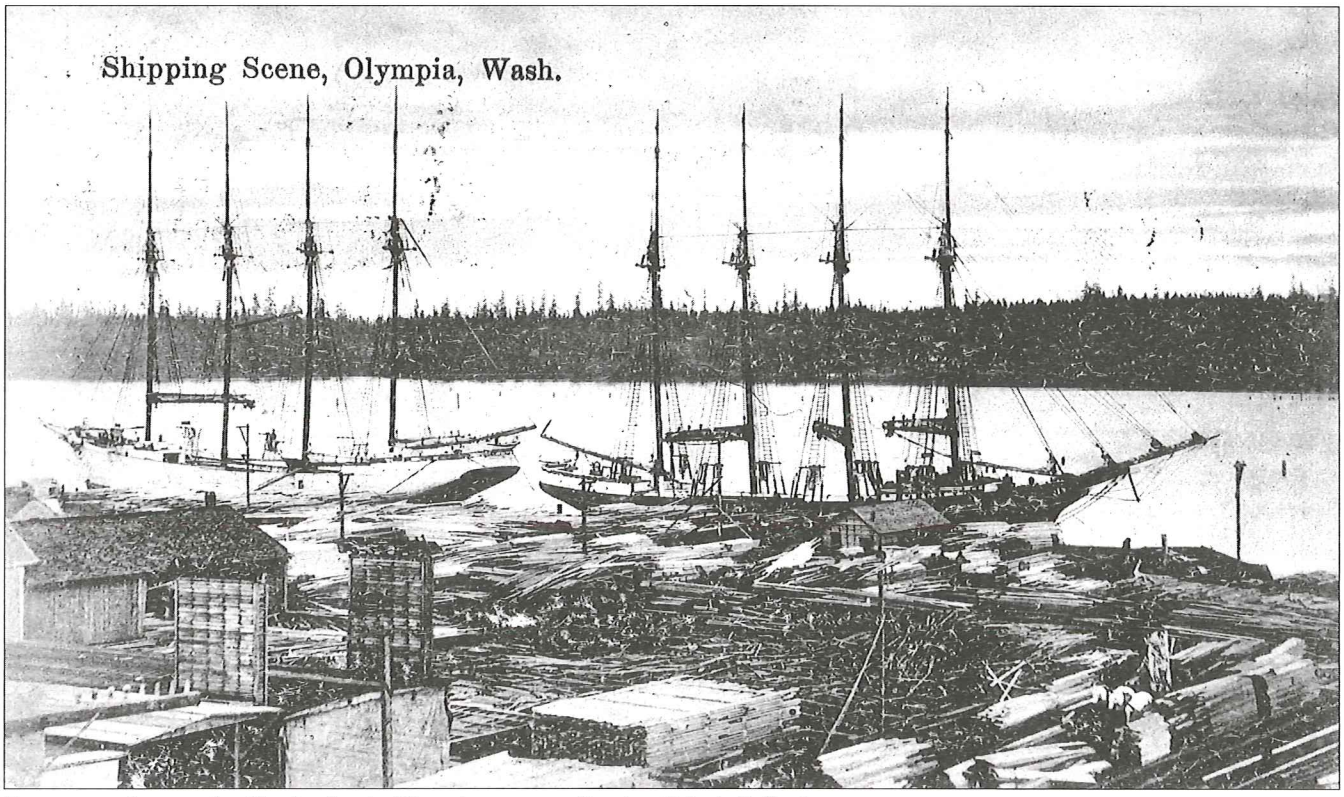
Olympia Soundings: A Maritime History

by Chuck Fowler

For many generations more than the 150 years that Olympia has been incorporated, maritime influences have been central to the growth and development of the city, region and nation.

Olympia's fascinating maritime history began thousands of years before its settling by European-Americans in 1847. The area's original residents were Indians of the Squaxin, Nisqually and nearby tribes who called the inland sea that stretched north from the future city, Whulge. Canoes carved from plentiful, massive cedar trees that lined the shores became the first vessels to ply these waters and helped create the extensive transportation routes that linked the tribes. These carefully-crafted vessels and their tribal paddlers began the trade-based society and economy that today connects nearby communities and Pacific Northwest areas, and also vast regions and far-away nations.

