

# Port Gamble, Washington

## Managing Cultural Diversity on Puget Sound

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**B**etween 1852 and 1855, timbermen from the East erected 16 steam-powered sawmills on the shores of Washington Territory's Puget Sound. Harbors there were secure, and timber was plentiful and easy to harvest. Trees grew so large a two-room house could be hollowed out of a stump. They stood so close to the shore they could be felled into the water and floated to a mill where they were sawed and shipped to San Francisco or abroad. Men from Maine, well versed in the ways of the woods and the sea, led this emerging industry. Men from across the globe labored to fell the trees and mill the lumber.

Three men from East Machias, Maine established Puget Mill Company on Gamble Bay in 1853. Their venture prospered despite a showdown between the United States Navy and Haida warriors across the bay two years later and the Fraser River gold rush of 1858 which enticed woodsmen and sailors to abandon their jobs and head north.

In 1889, Puget Mill was second in production among the 310 mills whose combined annual output of \$17.4 million helped Washington Territory gain statehood that year. The company had slipped into eighth place by

the turn of the century, its output dwarfed by new mills established to exploit the potential of rail transport. While competition and economic downturns eventually bankrupted other early mills, sound business practices enabled Puget Mill to operate on Gamble Bay through 1995. Re-named Pope & Talbot in 1938, the company continues to mill lumber in Oregon and elsewhere.

The founders of Puget Mill sought men from Maine to captain their ships, balance the books, file the saws, and mend the boilers. They established the town of Port Gamble in 1858 to attract and retain these skilled men and their families. The town's amenities and the company's practice of prepaying passage to Port Gamble in exchange for a commitment to work there for at least six months paid off. Two years later, 57 percent of the 202 inhabitants living in or near the town were from Maine or had parents from Maine. These men and women re-created at Port Gamble the culture they left behind: a Masonic lodge, free library, free school, amateur dramatic club, and steeple-topped Congregational church. Their front-gabled clapboard buildings with steeply pitched roofs, picket fences, and tree-lined streets replicated those of New England. Even the food served at the company's cookhouse

recalled Maine. George Hoyt remembered, "We liked baked beans, johnnie cake, and cod fish. We had them at Port Gamble just the way we did at East Machias."<sup>1</sup>

"Clan Machias," as those from Maine came to be called, topped the town's social hierarchy. Other New Englanders and employees of English descent equaled or were close behind in status. Much lower on the social scale were members of the local S'Klallam tribe, Kanakas from the Sandwich Islands, immi-

*In this c.1950 photograph, the Port Gamble mill and wharves [demolished] dominate the shoreline to the east.*



*The house on the right survives to show how mill workers and their families lived at Port Gamble. Puget Mill Company built the house in 1901 in the new neighborhood on the western edge of town and rented it for \$6.00 per month.*

grants from Northern and Central Europe, and first-generation Americans who labored in or near the mill. The Chinese workers remained at the bottom of the social ladder throughout their 65 years at Port Gamble.

The company provided the S'Klallam with land across the bay for a separate town, but the remainder of this diverse workforce lived within the confines of Port Gamble. Like other owners of company towns, Puget Mill promoted high production by minimizing conflict among employees of diverse cultures. Rich documentary evidence coupled with Port Gamble's well-preserved town plan and more than half its primary buildings reveal that it accomplished this by establishing rules and assigning housing according to ethnic and racial background or class.

Port Gamble did not follow the popular plan of the 1820s that blanketed New England and the Upper Midwest with churches and commercial buildings clustered around a village green. It instead took a linear form and its church stood in the residential district, a common pattern in sawmill towns in Maine.<sup>2</sup> By 1880 the church, school, Masonic lodge, park, and more than three dozen houses stood along the top of the bluff overlooking Gamble Bay. The mill, office, store, market, cookhouse, dance hall, and most of the housing for single men stood on the shore below, an arrangement that insulated families from dirt, noise, and disorder.

White families, united by language, culture, and race, at first lived intermixed with little distinction by class, a typical New England pattern. The main street, Rainier Avenue, is still lined with a combination of relatively elaborate houses built by Maine natives and rental cottages built by Puget Mill.

