Port Blakely Cemetery

Bainbridge Island, Washington

If one was airdropped into the center of the old Port Blakely Cemetery on Bainbridge Island, one of the first headstones that might be noticed would be that of Sakemoto Sadauosuke (Died Sept. 29, 1891, Aged 38 yrs, 2 Mos.). If one then ventured a few yards south, they would find themselves between two rows of headstones (five in each row) inscribed in Japanese and also containing the names of the individuals in English. These include C.S. Tsuchiya, Numata Tamizo, I. Tamezumi, Maida Sentaro, M. Hamaguchi and Hatsu Fujii (all of whom, including Mr. Sadausouke, died within a few years of each other and undoubtedly knew each other in life). As a result of this initial interaction with the cemetery, one might reasonably assume that they have been deposited into a Japanese cemetery. That is not the case, although it is a part of the story, as the history of the Port Blakely Cemetery reflects.

To just pick an interesting starting point for discussing the history of Port Blakely and the subsequent establishment of the Port Blakely Mill, the town of Port Blakely, and of course, the Port Blakely Cemetery, May of 1792 might be a good one. In late May of 1792 the *HMS Discovery*, under the command of Captain George Vancouver of the British Royal Navy, dropped anchor just inside the entrance to Blakely Harbor (a name that it would not be given for almost another 50 years). Vancouver was on his 1791 to 1795 expedition to explore and chart the northwest Pacific Coast of America, as well as look for the elusive "Northwest Passage". A month earlier on April 29, 1792, Vancouver had entered from the Pacific Ocean the 20 mile wide Strait of Juan de Fuca that now separates the United States (Washington State) on the south and British Columbia, Canada (and his namesake Vancouver Island) on the north. Over a period of weeks Vancouver sailed the approximately 100 miles (including adjoining bays and inlets) from the entrance of the Strait to Admiralty Inlet, where he entered Puget Sound. He then traveled south down Puget Sound the additional 40 miles to where he laid at anchor in Blakely Harbor in late May. Blakely Harbor is about as far down Puget Sound as Vancouver bothered to venture, in part because he correctly concluded by then that Puget Sound was not some gateway to the Northwest Passage. He remained only a few days at Blakely Harbor before leaving, having not even determined that Bainbridge Island was in fact an island - he reported and showed it as a peninsula. Vancouver weighed anchor on May 29, 1792 to head back north out of Puget Sound. Prior to doing so, he named the point of land that frames the south entrance to

Blakely Harbor "Restoration Point" in honor of the fact that May 29 was the anniversary of the English Restoration and in honor of King George II.

It was not until 1841 that Blakely Harbor was given its name by Lieutenant (later Captain) Charles Wilkes of the US Nav, who led the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838 to 1842 that included the northwest Pacific Coast and the waters of Puget Sound - many of the same waters that Vancouver had sailed 50 years earlier. In that year, and while on site, Wilkes named Bainbridge Island after the US Commodore William Bainbridge, commander of the *US Constitution* in the War of 1812, and named Blakely Harbor after Captain Johnstone Blakely, also a highly regarded captain in the War of 1812. Captain Blakely and his ship *Wasp* were later lost at sea in a gale in 1814. It is an interesting subtle irony of random history that the island and harbor where Captain Vancouver lay at anchor only 20 years earlier as an explorer and emissary of the British Royal Navy ended up being named for these individuals who were instrumental to the US in the War of 1812. Nevertheless, the name given to Restoration Point by Captain Vancouver has endured.

Port Blakely as a town more or less began in 1864 when Nova Scotia sea captain William Renton purchased most of the land surrounding the harbor and started the original Port Blakely sawmill. The harbor was deep - ideal for allowing lumber ships to enter - and the supply of mature Douglas fir trees on Bainbridge Island and the surrounding areas of the mainland was effectively unlimited. Douglas fir trees were the primary trees (along with Cedar trees) being logged and converted to lumber at the mill. Douglas fir was, and is, a very desirable wood as it is of medium weight and workable (i.e. not as heavy or hard as wood such as oak), yet extremely strong and rigid. The wood is particularly ideal for construction. For approximately 30 years through the late 1880s into the early 1900s, the Port Blakely Mill was the largest lumber mill in the world - sending lumber all over the world, from Australia to England, and many places in between, including to the eastern United States. The mill stood at the west end of the harbor on both land and piers covering a large area of the harbor, with much of the rest of the harbor continually filled with numerous lumber ships to be loaded and sent off on their deliveries to far away destinations. The mill burned down twice, the second time occurring in 1907. It was rebuilt at that time to a somewhat smaller scale, and then closed for good almost exactly 100 years ago in 1923. Many of the pilings that supported the piers and the mill are still observable at the west end of the harbor, along with the original breakwater and old power house that were built for the mill operations.

