

The History Corner

Orcas Island Historical Museum in
Eastsound, Washington

A Geographical Memoir

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In 1868, while ownership of the San Juan Islands was still a matter of dispute between Great Britain and the United States, the following description of Orcas Island was published by the U.S. Government:

“Between Point Thompson, the northeastern point, and Point Lawrence, the most eastern point, the shore is so rocky and inhospitable that anywhere along it even small boats would fail to find a safe harbor or anchorage. From Point Lawrence to Obstruction Passage the coast is much less bold, and contains several little bays, into which pour rivulets from the mountains, watering small but beautiful valleys.

There are two large bays and one small one on the southern side of the island. Ironsides Inlet, the most eastern, is the largest. It is about a mile wide, varies in depth from five to fifteen fathoms, and extends about seven miles into the island, within a mile of its northern end, thus nearly cutting it into two. Guerriere Bay, about three miles to the westward, is about three miles in length and a mile and a quarter in width, and has a depth of from five to fifteen fathoms. Both of these bays are excellent harbors. There is a small triangular bay known as Fishtrap, extending a short distance into the southwestern end of the island, with its greatest depth ten fathoms.

Within Ironsides Inlet, particularly toward its northern end, are several beautiful spots of agricultural land, and good timber, having the advantage of being immediately adjacent to an excellent harbor. Streams having their sources in lakes in the mountain gorges empty into the bay. One of the most pleasing prospects in this region, and especially along the shores of Orcas Island, is the frequent recurrence of beautiful cascades.

A very important feature of this island is the excellent pasturage which exists on the mountain slopes. The grass is green during every month of the year; and on the south side of Mt. Constitution even, almost to the very summit. Sheep, goats and cattle placed upon the island would thrive and multiply, without the necessity of special care, as there are no beasts of prey to molest them. Deer and Elk are the only quadrupeds of the larger species on the island, and a few years ago these were very numerous. The latter are now rarely seen, and the former are year after year rapidly disappearing before the approach of the white man, and in a few seasons will not be seen upon the island.”

Excerpted by Tom Welch from “The Northwest Boundary, Discussion of the Water Boundary Question: Geographical Memoir of the Islands In Dispute and History of the Military Occupation of San Juan Island”, Washington, 1868.