

Griffin Historical Sketch

By Steve Lundin

The Griffin community is located in northwest Thurston County and occupies the Steamboat Island peninsula that extends northward into southern Puget Sound.

The history of the Griffin community falls into three distinct periods.

The first period was the history of indigenous peoples before contact with white people. Indigenous peoples inhabited Puget Sound for thousands of years before the arrival of white people. They were known as the “People of the Water” and considered Puget Sound to be a sacred place. They relied on the Sound their basic means of transportation and as a source of food, including clams, oysters, and salmon.

Separate, but closely related, bands of indigenous peoples inhabited the seven inlets of southern Puget Sound. Each band occupied the watershed of the inlet – both sides of the inlet, including the Squi-Ailt who occupied the Eld Inlet watershed and the T’Peeksin who occupied the Totten Inlet watershed.

During cold weather, members of a band occupied cedar long houses in a village located at the sheltered end of each inlet. Remains of a large long house have been found on former Secretary of State Ralph Munro’s property located on the eastern shore of Mud Bay at the southern end of Eld Inlet. During warm weather, families units from each band fanned out along both sides of their inlet and lived in less permanent dwellings.

The second period involved the arrival of white people and their early interactions with indigenous peoples. These interactions had calamitous consequences with large numbers of native peoples losing their lives to disease brought by white men.

The first whites arriving in the Puget Sound area included Captain Vancouver, Peter Puget, and Captain Grey. Peter Puget explored the southern portion of Puget Sound in 1792. He named many areas which remain as local place names, including Eld and Totten Inlets. His journal describes indigenous peoples as being friendly and hospitable.

The United States and Great Britain jointly occupied what was called Old Oregon Country from 1818 until 1846 without consulting the indigenous peoples of this area. The Hudson Bay Company opened Fort Nisqually on southern Puget Sound in 1833. Michael T. Simmons and George W. Bush led the first American settlers on Puget Sound, arriving at what became Tumwater in 1845. A Treaty of 1846 ended the Joint Occupancy and established the western boundary between Canada and the United States. Congress created Oregon Territory in 1848 from the American portion of what remained of Old Oregon Country. The Oregon Territorial Assembly created Thurston

County in 1852. Congress created Washington Territory out of the northern portion of Oregon Territory in 1853.

Newly appointed Governor Isaac I. Stevens negotiated a number of treaties between the United States and indigenous peoples in Washington Territory. This included the Medicine Creek Treaty of 1854 that was signed by Governor Stevens and representatives of various tribes and bands of indigenous peoples living on southern Puget Sound. Indigenous peoples ceded 4,000 square miles of land in return for three small reservations and the right to fish “at all usual and accustomed grounds”. The Squaxin Tribe was recognized as a combination of the bands of indigenous peoples living on the seven inlets in southern Puget Sound, including the Squi-Ailt and T’Peeksin bands. Many indigenous peoples moved to a reservation located on Squaxin Island but most soon left as the Island had no source of drinking water. They supported themselves by logging, working on hop and berry farms, and harvesting shellfish and fin fish.

Early white settlers in the Griffin area were William W. Puffer and Benjamin F. Cross. Puffer filed a donation land claim in the early 1850's for 160 acres of land on what became known as Schneider's Prairie. He lived in a cabin was located near the current intersection of Sexton and Steamboat Island Road, north of the Highway 101 overpass. Puffer's claim was rejected by the federal government. Then Benjamin Franklin Cross filed a claim for the same 160 acres. Other white people soon filed claims or purchased earlier land claims, including August and Konrad Schneider after whom the local prairie is named.

The third period is the modern period since the early interactions between white settlers and indigenous peoples. Many settlers and new comers moved into the Griffin area during this period. The Griffin community was transformed from rural settlements of whites and indigenous peoples into a suburban area with many residents commuting to work outside of the peninsula.

Thurston County remained as the local government providing governmental services and facilities in the Griffin area. This included a system of road, law enforcement, a court system, and public health regulation. Early roads were provide by the forced labor of adult males and property owners using a system of small road districts.

Thurston County created a system of public schools throughout the county. Mud Bay School District was formed around 1870 and served all of the northwestern portion of the county, including the Griffin community. The first schooling in what is now the Griffin community was in the late 1870's at the log cabin of John and Ella Olson, located in what is now called the Holiday Valley Estates. Schneider's Prairie School District was created out of part of Mud Bay School District in 1881. A schoolhouse was soon constructed at what is now the north end of Whittaker Road immediately south of the Highway 101 overpass. Territory was gradually removed from Schneider's Prairie School District to create a number of new districts -- Hunter Point School District at the north end of the Griffin peninsula in 1891, John Fry School District at the middle portion

of the peninsula in 1891, and Oyster Bay School District at the southwest portion of Schneider's Prairie School District in 1907.

These new districts were eventually reunited with Schneider's Prairie School District, which was renamed as the Griffin School District. Oyster Bay School District consolidated with Schneider's Prairie School District in 1922. John Fry School District consolidated with Schneider's Prairie School District in 1923. The Schneider's Prairie schoolhouse burned to the ground in the summer of 1926. Arthur Griffin owned considerable acreage on Schneider's Prairie. He gave the school district five acres of land in exchange for the two acre site where the burned schoolhouse was located and the school district was renamed in his honor. A new brick schoolhouse opened at the new school property in the Spring of 1927. Hunter Point School District consolidated with Griffin School District in 1934.

Griffin School has changed since its early days. A new 12-classroom facility opened in 1969 and the old 1927 building was torn down. A middle school complex was added in 1978. Additional classrooms, and a gymnasium, music room, kitchen and cafeteria were added in 1989. A major remodeling project was completed in 2004.

Griffin Fire District (Thurston County Fire District No. 13) was created in 1962 to provide fire protection and emergency medical services in the Griffin area.

The county operates a public park at Frye Cove off of Young's Road. Griffin School District and the county jointly provide additional facilities off of 41st Street.

Employment in the Griffin area during the early years of the modern period was based upon logging, farming, oyster growing, working on steamships, and working at local commercial enterprises. Major logging camps and logging rail roads at one time served the Griffin community and nearby area. Major shellfish harvesting operations also were located on both Oyster Bay and Mud Bay. These operations remain today, although the Olympia oyster is no longer the primary shellfish that is harvested. Somewhat large farming operations were located in the Griffin area at one time. Modern farming is much less substantial. A number of local businesses provide employment and services. Most residents now commute out of the Griffin area for their employment.

The Squaxin Tribe emerged as a major economic and cultural presence in the Griffin area during this period.