During the 1880s, the nucleus of white families shifted as the company hired Northern European immigrants brought to Puget Sound by the newly completed transcontinental railroad. By 1889, so many Scandinavians worked for Puget Mill to earn money to buy farms that they constituted approximately 20 percent of the population in and around Port Gamble, an enormous increase over the .05 percent they represented a decade earlier. At the turn of the cen-



tury, Scandinavians, other European immigrants, and first-generation European-Americans constituted the majority of the town's inhabitants.

Children of these families attended the Port Gamble school, and all were invited to the company's elaborate Christmas and Fourth of July festivities. But mill owners scorned the immigrants, so it is not surprising that beginning in 1892 Puget Mill erected simple rental cottages in a new neighborhood to the west of town while it continued to construct more elaborate dwellings along Rainier Avenue in the original residential district. The seven surviving houses built in the newly formed "New England" neighborhood between 1892 and 1904 reflect the company's philosophy of providing houses "comfortable and suitable for the purpose for which they are built."<sup>3</sup>

The town plan underwent further change in the early-20th century when everything but the mill was rebuilt on the bluff to accommodate expanded milling operations. An elaborate store, community hall, and hotel were erected at the north end of Rainier Avenue. Housing for single laborers was constructed to the west, as close to the mill as possible without impinging on the finest family homes on Rainier Avenue.

Most of the single men who worked at Port Gamble and other mills were unskilled laborers who stayed for a few weeks or months and moved on. Puget Mill required them to live in town so it could monitor their behavior. Kanakas, State Mainers, Virginians, Russians, Cubans, Australians, Germans, Scots, Finns, and men from other cultures lived side by side in the accommodations the company provided. They slept on their own bedrolls and ate at the company cookhouse where plentiful, well-cooked food was served "family style" and the tale was

told that men ate so quickly that if the lights went out for a moment a man's hand might be speared by four forks reaching for a piece of meat. No housing for these men survives, but construction records from the turn of the century do. They show the bunkhouse, the most basic accommodation, was built in 1903 by employees, dozens of cabins were solidly and simply built by a Seattle contractor, and that the rooming house was designed by a leading architect.<sup>4</sup>

There is no evidence the Chinese workers roomed with men of other races at any time. They always lived apart, first in "quarters" on the beach near the cookhouse, later in a laundry on the edge of town, and finally in a dormitory originally built for female hotel workers. The dormitory survives, surrounded by acres of park that suggest it was a suitable location for protecting young women and for insulating the Chinese from other inhabitants.

Shunned for their foreign ways, the Chinese were especially unpopular during times of high unemployment because they endured unpleasant work for low pay, one reason mill owners employed them. Faced with high turnover among laborers, mill owners likewise benefited from the contract system through which they hired fixed numbers of Chinese workers from a single agent for a specified period of time.

Nearly all the Chinese who entered the United States between 1849 and 1882 were men. Those women who did come to America were commonly from destitute families, sold as servants or prostitutes. Thirteen Chinese lived at Port Gamble in 1870, the first year they

appeared in the federal or territorial census. One was a woman housekeeper, 18-year-old Theong Wine. She was likely one of the first Chinese women in Washington Territory since the federal census lists just two in 1860 and two in 1870. She probably lived in the Chinese quarters on the beach.

During the 1870s and 1880s, the Chinese were driven out of towns throughout the region, sometimes killed. Overt friction at Port Gamble was minimized by Puget Mill which protected the Chinese who worked not only as laborers, but as servants, laundrymen, cooks, and time-keepers in the mill. During the mid-1880s the Knights of Labor forced many Puget Sound mill owners to fire Chinese workers, but failed to remove them permanently from Port Gamble according to resident Ethel Eames.

