Sehome Hill. The Sehome Coal Mine was not.
abandoned mine causes construction problems in the city core. The original claimants quickly sold the find to a company of investors from San Francisco who organized the Bellingham Bay Coal Company to extract the resource (Bellingham Centennial Coordinating Committee 2003, p.).

There was also activity on the Bay south of Pattle’s claim in 1853. A Mr. John Thomas made a claim on what became the town of Fairhaven, and hired Dan Harris to help him build a cabin at the mouth of Padden Creek. Before they could finish it, however, Thomas died. Harris went ahead and finished it by himself, made it his home, and finally got possession of Thomas’ land claim in 1861 (Bellingham Centennial Coordinating Committee 2003, p.).

These beginnings on the bay were sufficient for the Washington Territorial Legislature to create the county of Whatcom in 1854 during its first legislative session, with the town of Whatcom as its seat (Scott and Turbeville 1980, p. 5). Initially quite a large county, Island and Skagit counties
Consolidation

The organizational history of the towns on Bellingham Bay is rather convoluted. The gist is that four towns were created contiguous to each other, but eventually merged into one. The exact progression seems a bit misty because of the differences between settlement dates, plat dates, and incorporation dates. To add to the confusion there were several name changes, and several interim consolidations before the final City of Bellingham was made official in 1904 [Figures 3 & 4]. Even these do not cover everything: ‘Bellingham’ was first Unionville in the 1860’s after Pattle moved on and the Union Coal Company tried his mine. ‘Bellingham’ was platted in 1883 but not incorporated (Bellingham Centennial Coordinating Committee 2003, p.).

First 30 years

Despite all of the initial promise of the rush of industry on the Bay, the situation was in fact marginal for quite some time. The high lumber prices in San Francisco did not last, in part due to
the mid-decade depression on the west coast and the Panic of 1857 (Johansen et al. 1957, p. 314; Encyclopædia Britannica 2005a, p.). The recurring lack of water flow on Whatcom Creek created times when the Roeder & Peabody Mill could not run. Even after finding a lumber market in Victoria, BC, the mill was not rebuilt after it burned in 1873 (Barrow et al. 1970, p. 8; Bellingham Centennial Coordinating Committee 2003, p.). Roeder was involved in several other enterprises to keep himself afloat such as running a quarry, shipbuilding, and shipping on Puget Sound. None of these lead to much growth for the towns on the bay.

Another problem was the quality of coal. It was low to medium grade bituminous making it difficult to profit from using the mining techniques available at the time. Shipping it to San Francisco also added to the cost. No company was able to make the mine on Sehome Hill a continuing enterprise. The Bellingham Bay Coal Company had several years of failure before reorganizing in 1859 and changing their operating methods. For twenty years afterward returns declined until only the company store was making money. The mine was closed permanently in 1879 (Scott et al. 1980, p. 61-62).

A major contributing factor to the marginal nature of these enterprises must have had to do with the distance to markets and the need to ship in supplies as well as shipping out extracted resources. Even with a good harbor and resources at the water’s edge they could not out-compete suppliers closer to their primary markets, San Francisco and Victoria.

There was one bright spot during this time—the gold rush to the Fraser River canyon in 1858. That summer thousands of people came by ship to the shores of the bay, all waiting for the Whatcom Trail to be widened from an Indian footpath to a wagon trail. The path cut through the dense forest north to the Nooksack River. By the end of the summer the widening was complete and the fortune hunters were gone, in large part because of a new rule requiring miners to buy permits in Victoria (Oakley 2004a, p.). The towns’ populations returned to what it had been, about 100 (Barrow et al. 1970, p. 8).

Even before the Sehome Coal Mine was closed the 1870’s were a dreary period. The Panic of 1873 and the four-year depression that followed damped demand for goods (Encyclopædia Britannica 2005b, p.). The Skagit Valley area, one river to the south, was growing and LaConner was taking over as the major town in the county—farmland was being created from diked tidelands (Johansen et al. 1957, p. 384). The County Court moved there, as did Bellingham’s newspaper. There was even talk of moving the county seat to LaConner (Scott et al. 1980, p. 5). After the closure of the Bellingham Bay Coal Company the population living on the bay dropped to a couple dozen (Barrow et al. 1970, p. 8).

