



[ Quartermaster Harbor ]

# CLOSE to the FAR from the City, Frenzy

By | Jennifer and James Hamilton

For decades, Vashon Islanders have steadfastly resisted any threat to their peaceful, quasi-rural lifestyle. The island is only a short ferry ride from Seattle and Tacoma—ferries run from both ends—yet the pace here is slower than in the cities. And that’s how the islanders like it.

➤ **Quartermaster Harbor**, on Vashon Island’s southeast shore, reflects that ideal. The harbor is tranquil and relaxing. Most mornings, the only disturbance to the water surface comes from sea birds and the paddles of the Vashon Island Rowing Club. Even on sunny summer ▶



The barge at Judd Creek, once filled with treadle sewing machines, is a frequent watercolor-painting subject.

weekends, so few boats are anchored that the place still feels secluded. If you prefer to tie off, the harbor also has a large public dock plus two private marinas.

The harbor mouth is 20 nautical miles from Seattle and only four from Tacoma. An easy half day's run in even the slowest vessel will take you away from the city crowds and into this secluded, all-weather anchorage. Once inside, you can explore by tender or afoot, or just relax and enjoy the calm.

### One Harbor, Two Islands

Two islands, connected by an isthmus, form Quartermaster Harbor's sheltered

waters: Vashon Island to the north and west, and Maury Island to the south and east. The islands were once, in fact, truly separate. In the early 1900s, the tidal neck between them was filled in for a road. The islands—collectively called Vashon-Maury Island or just Vashon—have been one ever since.

The area around the neck is called Portage. Before the land-to-land connection was built, the neck carried water-to-water traffic between Quartermaster Harbor and Tramp Harbor on the other side. You can land a tender on the Quartermaster Harbor side and walk a quarter mile to Tramp Harbor for a view to the mainland.

The two-story building on the corner is the recently-closed Portage Store, established in 1903. The Tramp Harbor Fishing Pier, a popular scuba diving and fishing site with picnic tables and restrooms, is a half mile to the north. You might also see what we have dubbed the "Portage Fitness Club." When we last visited, old broken-down exercise equipment was strung along the road facing Tramp Harbor. You won't get much exercise, but you couldn't ask for a workout with a finer view.

### Dockton

Dockton Park, midway along Maury Island's west shore, is the most popular

temporary moorage in Quartermaster Harbor. The 23-acre park includes 58 guest slips, a boat launch, trails, picnic tables and a swimming area. The sturdy, well-maintained docks can be busy in the summer—a rendezvous always seems to be taking place whenever we've been there.

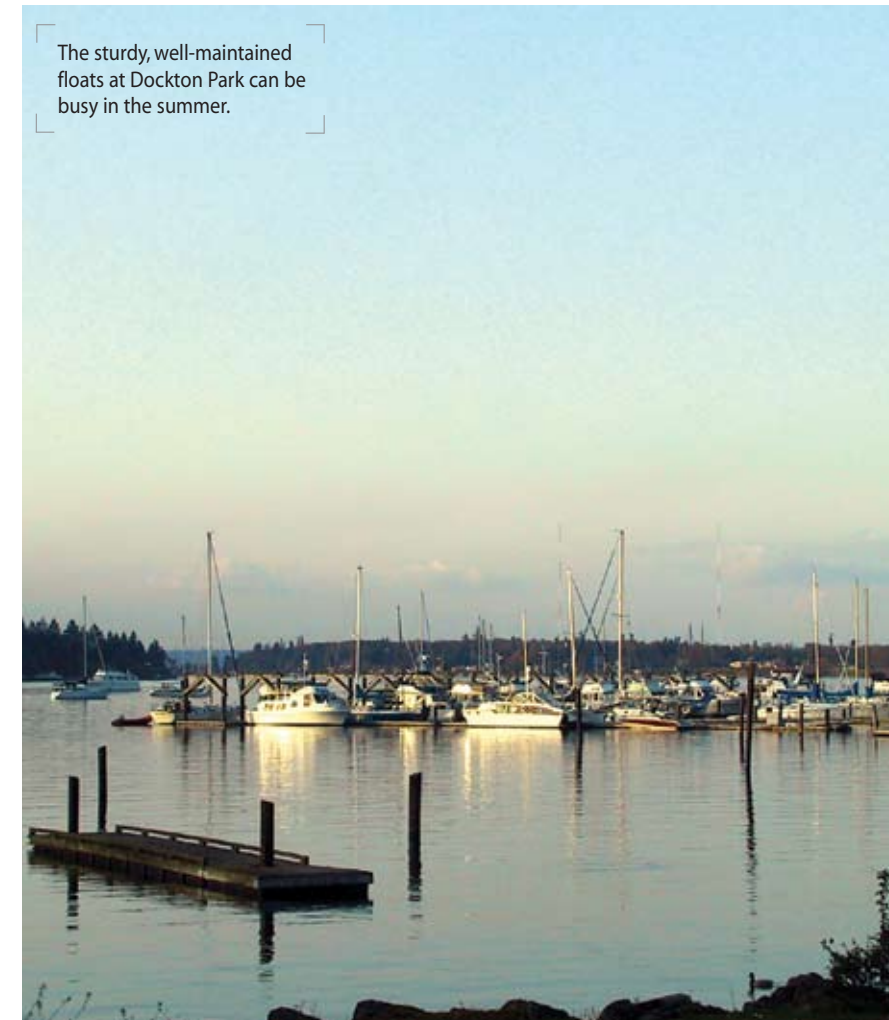
This recreational retreat has industrial roots. Beginning in the 1890s, the Puget Sound Dry Dock Company operated a shipyard here, offering the only dry dock in Puget Sound. It was among the largest on the West Coast. Massive, four-masted sailing ships, and later steamships, were built and repaired here. Shipyard employment neared 400 at one point, and anchored the nearby town of Dockton. Maury Island may seem like a strangely remote location, but when the business was formed, most transport was water-based. Dockton was no more difficult to reach than any other port city. As railways and roads became the primary means of mainland transportation, an island was no longer a convenient location and business waned.