The importance of these early maritime linkages was crucial to the area's early Indian civilization. They were vital also to the subsequent stages of development initiated more than 200 years ago by sea-going European-American explorers, U.S. Navy exploration and surveying 50 years later, and the arrival of overland settlers to Olympia and the south Sound area shortly after.



Four-mast schooners loading lumber in Olympia, ca. 1909. *Courtesy Private Collection.*

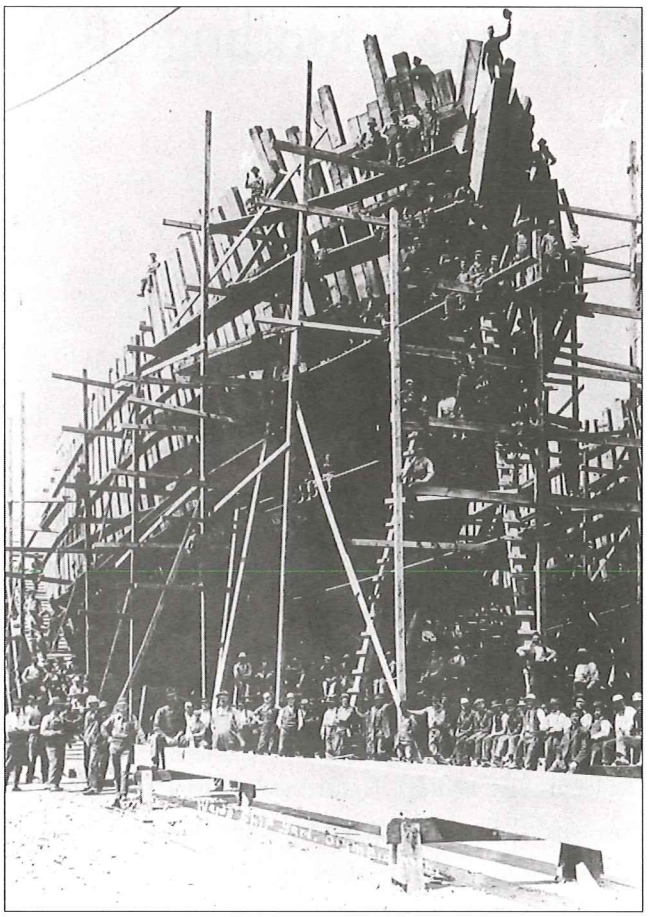
The Olympia area's modern maritime history began in 1792 when British Navy Captain George Vancouver, his ships, and crews became the first Europeans to explore the waters that he would subsequently name for his officer who charted them, Lt. Peter Puget. Puget and his longboat crews were the first to venture south to the head of the inland sea and the future site of the city.

During his exploration Vancouver commented in his journal about the abundant natural resources of the region. The British captain recorded his observations in a familiar sailing ship context, noting that the vast forests would produce masts and spars "enough for all the navies of the world." However another resource, beaver pelts, became the mainstay of the active fur trade developed by the British Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) between the Pacific Northwest region and the Orient.

While Vancouver arrived in the Pacific North region by sailing ship, the Industrial Revolution and a rapidly-developing, new era came to Puget Sound less than a half century later when the first HBC steam engine-powered boat arrived in the Sound in 1836. Home-ported in Victoria, British Columbia, the side-paddle wheeler *Beaver* brought passengers, supplies and also welcome news from near and far as it called at the company's Fort Nisqually trading post and settlement, located a dozen miles north of present-day Olympia.

Only five years later, in 1841, Navy Lt. Charles Wilkes and his flotilla of United States Exploring Expedition ships charted and surveyed Puget Sound in greater detail than Vancouver. With both sea-borne and landside exploring parties, Wilkes flew the American flag prominently as they traversed and mapped the vast new Pacific Northwest region including South Sound. This signaled an expansion of the mostly quiet, scientific, commercial and political struggle between the United States and Britain for control of the resource-rich area.