\textit{Next 20 years}
The towns on the bay finally began to gain some momentum in the 1880’s, for a number of reasons. One of the major reasons was the upsurge in immigration to the Pacific Northwest facilitated by the transcontinental railroads. According to one report, more people immigrated to Washington Territory during 1887-1889 than lived in the territory in 1880. Easing the passage to the west enticed less adventurous immigrants, farmers and laborers, to come to the region rather than just fortune-seekers out to earn quick money in industry or speculation. While the Union Pacific/Central Pacific line from Omaha to Sacramento was completed in 1869, there were no rail connections to the Puget Sound region until 1883 when the Northern Pacific completed its east-west link (Johansen et al. 1957, p. 370-78, 383). Tacoma and Portland were each a terminus, and Seattle was linked-in to the national system in 1884. Bellingham Bay received its share of these immigrants by steamer from Seattle, at least until 1891 when rail connections were made to both the north and south.

In 1881 a group of farmers from Kansas came to the bay, enticed by an offer giving the site of the former Roader & Peabody Mill to anyone who agreed to build a new one. The new Colony Mill was quickly successful at supplying shingles and lumber first to San Francisco and later to meet construction demands in the Puget Sound region. Colony Mill can be seen in Peabody’s claim on this map of New Whatcom from 1883.

Farmers who came to the region were at first impeded in their efforts to grow crops by the enormous size of the trees in the forest. Homesteaders usually burned them, but were still faced with removing stumps. Most farmers acquired cut-over land from timber companies. Stumping machines became available in the 1880’s to ease the burden, though. Still, farming in Whatcom County was mostly subsistence until about 1900. First the railroads had to make shipping crops practical, and then farmers had to experiment with specialization to see which crops would both thrive and find markets. Early on flower bulbs, dairy ranching, fruit trees and berries caught on. In 1900 there were 164,000 fruit trees in the county (Pierson 1953, p. 63). To facilitate these crops, processing plants were built, many of them in Bellingham: Bellingham Bay Brewery and W. H. Pride & Company jam factory are two examples (Scott et al. 1980, p. 125-50).

There was also an explosion in the size of the forest products industry resulting from technological advances. New methods and machines had to be developed in order to facilitate cutting, moving, and milling the fantastically huge trees of the Northwest forests. Crosscut saws were one invention that sped up felling the behemoths. First horses, then oxen, then by 1900 the steam donkey (invented in 1881) provided power to yard the logs (Scott et al. 1980, p. 22-25; Wilma 2003, p.). Steam powered saw mills allowed mills to be located anywhere, not just at locations with a head of water, reducing the distance that raw logs had to be moved. This also facilitated logging away from bodies of water, which were initially needed to transport logs to the mill. The coming of the railroads in 1891 further eased the transportation of both logs and lumber, eventually coming to largely by-pass the wharfs. All of these changes had an impact on Bellingham and Whatcom County. The size of the local industry grew enormously between 1880 and 1890 – the bay went from no mills to seven saw mills and three shingle mills in a decade (Western Washington University: Center for Pacific NW Studies 2003, p.).

2 http://www.acadweb.wwu.edu/cpnws/centennial/maps/bbic%209-4.jpg
At the same time farming and logging were rapidly growing, fishing and fish packing also came to Bellingham. The first fish packing plant in Puget Sound was built near Everett in 1876, and Whatcom County saw its first in 1882 at Blaine. At least four other canneries were built in the county, including one in Bellingham owned by Pacific American Fisheries (PAF). The company was based in Bellingham and at one time it the largest salmon canning operation in the world, with canneries throughout the Pacific NW and Alaska (Western Washington University: Center for Pacific NW Studies p.; Western Washington University: Center for Pacific NW Studies 2003, p.). The Bellingham plant was built in 1898 and acquired by PAF the following year. The county could support so many plants because of large fish runs on local rivers and its location relative to the Inside Passage and the Straight of Juan de Fuca. Bellingham became homeport for many local fishermen as well as a substantial part of the fleet that fished Alaskan waters (Scott et al. 1980, p. 93-97). This in turn built up Bellingham’s boat building and repair industry.

By the turn of the century the towns on Bellingham Bay were on their feet and offering a mix of employment. They had survived the depression of the mid-1880’s and the Panic of 1893. All of them were growing, and growing together. The towns voted to merge in 1903 and completed the process in 1904. ‘Bellingham’ was the compromise name chosen for the combined city.

**Conclusion**

Bellingham was built on three main industries: logging, farming/ranching, and fishing. Whatcom County had these resources to exploit and employed both those involved in primary extraction as well as those involved in processing, transportation, and marketing. While each of these industries waxed and waned over time, all three are still important in the area (even though the last paper mill recently closed). They played a major role in establishing the town and keeping it alive through depressions and panics until new industries were established like aluminum smelting and oil refining. Today Bellingham seems to exist on Western Washington University, construction of homes for retirees and telecommuters, retail sales, and tourism (along with the refinery at Cherry Point). The only constants have been Bellingham Bay’s location relative to shipping lanes, and the nice weather.
Works Cited


