

Boats: Canoes, Steamers, Ferries, and Pleasure Boats

By Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

David Guterson, in his reflective essay “The Citizens of Paradise,” writes: “Islands are paradoxical places: they simultaneously liberate and confine ... the moat of water that keeps others out also keeps islanders in; the moat of water that makes an islander feel secure also makes an islander feel imprisoned.”

Because of this paradox, boats are essential for all island dwellers. For Vashon-Maury Islanders, boats are a fact of everyday life on Vashon and have been for decades, whether they be the canoes of Vashon’s Coast Salish S’Homamish, the Mosquito Fleet steamers of the Euro-Asian-American emigrants, the modern diesel-electric ferries or the myriad pleasure boats that dot the harbors and inlets of the island.

The first boats on the island were the canoes of the S’Homamish, the Coast Salish People who lived on Vashon. Abby Williams Hill captured the look of these canoes with her drawing of S’Homamish canoes on the beach at an “Indian camp” drawn in 1901.



Abby Williams Hill, “Indian Camp” 1901
Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum

In the canoe culture of the Coast Salish the concept of “capsizing” (sp’alac’) represents a fundamental loss of stability in their society. The first capsizing came when the ancient world, where humans and animals existed in interchangeable forms, was replaced by the world of the Coast Salish. The second capsizing came when new settlers came and replaced the Coast Salish.

In 1901, when these canoes were drawn, the world of the S’Homamish had capsized and changed forever, brought on by a wave of American emigration westward and Asian immigration eastward.

Once these new emigrants settled Vashon, they were dependent on the many steamers that made up a fleet of boats referred to as the Mosquito Fleet. These steamers swarmed over the sound and provided transportation before roads and automobiles capsized the world of the Mosquito Fleet and replaced that world with one of automobile and passenger-only ferries. The Virginia V, seen in the 1922 photograph on her maiden voyage, is a good representative of these Mosquito Fleet steamers that served both sides of the island and Quartermaster Harbor.



Virginia V Madien Voyage 1922
Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum

Today most of the boats on Vashon are no longer working boats that residents depend on for survival and transportation. There are, of course, some important working boats, including the Washington State Ferries and the King County Water Taxi, as well as fishing boats that make the annual trek north to work Alaskan waters. But most of the boats on Vashon today are pleasure boats — boats that we use for sport fishing, crabbing, cruising, water skiing and just generally “messing about in” as Kenneth Graham’s Water Rat noted in *The Wind in the Willows*.



Washington State Ferry – Terry Donnelly

Terry Donnelly’s photograph of boats at anchor in Quartermaster Harbor captures well the kinds of boats we see around the island. These are pleasure boats — sloops, ketches, yawls, trawlers, speedboats and dinghies — that all sit patiently waiting for us to bring them to life when we cast off and take them to sea.



Boats Quartermaster Harbor – Terry Donnelly

When you compare the S'Homamish canoes, the Mosquito Fleet's Virginia V, the modern Washington State Ferry, and the pleasure boats in Donnelly's photograph, the difference is more than just the 100-plus years that separate them. The difference is that of worlds that collided, capsizing each one and replacing it with another. What collision will capsize our world?