Today, Dockton Park occupies the Puget Sound Dry Dock Company's old property. The old Dockton General Store, established in 1908, was restored in the 1990s, but no longer operates as a store and is generally closed—you can only see the exterior.

### Magnificent Madronas

Two sizable madrona (*Arbutus menziesii*) forests grow on Maury Island. This unusual evergreen, with peeling red bark over a smooth underlying trunk, is common throughout the Pacific Northwest, but rarely in such numbers. A walk through a madrona forest soothes the spirit. The mostly slender trunks rise smooth and bare—leaves only grow on the branches overhead. Even on a sunny day, the forest remains cool and muted. Sunlight glows on the canopy, but little reaches the forest floor. The trees draw your eye upward. Bits of filtered sun reach through from high above, like light through stained-glass windows.

The most accessible forest is on DNR property adjacent to Dockton Park. A trailhead across Dockton Road SW connects to trails that lead south and east into the madronas. The forest extends



The sturdy, well-maintained floats at Dockton Park can be busy in the summer.



**Above Left:** Most mornings, the only disturbance to the water surface in Quartermaster Harbor comes from sea birds and the paddles of the Vashon Island Rowing Club. **Above Right:** The "Portage Fitness Club." You won't get much exercise, but you couldn't ask for a workout with a finer view.



At Burton Acres Park, the cool, sun-dappled trails through 100-year old second-growth forest are refreshing to walk on a hot summer's day.

**IF YOU GO**

**References:** Several cruising guides cover Quartermaster Harbor: the annual *Waggoner Cruising Guide*; *Gunkholing in South Puget Sound* by Jo Bailey and Carl Nyberg; and *A Cruising Guide to Puget Sound and the San Juan Islands* by Miguel M. Scherer. We also recommend Marge and Ted Mueller's *Afoot and Afloat: South Puget Sound and Hood Canal*. We own the entire series—their books are interesting and educational, and the trail maps particularly handy for exploring ashore.

**Anchoring:** We usually anchor directly north of Burton Acres Park. Holding is excellent over thick mud. In settled summer weather, we've also anchored in three fathoms with good holding off Rosehilla on Maury Island's southern tip, just west of several charted rocks. Wakes from boat traffic can rock the boat a bit, but conditions generally calm down in the evening, and the views to Tacoma and Point Defiance are worth it. According to the *Waggoner Cruising Guide*, holding is poor north of Dockton Park.

*Dirona* at anchor in the placid waters of Quartermaster Harbor.



**Marinas:** Besides the public floats at Dockton Park, two private marinas are at the head of Quartermaster. Members of reciprocal clubs can dock at the Quartermaster Yacht Club ([www.qyc1.org](http://www.qyc1.org)). Nearby Quartermaster Marina (425.463.3624) occasionally has guest moorage available.

south onto Glacier Northwest property and ends to the east at their gravel mine. The property is private, but locals and others still use the trails. Near the water are the ruins of an old conveyor belt and dock used when gravel was transported out by barge.

