

Vashon's First Automobile Ferry

By Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

We are so used to having a ferry dock at the north and south ends of the islands, that it is hard to imagine that the very first ferry to carry automobiles to the Islands was located in the middle of the Island, on the east side, between Portage and Ellisport at the site of the Vashon Park District Tramp Harbor Dock.

In 1916, King County completed the new brick Seattle-Des Moines Highway, and to take advantage of the new highway the County opened automobile ferry service to Vashon from Des Moines. The Vashon ferry dock was built between Portage and Ellisport which both already had Mosquito Fleet steamer docks. To access the new ferry dock, what is now Dockton Road SW was built along the waterfront from Portage to Ellisport. Before this road was built, the road ran up over the hill following the route of what is now Tramp Harbor Road. To carry automobiles from Des Moines to Vashon, King County built a new ferry and christened it the "Vashon Island." This was the first diesel automobile ferry on Puget Sound.

By making the ferry part of the King County Road System, the County established an early precedent of considering ferries as marine highways. This is a concept that still works today with the Washington State Ferry System, although increases in fares and decreases in service make many ferry dependent communities feel like the state is not fully meeting its marine highway responsibility.

However, the Portage-Des Moines ferry was short lived. The long drive from Des Moines to Seattle led islanders to request service to Seattle using the Marion Street Dock next to Colman Dock in downtown Seattle. The Portage-Des Moines ferry was abandoned in September 1921 in favor of the more convenient Vashon Heights-Harper (just north of Southworth) – Marion Street ferry route when a new concrete highway was constructed in 1920-21 linking Vashon Town to the Heights Ferry Dock. The new highway, built by the Henry J. Kaiser Company, was named the Leif Hamilton Scenic Highway after a King County Councilman.

In 1925 the Fauntleroy dock became a fourth point on the Heights-Harper-Seattle-Fauntleroy route as roads in West Seattle quickly improved and automobiles became more available. The debate between using the Marion Street Dock in Seattle and the Fauntleroy dock continued into the 1930s. A poll of islanders in 1939 favored the Fauntleroy dock because it meant more frequent service. As a result, ferry service from Vashon to the downtown Seattle Marion Street dock was dropped, and Vashon was saved from becoming another Bainbridge Island with easy direct service to downtown Seattle.

The former ferry dock was converted to an oil dock to bring petroleum products to the islands when the Standard Oil Company leased the dock from King County in 1922. The landing platform for the first ferry dock and the current picnic area

just to the north of the dock was constructed to accommodate an oil tank storage area with 6 large bulk storage tanks, a fuel/oil dispensing station, and a garage/storage building. Standard Oil delivered bulk gasoline, kerosene, lube oil, motor oil, and diesel to service stations, gasoline stations, and farmers on the islands. The dock was reconstructed in 1939. From 1960 through 1965, Boeing used the Standard Oil bulk fuel facility to re-fuel hydrofoils during test runs on Puget Sound. In the mid-1980s Standard Oil stopped using the pier and the fuel storage site was demolished. King County, which still owned the dock, converted it to a public fishing pier. In 1995, King County deeded the pier to The Vashon Park District, which renamed it Tramp Harbor Dock.



Ferry *Vashon Island* at Portage 1916 – Norman Edson
Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum

The original photograph by Norman Edson was taken in either 1921 or 1922. Edson arrived on Vashon in 1921, and in 1922 King County cancelled the Portage-Des Moines Ferry. In this Edson photograph the ferry *Vashon Island*, is seen leaving the dock, the Ellisport Hotel can be seen above the ferry dock bridge, and the Ellisport Store can be seen just above the end of the ferry wing wall pilings. Ellisport is still developing as a residential community with houses visible above the ferry. The building at the end of the dock, next to the road, was the Allison Garage, a Buick and Marquette (Canadian badged Buicks) distributor and automobile repair shop.



Tramp Harbor Dock 2011– Terry Donnelly

In the 2011 photograph, a riprap bulkhead and the newly constructed roadway at the Fishing Pier have replaced the wooden plank and piling bulkhead in the original photograph. The Tramp Harbor Dock has been modified and upgraded, and the landside end of the ferry dock where the structures in the original photograph are located has been filled in to create the picnic area where the oil storage tanks were located. Ellisport is much more fully developed as a residential community, although the hotel and store buildings no longer exist.