British and American settlers lived side-by-side in south Puget Sound during the late 1840s and early 1850s. But as noted in Murray Morgan's book *Puget's Sound*, the American incursion had begun. The scattered farms of the members of the George Bush and Michael



The Olympia Shipbuilding Company built auxiliary schooners during World War I. In this image one worker at Ward's Shipyard proudly waves his hat from the stem or bow timber of a partially-constructed ship while others are shown on the scaffolding and ground. *Courtesy Private Collection.*

Simmons pioneer party, which arrived at the head of Puget Sound in 1845, had produced a small village now known as Tumwater. Following the construction of a grist mill to grind wheat and other grain, Simmons and seven other enterprising settlers built the first South Sound sawmill. This mill was the first of many that would subsequently dot the shores of Budd Inlet to form a rudimentary industrial base in the area.

Initially the mill produced only small quantities of cut lumber daily, but after the first 25,000 board feet had been produced it was rafted to Fort Nisqually, purchased by the HBC and trans-shipped to Hawaii. This began the active maritime timber and lumber trade between south Puget Sound and destinations throughout the Pacific that has continued during the past 150 years.

In 1846 the second group of settlers to arrive overland from the Oregon Territory included Levi Lathrop Smith and Edmund Sylvester, who settled to the north at a site they named Smithfield which was later renamed Olympia. After the unfortunate death of Smith and a year after the California Gold Rush of 1848 began, Sylvester bought the small, brig-rigged sailing ship *Orbit* in San Francisco. He planned his own gold rush-inspired bonanza when he sailed his new vessel north and arrived home in early 1850 to load a cargo of timber piling. The *Orbit's* valued commodity was destined for the construction-crazy San Francisco building boom that had been fueled by the Gold Rush. It was the first of thousands of raw log and lumber shipments from Puget Sound that would help build and also, after ravaging fires, rebuild California. For many generations this inter-coastal trade helped build the economies of Olympia, other Puget Sound cities and the Pacific Northwest.

As chronicled in Shanna Stevenson's book, *Superior Shipping Service: A History of the Port of Olympia*, another important but short-lived factor in the area's early maritime-related growth was the establishment of the first Puget Sound Collection District and Custom House in Olympia. United States maritime commerce regulations required that all ships entering the Sound had to register and pay taxes at the designated port of entry before proceeding to their ultimate destinations. But the 160–mile voyage from the Pacific Ocean through Puget Sound to Olympia to register was a time-consuming, costly detour for shippers. This difficult situation led to the designation of Port Townsend as the new port of entry three years later.

Hundreds of schooners and some square-rigged ships called on Olympia as inter-coastal and international trade increased in the mid-1850s. The winds of local maritime history change were felt in 1853 with the arrival of the square-rigged sailing ship *Sarah Warren*; on-board as deck cargo was the small steamboat *Fairy*. Soon, larger steamers were linking Olympia with other communities on the Sound, carrying passengers and

Three tugboats of the Olympia Towing Company fleet at the company's dock in the 1930s. *Courtesy Mark Freeman.*

also mail, food and other essentials of daily life. Many of these passengers were legislators and other government officials who visited Olympia after it was named the capital of the Territory of Washington in 1854.

During this time and near the site of today's popular Percival Landing waterfront park, Samuel Percival arrived in Olympia to establish a dock, store and steamship ticketing agency which he and his son John operated for more than 80 years. When in Olympia, Percival's Dock was "waterfront central" for the many Mosquito Fleet steamers that crisscrossed Puget Sound and connected its growing number of communities.

While most of the major shipbuilding occurred in the Central Sound—Port Blakely, Winslow, Seattle, and for navy ships Bremerton—some early passenger and freight steamboats were built in the South Sound and Olympia area. The *Pioneer* was constructed in 1864 and the *Alida* in 1873. These local steamers joined the hundreds that served in the Sound for a half century until, beginning in the 1920s, highways began to replace waterways as the region's primary transportation routes.

Olympia's more than century-and-a-half maritime history, first as a village, later a town and then an incorporated city in 1859, was marked by boom-and-bust periods as the economic tides rolled over south Puget Sound shores. Timber and lumber have continued to be key commodities in the commercial growth and development of the city and surrounding area.

As Stevenson notes, "By the turn of the [20th] century lumber trade was the mainstay of the Port. Lumber ships loaded products from the area mills from scows," to be trans-shipped to destinations along the Pacific Coast, the Orient and worldwide.