In 1880 (the same year that the Port Blakely Cemetery was established), the Hall Brothers Shipyard was opened in the harbor next to the mill. Over the next 24 years, the shipyard built and launched 77 sailing vessels, including most of the lumber schooners used in the Pacific Coast lumber trade and the transport of Port Blakely Mill lumber.

The Port Blakely Cemetery was established on Bainbridge Island near Port Blakely in 1880. The cemetery sits off Old Mill Road about a quarter of a mile west of Port Blakely on a flat to gently sloping south facing site at an elevation of approximately 300 feet. The original cemetery is about two acres in size (an addition to the cemetery of about the same size was added in the early 2000s). The original cemetery was likely sited in this location (a short walk from the town of Port Blakely) so as not to be immediately above Port Blakely and the huge Port Blakely Mill, the operations of which produced much noise, smoke and general disturbance that would not be conducive to a peaceful cemetery environment.

There was, and is, no church directly attached to the Port Blakely Cemetery. The Port Blakely Presbyterian church (which was not built until approximately 20 years after the cemetery was established) stood at the top of the hill about 400 yards north of the mill and harbor, and about 300 yards to the southeast of the cemetery (near the top of what is now called Blakely Hill Road). Sitting at the top of the hill overlooking the harbor with a 60 foot bell tower, the church was likely a rather observable landmark - and was also likely sited there (as opposed to all the way up by the cemetery) for ease of attendance for those who worked at the mill and lived in the town of Port Blakely. With the mill closed on Sundays, quiet and undisturbed services at the church were not an issue. The church apparently burned down in the early 1930s, less than a decade after the mill had closed. Visiting the location today, it is overgrown and wooded and there is no trace of the old church - a sign that, as with most buildings constructed at that time in the area, it likely had nothing much more than a wood and post foundation. Wood was cheap, and would provide a sufficient foundation for many decades. Plus, this was a mill town and the longevity of buildings constructed there was not likely as valued as it would be today. In fact, and except for a few of the old small residences along the north side of Port Blakely, the whole town of Port Blakely disappeared fairly rapidly after the closure of the mill.

At the time that the cemetery was established in 1880, there were likely no trees surrounding the cemetery as there are today (the trees that were originally there having been cut down and taken to the mill to become lumber). As such, the "view" from the cemetery at that time would have been quite open and southward down over Rich Passage, the waterway at the south end of the island that separates Bainbridge Island from the mainland. The view today is interrupted by all of the tall Douglas fir trees and other shorter species trees that have grown up over the last 100 years or so. However, if one goes to visit the cemetery in the late fall when all of the shorter deciduous trees have lost their leaves and the sun is setting, one can see through the windows between the trunks of the taller fir trees the sun's rays reflecting off the waters of Rich Passage, giving a fairly clear impression of what the original view from the cemetery looked like.

Unlike in 1880 when the cemetery was first established, these tall trees that surround the cemetery on three sides today and reach upwards of 100 feet and more to the heavens now naturally draw your eyes upward at an angle to their tops. Particularly in the early morning and

evening when the sun is filtering through, this tall surround of trees creates somewhat of a natural cathedral effect.

The only main trees that exist from prior to the establishment of the cemetery are three large Douglas fir trees growing within the cemetery itself that are now likely 200 to 250 years old. These three trees stand in a SW to NE row, with the largest and likely oldest, being in the approximate center of the cemetery - within a few yards of Mr. Sadauosuke.

The cemetery was obviously established in 1880 to serve the town and community of Port Blakely. A majority of those buried in the old cemetery represent the community as it existed in the late 1800s into the early 1900s, but the cemetery has continued to serve the island community up through the current time, particularly with the addition to the cemetery that was added in the early 2000s. The Port Blakely community during these early years consisted primarily of those workers and families tied to the timber industry and the operations of the Port Blakely Mill. Those workers and their families included many recent European and Japanese immigrants, all of whom came to Port Blakely to seek their fortunes - or if not fortunes, at least for the work and economic security that the mill provided. Due to the segregation of the times, the Japanese did not live in the town of Port Blakely. They lived in two small towns on the south side of Port Blakely named Yama and Nagaya. After the mill burned down and then was subsequently closed in 1923, these small towns were slowly absorbed back into the surrounding forest with little trace - all that remains today are certain artifacts and some photographs taken in the late 1880s. And when the mill did close, many of the Japanese mill workers and their families dispersed around Bainbridge Island and began farming. Two of the more well known of these families are Suyematsu and Nakata, and both families have family members buried in the cemetery.