Residents are fiercely opposed to Glacier Northwest's proposal to expand their mining operation and rebuild the dock to resume gravel barging. We saw signs posted roadside that read "Maury Island: Yes. Glacier: No." Until we understood the topic, we thought maybe the residents were preparing for another ice age.

A second madrona forest, the largest in the Northwest at 180 acres, is a two-mile walk from Dockton at Maury Island Marine Park. King County purchased

whimsical names like Enchanted Forest, Elfin Dell, and Green Cathedral. The cool, sun-dappled trails are refreshing to walk on a hot summer's day.

**Sea Birds And Sewing Machines**

People are not the only fans of Vashon Island's rural nature. The island shelters a large and varied bird population that includes 239 species. Quartermaster Harbor reflects the island's character in this way, too. In 2000, the National Audubon Society designated the harbor an "Important Bird Area." Nearly ten percent of the state's wintering Western Grebe population, numbering several thousand birds, stops here some years. The harbor has several good birding locations, including the area in and

“Sunlight glows on the canopy, but little reaches the forest floor. The trees draw your eye upward. Bits of filtered sun reach through from high above, like light through stained-glass windows.”

this former gravel quarry in 1994 and created a 320-acre preserve that has over a mile of shoreline. The forest grows on bluffs with views across to the mainland. Below are a sloping pebble beach and a fishing pier. The park is largely undeveloped so far, but does have restrooms.

**An Enchanting Forest**

Vashon-Maury Island has many parks, but only a few are accessible from Quartermaster Harbor. Burton Acres Park is one of them. This park includes most of the peninsula that extends into Quartermaster Harbor directly north of Dockton. Private property rings the park, except for a beach and boat launch at Jensen Point on the eastern tip. The wide pebble beach and grassy fields above are ideal for picnicking, sunbathing, throwing sticks for your dog, or just taking a lazy nap. The seashore, however, is not the park's only attraction.

Up the hill from the boat launch is the Jensen Point Boat House, where you can rent a kayak for an afternoon's paddle. Farther up the driveway, across SW Harbor Drive, a trailhead leads to a 100-year-old second-growth forest. Well-tended trails meander through forests with

around Portage. At high tide, take a tender out to explore two of them: Raab's Lagoon and Judd Creek. Birds or no, both are interesting.

Raab's Lagoon is on the harbor's east shore, south of the KIRO radio towers. The lagoon looks landlocked on the chart, but a narrow opening allows shallow-draft vessels inside at high tide. (The current through the entry can be substantial—use caution if you are paddling.) The lagoon feels even more remote than Quartermaster Harbor, and takes tranquility to a whole new level. Seabirds idle along the surface, while horses lazily munch grass ashore. In *The Birds of Vashon Island*, Ed Swan counts Raab's Lagoon among Vashon's top ten birding sites. A variety of sparrows winters here, and many songbird species are present year-round.

Judd Creek empties into Quartermaster Harbor's northwest corner. In the winter, the creek is popular with ducks and other seabirds such as scoters, goldeneyes, and buffleheads. At high tide, you can work a tender under the bridge that crosses the creek and travel a short distance upstream. With trees and grasses crowding the shore, the setting

feels secluded and intimate compared to the open waters of Quartermaster.

At the creek mouth sits a red painted, double-decker wooden barge. A local told us that the barge was an old bunkhouse that a Vashon resident had brought down from an Alaskan gold-mine and filled with treadle sewing machines. The owner died and the barge is now a derelict, but it still serves a purpose: More watercolors have been painted of it than of any other scene in the area.

**Discover Quartermaster Harbor**

The first time we stopped at Quartermaster Harbor, we knew we'd be back. Each time we returned, we found or learned something new, and we're not done yet. Quartermaster Harbor is a great all-season boating destination. Protection from the southerly winds is excellent and flocks of wintering seabirds cover the surface. If you've not yet visited Quartermaster Harbor, you should. And when you do, you'll soon be planning a return visit.

*Thanks to the Vashon Park District for their help with this article. Program Coordinator Susan H. McCabe provided excellent feedback on the final copy and Executive Director Wendy Braicks sent us many useful maps.*

**THE QUARTERMASERS**

The **Wilkes Expedition**, under the command of Lt. Charles Wilkes, began the first American survey of the Puget Sound in 1841. Wilkes enthusiastically assigned names to many of the area's features. British Captain George Vancouver had already named Vashon Island in 1792, but Wilkes named Maury Island after Lt. William Maury, the nephew of a Navy hydrographer. Wilkes also named several points on Vashon and Maury Islands after his quartermasters—among them Henry Heyer, John Robinson, Thomas Piner, William Neill, and Thomas Sandford—and Quartermaster Harbor to honor the group.

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