[The union] wanted white cooks to replace the Chinese. Cyrus Walker [the manager] told [the] Chinese cooks to go to their house, which was a little ways away, 'to stay there and keep quiet.' The white cooks arrived, and Yeates who had charge of the cookhouse told them to make 100 pies. The new cooks did not know how to make 100 pies, 'and you call yourself cooks,' said Yeates. He showed them. They lasted about a week. The men kicked about the food, and the Chinese cooks returned.<sup>5</sup>

Animosity toward the Chinese on Puget Sound ebbed after their numbers declined during the 1880s. If not assimilated, they were tolerated. In 1920, for example, Yut Kong Eng, 14-year old son of a laundryman at Port Gamble, apparently attended school there since he is included in a class picture of the period.

Hostility again flared up during the 1930s, and the American Federation of Labor forced the Chinese out of their jobs shortly after the company recognized the union in 1935. The 15 Chinese reportedly offered to remain if they were hired as a unit by the company's owners, but no work could be found for so many so they returned to China.<sup>6</sup>

The separate town the S'Klallam lived in across the bay and the separate entrance in the cookhouse-market built in 1895 for their use indicates they too were segregated from the rest of the community. But even the

*This 1907 photo shows how the S'Klallam adapted New England-style architecture while siting their houses close to the water according to traditional practice (right foreground). The Port Gamble mill and wharves are visible in the background. The town above the mill is obscured by smoke arising from the sawdust pile that burned at every mill town 24 hours a day.*



Indian hostilities of the mid-1850s failed to generate the level of ill will the Chinese suffered.

The S'Klallam lived on or near Gamble Bay when the sawmill was established in 1853. When the federal government assigned them to a distant reservation with their enemies the Skokomish two years later, only eight S'Klallam moved there. The rest squatted on land owned by the mills surrounding the Sound. In 1858 the S'Klallam lived on Puget Mill land across the bay from Port Gamble in a village of longhouses and small dwellings.<sup>7</sup> By 1884 they had New England-style houses and a church led by a native Catholic priest.<sup>8</sup> Photographs show narrow, front-gabled buildings with milled siding strung in a row along the beach in traditional S'Klallam fashion. The town, named Boston, lacked many of the amenities Port Gamble residents enjoyed. While every dwelling at Port Gamble apparently had running water by 1880 and electricity by the turn of the century, those at Boston had neither although the S'Klallam lived there until the federal government purchased the land in 1935 and rebuilt the village further inland.<sup>9</sup>

Long after Boston was founded, the S'Klallam held week-long potlatches, the ritual redistribution of goods that reinforced the tribal hierarchy, but they soon adopted the ways of the whites. Indian Agent Myron Eells described their habits in 1887, noting their use of brooms, chairs, dishes, and lamps. He further stated that many had abandoned the traditional way of smoking salmon in favor of the New England style of salting it and that, "Potatoes, flour, and sugar are almost as indispensable to them as to the whites."<sup>10</sup>

The S'Klallam reportedly began performing tasks around the mill and selling the dogfish oil that lighted it soon after its construction. They helped keep the mill running during the late 1850s as white men joined the gold rush on the Fraser River. Special Indian Agent Charles E. Roblin reported in 1919 that Puget Mill found them to be good workers, while a foreman interviewed in 1948 described the S'Klallam as "wonderful sawyers and good edgermen and trimmer men."<sup>11</sup> When the mill closed in 1995, S'Klallam still worked there—Lloyd Fulton, a third generation employee, was among the men who fed the last log up the chute.

Port Gamble is no longer the living town it was before the mill closed, but its intact plan, surviving architectural resources, and landscape