So one of the interesting facets and ironies of the Port Blakely Cemetery is that although the Japanese and the other mill workers, and their respective communities, were separated in life, they are commingled together in their final resting place in the cemetery. Once again, death became the great equalizer, with any cultural separation between the communities being left outside the gate.

Being a mill tied to the logging of the trees that entered the mill as single great logs and came out of the mill as lumber, there are many "woodman of the world" buried in the cemetery. The various "woodman" headstones vary in design. Many of the headstones artistically depict tree trunks, axes, saws, ropes and other logging tools of the trade. Each headstone typically includes the Latin phrase "Dum Tacet Clamat", which means "though silent, he speaks". Many of these woodmen of the world also died quite young. Logging was a very dangerous profession, not to mention the other dangers of working in the lumber mill. Representative of these many "woodman" headstones are the following *[note that many of the woodman, including those listed below, were immigrants from northern Europe]:

PAUL H. NORDBERG
Born in Finland, September 30, 1873
Died June 16, 1909

Here rests a woodman of the world.

MARTIN EVENSEN
Died
Apr. 20, 1907
Aged 40 yrs.

Here rests a woodman of the world.

PETER B. BECK
BORN IN DENMARK
February 11, 1868
DIED
Nov. 14, 1905

*On that bright and
beautiful shore
we shall meet to part
no more.*

*Here rests a woodman
of the world.*

Wm. G. MATHEWS

Died Jun. 27, 1908 - Aged 39 yrs.

Here rests a woodman of the world.

_____

OTTO F. SUNDELL

Born in Finland Mar. 8, 1879

Died Feb. 8, 1907

Here rests a woodman of the world.

_____

Here rests a W.O.W

HANS A. H.
MAISON

BORN IN
DENMARK
APRIL 4, 1868

DIED AT
PORT BLAKELY
JULY 30, 1902

*Gone but not forever
forgotten.*

_____

As a footnote to these "woodman" headstones, it is likely that some or all of them were the result of an insurance company that began in the 1880s named "Woodmen of the World". The

insurance policy issued by the insurance company typically provided that the company would pay the widow $100 and provide a free headstone if the headstone included the logo of the insurance company. The logo varied from using the term "woodmen" to "woodman" to "W. of the W." to just "W.O.W.", but almost always included the Latin phrase "Dum Tacet Clamat" mentioned above. As also mentioned above, and regardless of their source, the designs of the headstones are often rather ornate and interesting, with designs directly connected to working in the logging industry. As a final comment, this interesting footnote regarding the possible source of some of the "woodman" headstones in the Port Blakely Cemetery should not detract from their solemn use or meaning, or the respect meant for the individual whose name appears on those headstones.

––––––––––––––––––––––––––––

Life in the days of the Port Blakely Mill was also clearly hard on infants and young children. Death was constantly at the door, and there are many young children buried in the cemetery from its early years. The resulting sadness from the childrens' too early death cannot only be imagined, but can be felt through standing next to and reading some of the headstones of the children that died too young. The following are just a few:

––––––––––––––––––––––––––––

Sacred is the
Memory of
KATIE
Only daughter of Richard & Marion Chillcont
Died Aug 2, 1887
Aged 3 yrs and 3 mos.

––––––––––––––––––––––––––––

OUR DEAR BABY
ANDRE V. MILLER
Born July 23, 1905
Died June 23, 1907

Saved in Jesus

––––––––––––––––––––––––––––

JULIA C.
Born
Apr. 27, 1892
Died
Aug. 2, 1894

FRANK E.
Born
Nov. 11, 1894
Died
Feb. 15, 1895

Children of
B.F. & S.A.
TABBUTT

One of the most prominent headstones in the cemetery is the ten foot obelisk monument erected by the Knights of Pythias related to the sinking of the passenger vessel *Dix* in November, 1906:

Sacred To The Memory Of
Brother Knights Drowned By
The Sinking Of The Steamer Dix
Nov. 18th, 1906

CHAS. E. BYLER
JAMES N. SMITH
RALPH CLARK
ALBERT MCDONALD
JAMES SLOAN
FRANK B. MCQUARRIE

Sleep O Brothers Safely Sleep
While Thy loved Ones For Thee Weep
May Thy Spirit From Above
Heal Us In Eternal Love

