

Burton Trading Co. – Harbor Mercantile

By Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

The Burton Store, officially named Harbor Mercantile, while not the oldest store building on Vashon-Maury Island, is the oldest continuously operating store on the Island. It is the last of the 14 community stores that once served the separate communities spread around the island. In 1907 Howard Stone constructed the building, and the store opened in 1908 as the Burton Trading Company, operated by Dave Gammel. That same year, Theodore Mock built the Burton Hotel across the road and to the south of the store where the Burton Dock, removed in the 1960s, was located.

The town of Burton was founded in 1892 by Miles Hatch and named after Burton Township where he was born in Illinois. Hatch was an early Vashon entrepreneur and developer. He built the first commercial building in Burton, The Hatch Building, which was located just to the north of the Burton Store until it was taken down in the 1960s. He also started Vashon College in 1892, developed his Mileta Farm (named for the first two letters in Miles, son Lewis, and wife Tamara) as a large dairy operation and owned the sawmill at Assembly Point where Camp Burton is today.



Burton Trading Company @ 1920 – Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum

Burton quickly became the most important town on Vashon, with daily ferry service to Tacoma, a post office and numerous small businesses. Burton

remained the major town on the Island until automobiles, better roads and the North End ferry dock led to Vashon Town taking over as the major commercial center. Gammel operated the Burton Trading Company until he sold the business to W.C. Whitfield in 1914. The Whitfields renamed the store the W. C. Whitfield General Merchandise and operated it until 1924. Their daughter Ethel Whitfield won the contest sponsored by the Tacoma Chamber of Commerce to name the new ferry landing at Clam Cove on the south end of Vashon. Ethel proposed the name Tahlequah after the Oklahoma city that was the Indian Territory capitol of the Cherokee Nation. She thought the word Tah-le-quah meant “water view” or “pleasant water.” In actuality, the name more likely comes from the name Chalequa for the Cherokee Tribe, which is found on a 1597 map. Ethel was awarded \$50 for her winning name.



Harbor Mercantile 1977 – Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum

Coy Meredith operated the store from 1924 to 1945 and Andrew McCall operated the store from 1945 to 1947. Rex Bowen took over in 1947, affiliated the store with the Red and White chain, and was the proprietor until 1956. Jack and Bertha Stephenson operated the store from 1956 to 1975 and renamed it Harbor Mercantile. Judy and David Joseph were proprietors from 1975 to the end of

1977, and on December 22, 1977 Sandy and Fred Mattara took over the store. Fred no longer lives on the island and Sandy continues to run the store today.



Harbor Merchants 2010 – Terry Donnelly

The store building has been largely unchanged since it was built in 1907. In 1908-09 the shed roof extension on the backside of the building and the flat roofed service station on the south side was added. In 1947 the flat roofed addition on the south side was extended the length of the building to create the cold storage area. The exterior staircase on the north side was removed and moved to the south side in the 1930s. Sometime during the 1930s or 1940s the doorway to the south extension was closed in and the current façade of the building was in place In the 1960s.

After Sandy Mattara took over in 1977 she repainted the building, added shutters to the windows, and installed the current scroll and sign. Over the past 35 years, Sandy has become a fixture in Burton, continuing to operate the store six days a week and serving as the social doyenne of Burton.