convey its historic character and reveal how it functioned as a company town for more than a century. A National Historic Landmark since 1967, it is the only early community on Puget Sound that is so unaltered. The town is presently operated by Olympic Resource Management, a company whose major stockholders are descendants of Puget Mill founder Andrew Jackson Pope. Rental income only partially offsets the cost to maintain the town, a situation the company seeks to rectify through a mixture of tourism and development. The family's appreciation of the town's historic ties and its prestige as a National Historic Landmark, widespread affection for the community throughout the region, and the evolving working relationship between the National Park Service's Columbia Cascade Support Office and Olympic Resource Management auger well for a cooperative effort that ensures that Port Gamble continues to tell the story of its cultural diversity.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Stewart Holbrook, unpublished notes concerning visit to East Machias on behalf of Pope & Talbot, July–August 1944, Pope & Talbot Archives, Port Gamble, 29.
- <sup>2</sup> Kirk Mohnney, architectural historian, Maine Historic Preservation Commission, telephone conversation with Jan Eakins, March 1996.
- <sup>3</sup> Cyrus Walker, "Policy of the Companies, Port Gamble AND S. E., 1892," memo to Pope & Talbot, 29 January 1893, Scrapbook No. 176, Pope & Talbot Archives, Port Gamble.
- <sup>4</sup> *Puget Mill Co. Construction and Repairs, Port Gamble, Section 1, 1890*, Pope & Talbot Archives, Port Gamble.
- <sup>5</sup> Ethel Eames, interview by Helen Gibbs, typed notes, 2 February 1948, Pope & Talbot Archives, Port Gamble.
- <sup>6</sup> Cyrus T. Walker, interview by Edwin Coman, typed notes, 1 October 1947, Pope & Talbot Archives, Port Gamble.
- <sup>7</sup> "Nautical Chart of Port Gamble, WA Territory, 1858," U. S. Coast Survey map, at NOAA, Riverdale, MD and <http://anchor.ncd.noaa.gov//states/wa.htm>.
- <sup>8</sup> Edwin G. Ames, "History of Port Gamble, Washington," 1884, Pope & Talbot Archives, Port Gamble, 10.
- <sup>9</sup> Sean C. Hess, "Little Boston Archaeological Site and Traditional Cultural Property," unpublished National Register of Historic Places nomination form prepared 1991, Boas, Inc., Seattle, Washington.
- <sup>10</sup> Myron Eells, "The Twana, Chemakum, and Klallam Indians of Washington Territory, Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian

Institution.” Washington: Government Printing Office, 1889, National Archives, Pacific Northwest Region, 613-4.

- <sup>11</sup> *Extract from Report of Charles E. Roblin, Special Indian Agent, Jan. 31, 1919, On Non-Reservation Indians of Western Washington. Various Tribes*, National Archives, Pacific Northwest Region, unpaginated. William Haller, interview by Edwin

Coman or Helen Gibbs, typed notes, February 1948, Pope & Talbot Archives, Port Gamble.

*Jan Eakins, an independent consultant in historic preservation, served as project historian for the recent HAER documentation on Port Gamble.*

Photos courtesy Pope & Talbot Archives.

## A Multicultural Melting Pot in Ketchikan, Alaska

Located in the City of Ketchikan in southern southeast Alaska, the Stedman-Thomas Historic District developed from the social segregation of American Indian and other ethnic groups from the rest of the village. Members of the Tlingit tribe established fishing camps at the mouth of the Ketchikan Creek to trap the abundant supply of salmon. In the 1880s, the salmon supply drew the first European Americans to Ketchikan. As the population grew, the whites lived to the north of Ketchikan Creek, while the American Indian population settled on the southern shore in what is currently known as the Stedman-Thomas Historic District.

By first decade of the 20th century, other groups migrated to Ketchikan, including Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos, who settled in Indian Town. Later, they were joined by Koreans, Mexicans, South Americans, some European immigrants, and African Americans. Living in geographic isolation from the dominant white community, the groups coalesced in the area that became known as Stedman-Thomas, named for two businessmen. Although they lived in isolation from the rest of the village, many residents engaged in commercial and organizational

activities that would have been more unlikely in the lower 48 States.

By the mid-20th century, the social isolation eased; and the white and multicultural communities began to patronize each other's businesses. Gradually, ethnic minorities took up residence in other parts of town. Today, the buildings of Stedman-Thomas illuminate the diverse community that once inhabited the area. Many of the half-million tourists who visit Ketchikan annually travel through the neighborhood.



*This c. 1925 view of the Stedman-Thomas community was taken during the height of the neighborhood's role as a multicultural melting pot. In February 1996, the Stedman-Thomas Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in recognition of its role in the history of commerce and ethnic groups in Ketchikan. Photo courtesy Tongass Historical Society.*