The Port of Olympia was established by Thurston County voters eager for commercial growth during the November 7, 1922 election, only a year after Port Districts were authorized by the Washington State Legislature. During the past almost 90 years the Port has fostered economic development and waterborne commerce during both prosperous and challenging times. While the Port has improved its facilities and handled diverse cargoes though the years, lumber from Olympia's many mills and in recent decades raw logs from the area's forests remain key products in its shipping array.

Port operations continued growing through the 1920s and survived the Great Depression of 1929. At the beginning of the 1930s, two significant events marked Olympia's maritime history. First the historic Navy frigate *U.S.S. Constitution*, built in 1787, visited the city in 1933 along with 89 other ports on the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Pacific coasts. The national voyage showcased the famous ship and commemorated its major 1925 restoration, funded in part by pennies, nickels and other small change contributed by the nation's school children.

The second major event during 1933 was the formation of Olympia Local 38-39 of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA). Designed to provide organization, work rules and other benefits for both the union and the Port, the name of the group was later changed to International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union and the Olympia unit to Local 47.

Some shipbuilding took place in Olympia during both World War I in the late 1910s and World War II during the early 1940s when cargo and other vessels were constructed on the filled-in Port peninsula and elsewhere on the city's waterfront. Reliable Steel Fabricating Company built tugs and other support boats beginning in the early 1940s but constructed its last vessel in the 1970s, when the era of significant shipbuilding in the South Sound ended.

The log export business was lucrative for the Port of Olympia from the 1960s to the 1980s and the highest cargo volume was reached in 1988. But with logs comprising up to 98 percent of the port's outbound shipping it was time to diversify the cargo base. As a result, in 1992 the Port began an aggressive comprehensive planning and business diversification process aimed at upgrading its docks, storage yards, terminal buildings and other facilities. It also instituted an active marketing program designed to attract new bulk cargoes such as rubber, steel, aluminum, pig iron, grain, and more recently high tech windmill blades for power generation. This overall economic development effort, and other initiatives to

TUGS

The historic Olympia tugboat *Sand Man* has been a South Puget Sound maritime icon for almost a century. *Photograph by Carl Cook, courtesy Jadine Cook.*

A final, important part of Olympia's working waterfront history has been the tugboats, companies and owners that have provided ocean-going ship assist as well as waterside towing and handling of lumber, log, sand and gravel, petroleum and other products. Former Port Commissioner and businessman Delta V. Smyth started in the South Sound tug boat business in 1920 and the Smyth family operated it until sold to Foss Launch and Tug Company in 1961. Among the company's 30 tugs owned through the years was the *Sand Man*, now fully restored and approaching its centennial anniversary. Last worked by owner Franz Schlottmann, the historic tugboat is now a public exhibit at Percival Landing, where it was moored in its early days.

Vintage tugs packed tightly at Percival Landing dock during Harbor Days in the 1980s. *Courtesy Karla Fowler.*

increase public access to the waterfront as well as gain new commercial and recreational business, has produced positive results overall during the past two decades.

Another of the city's well-known tugboat operations was the Olympia Towing Company, founded in 1927 and operated by Milton Willie. The company owned a fleet of tugs and was run by Willie family members for 60 years before its sale to Dunlap Towing in 1989.

Each year since 1974, Olympia's working tugboat history has been celebrated and commemorated during Harbor Days held annually on Labor Day weekend. Sponsored by the nonprofit South Sound Maritime Heritage Association, this popular, long-running community event has featured as many as 40 modern and vintage tugs on both shore-side display as well as in historically-based races on Budd Inlet.

The chronicle of Olympia's maritime history, from the time of its first Indian residents to the 2009 sesquicentennial of the city's incorporation, is rich, diverse and ever-changing. The individuals, events and achievements that made this special history form a significant legacy for the city's future, a future that promises to be as fully fascinating as its maritime past.

Growing up and boating on Puget Sound, Chuck Fowler has had a lifelong interest in maritime history. He is a graduate of the University of Puget Sound and Northwestern University, and has written two books and many historical journal and magazine articles about Pacific Northwest nautical topics. Chuck is past board president of the Puget Sound Maritime Heritage Society in Seattle as well as the State Capital Museum and South Sound Maritime Heritage Association in Olympia.