

The History Corner

*Orcas Island Historical Museum in
Eastsound, Washington*

Catch the 6:15 From Mount Constitution

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Homesteading on Orcas Island was never a simple affair, but it was always hard work. Just getting here, in those early days of haphazard transportation on ill-kempt and often leaky vessels piloted by captains of dubious ability, could be a thrilling and dangerous endeavor. The earliest white pioneers arriving in the 1850's and 1860's couldn't legally homestead, but after the end of the Pig War and settlement of the international boundary question in 1872, homesteaders on Orcas Island were able to 'prove up', or patent, their land filings and receive clear title to their property. Clearing the land, building a rough cabin for the family and shelter for the few farm animals, planting the gardens in ground that had never seen a plow — doing all of this and struggling to keep a growing family clothed and fed on a remote, cash-starved island made for difficult times.

While much of the arable land here had been claimed by the end of the nineteenth century, a county land office print showing the locations of government land on Eastern Orcas Island in 1907 might well have excited interest among local citizens. For this map showed, along with the holdings of the well-known homesteading family names such as Willis, Viereck, Bowman, Robinson, Morrow, Langell, Tulloch, Grey, and others, the applicant's name on a recent claimant filing for 240 acres extending nearly to the summit of Mt. Constitution: the Northern Pacific Railway Company.

Filing a 'Lieu' land claim on the upper reaches of a mountain on an island miles from the nearest railhead might strike some as fairly odd behavior for a major western U.S. railroad, but the devil, as they say, lies in the details. The Railroad Act of 1852 gave the major railroads alternating sections of land along their tracks, but also provided an ability for the railway companies to file on other available land 'in lieu' of trackage land that may have been restricted or otherwise unavailable. The Act also allowed the railroads to file on and claim land up to fifty miles from their railhead, or end of the line. Land along the upper reaches of Mount Constitution was open and available, and, to the surprise of many locals, was claimed by the Northern Pacific.

The initial flush of excitement at the prospect of a shiny new railroad station atop Mount Constitution no doubt lasted a very short time, if at all, as it quickly became obvious to any interested parties that a 'deal' had been in the works regarding the Lieu Land Claim filed by the railroad. By that year of 1907, Robert Moran and his brothers had acquired between two and three thousand acres of land between Cascade Bay and Mount Constitution. Former owners of the largest shipyard on the west coast, it may be supposed that the Moran Brothers had a bit of influence with the railroad that hauled the tons of steel and other materials they used in building battleships for the U.S. Navy. The railroad's claimed acreage was soon sold to Robert Moran, incorporated by him with the rest of his holdings, and eventually given to the State of Washington as part of Moran State Park. So, while we sadly lack the attraction of a railway station atop our highest mountain, Orcas Islanders make do very well indeed with the myriad attractions of our wonderful Moran State Park.