_____

The *Dix* was one of dozens of passenger steamers that ferried people all over Puget Sound from the late 1880s through the first several decades of the 1900s. They were known as the Mosquito Fleet. When work at the mill started to slow down around 1903, many of the workers sought work in other locations, particularly Seattle, approximately nine miles east across the sound from Port Blakely. The *Dix* was not the normal steamer that ran between Seattle and Port Blakely. On the fateful night of the sinking November 18, 1906, she was relieving another steamer called *Monticello*. The *Dix*, which was about 100 feet long, left Seattle on its evening run (i.e. in the dark) heading for Port Blakely with 77 passengers on board. When the *Dix* left Seattle, her captain, Percy Leonard, was busy collecting fares from the passengers and had turned over the helm to his unlicensed mate, Charles Dennison. About a mile and a half out of Seattle, and for some unexplained reason, other than possibly thinking that he was acting correctly to avoid a collision, Dennison turned the *Dix* sharply into the path of the *Jeanie*, a much larger vessel. The *Jeanie* slammed into the starboard side of the *Dix*, which quickly rolled to port and sank in deep water. Here are two short newspaper accounts from the time. The first is by the captain Percy Leonard, and the second is about Adeline Byler, whose daughter and two sons (including Charles listed on the monument mentioned above) were lost in the sinking.

"The sight fascinated me by its horror. Lights were still burning and I could see people inside of the cabin. The expressions of the faces were of indescribably despair. … There were cries, prayers, and groans from men and women, and the wail of a child and the shouts of those who were fighting desperately to gain the deck".

"Tottering and shaking with tearless sobs … (Adeline) Byler was led from the steamboat unable to walk unassisted." the Daily Times reported. " 'Have you seen my boys? Oh, my boys!' was the conoless question that Mrs. Byler put to every man. As nothing definite was heard, nor either of them put in an appearance, Mrs. Byler collapsed".

This latter quote relates to the rescue steamer returning to Port Blakely with the survivors of the sinking several hours after the *Dix* was scheduled to arrive. Anxious residents of Port Blakely had been waiting on the docks for some time as word of the sinking preceded the rescue steamer arriving. As the article indicates, Mrs. Byler asked about her "boys". It can be assumed that she probably also asked about her daughter, but that is not reflected in the article. It is possible that her daughter survived, and that is why no inquiry about her status is reflected. A search of the cemetery does not reflect any headstones related to Mrs. Byler's daughter or sons (other than Charles being listed on the monument). It would seem a reasonable assumption that their bodies were never recovered.

There are also several other individual headstones in the cemetery reflecting those who died in the sinking of the *Dix*, including this one *[note that James N. Smith is also listed on the above Knights of Pythias monument]:

Jas. N. Smith
His Wife Grace
His Son Arthur
Died Nov. 18, 1906
Victims of Dix Disaster

To forget is vain endeavor
Love's remembrance lasts
Forever

Of the original 77 passengers who boarded the *Dix* that night bound for Port Blakely, approximately 50 drowned in the sinking (history has left the exact number in dispute). But by all measures, the sinking of the *Dix* in November, 1906 was a huge tragedy for the Port Blakely community. Unknown to the community at the time, however, was that another great tragedy would strike the community in only six months when the mill burned down for the second time in April of 1907. It is difficult to imagine how further devastated this one/two punch of tragedies left this community of just a few hundred people.

The Port Blakely Cemetery, the Port Blakely Mill and the history of the town of Port Blakely are inseparable. After the mill burned down in 1907 and was rebuilt on a smaller scale, it finally closed for good in 1923. The fire and time have left limited evidence of the once great lumber mill and shipyard that occupied much of Blakely Harbor. The fact that there is so little left from such a huge lumber and mill operation is amazing in and of itself. But in the end, it was all built mostly of wood from the mill itself, and wood has only so long of a life span against wind, water and the elements.

Walking the shores of Port Blakely today you will see quite a few old pilings and deck timbers that are exposed at low tide, but otherwise sit waterlogged on the bottom, as well as some rusted pieces of iron and bits of old porcelain. You will also come across quite a few old and mostly broken bricks lying on the shore. Many of these bricks are stamped with the names of brick

factories that were located and operated in the late 1880s and early 1900s in places like England and Scotland, and all of which have been closed for a 100 years or more. How did all of these bricks from such far away places end up scattered in and around the shores of Port Blakely? The answer is not totally clear, but it is likely that the bricks were picked up and used as return ballast by the old lumber ships on their return sail to Port Blakely, only to be dumped into the harbor upon arrival prior to loading up the next load of lumber.

At the end of the harbor you will also see the breakwater constructed by the mill that separated the main part of the harbor to the east from the inner bay to the west where logs were stored in a holding pond prior to entering the mill.

But without a doubt, the main observable remnant of the mill and town that still exists is the old concrete power house that once housed all of the steam engines that powered the mill. The power house sits just north of the breakwater on flat ground between the outer and inner harbor.

With a bit of imagination applied, and viewed from a distance today (especially from a vantage point further east in the harbor looking back) the old power house appears almost as a headstone for the mill - a monument to the great mill's near 60 years of life, and it's eventual demise 100 years ago.