

Context:

Gabriola, history

Citations:

Gehlbach, J., Gabriola's wharves—an introduction, *SHALE* 27, pp.2–4, December 2013.

Copyright restrictions:

Copyright © 2013: Gabriola Historical & Museum Society.

For reproduction permission e-mail: nickdoe@island.net

Errors and omissions:

Other articles in this series:

Gehlbach, J., Gabriola's wharves—[Northumberland Channel](#), *SHALE* 27, pp.5–17, December 2013.

Gehlbach, J., Gabriola's wharves—[The Maples and Degnen Bay](#), *SHALE* 27, pp.18–27, December 2013.

Gehlbach, J., Gabriola's wharves—[Silva Bay](#), *SHALE* 27, pp.28–36, December 2013.

Reeve, P., [More wharves in Silva Bay](#), *SHALE* 28, pp.51–53, June 2014.

Gehlbach, J., Gabriola's wharves—[the North Shore](#), *SHALE* 27, pp.37–45, December 2013.

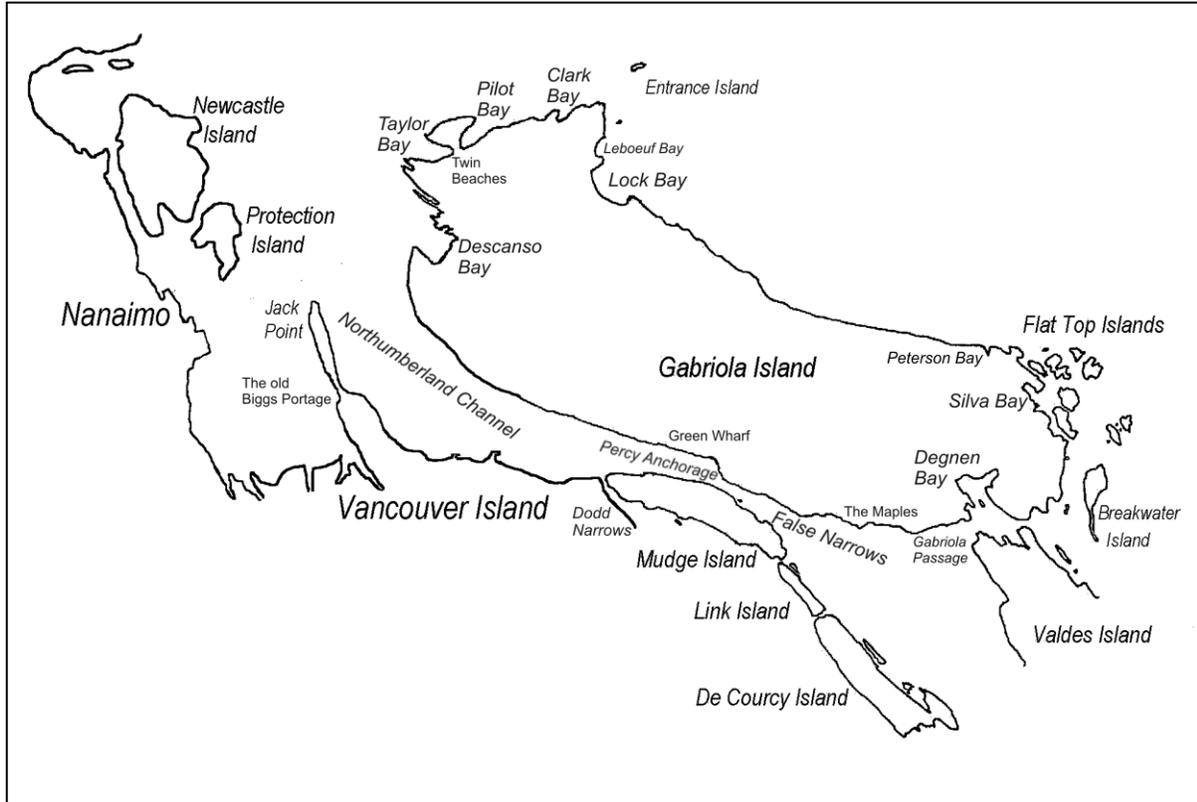
Gehlbach, J., Gabriola's wharves—[Descanso Bay](#), *SHALE* 27, pp.46–56, December 2013.

Date posted:

May 27, 2015.

Gabriola's wharves—an introduction

by Jenni Gehlbach



People often ask what name was used by the Snunéymux^w for Gabriola Island. As far as any of the Elders could remember when asked this question a few years ago, the island never had a name. There were names for places they went and where people lived, but as a geographical entity, Gabriola was just like any other place on the coast; you could only get there by boat, so there was nothing particularly special about being on an island. Canoes can of course come ashore on any beach, and that all of Gabriola's beaches have ancient middens at their head testifies that they once did.

When European settlers arrived in the mid-nineteenth century, people continued to travel everywhere by canoe, but the growing

trade between Gabriola and Vancouver Island called for larger vessels. These were needed to transport families and their possessions, farm produce and farm animals, freight and mail; and these bigger boats required wharves and permanent floats out beyond the low-tide mark.

Major public and neighbourhood wharves were built in the sheltered waters of Degnen Bay, at both ends of False Narrows, and in Descanso Bay. Silva Bay has been home to several commercial wharves as well as private ones. Several substantial private wharves were constructed around the Twin Beaches Peninsula (Gabriola Sands), and a wharf once stood briefly in Clark Bay.

Many of these wharves have been controversial, and some were short-lived.

In 1874, *The Nanaimo Free Press* (May 9) and *The British Colonist* (May 17) printed an article about Gabriola that listed the settlers then living on the island:

“...It contains no less than nineteen settlers,¹ viz., (going from the E. end to the W.,) Messrs. Dingman,² Dick, Gray, Martin, Martin,³ Kemp, Magnus,⁴ Chapel, McGuffy, Easson, Hogan, McLay, Hall, Le Beuf, Goss, Caulfield, White, and Heath, seventeen of whom are in constant occupation of their claims and hard at work ...”

The locations of these early settlers are described here as being at the east end, also known as the lower end, and at the west end, or upper end. Nowadays, for no compelling reason, we would more likely refer to them as being at the south or north ends.

In the southeast corner of Gabriola, Thomas Degnen and Robert Gray had settled near what became Degnen Bay. Thomas McGuffie's land in mid-island stretched along False Narrows and included what became Brickyard Beach when the brickyard⁵ started operating in the mid-1890s. His land also included the location of the future Green Wharf. Settlers Henry Goss and John Penberthy-White were closer

to Descanso Bay, which was then called Rocky Bay.⁶

All three of these areas became hot contenders for the location of a public wharf.

The 1874 newspaper article continued:

“...Their stock consists in all of some four hundred and fifty or perhaps five hundred head of cattle, besides a horse which we mention because it is in the habit of visiting a neighbouring island for summer quarters, and is on friendly terms with the cattle thereon much to the disgust of the gentleman who owns it. They have also numerous pigs and fowls, and supply us with butter, eggs, potatoes, turnips, and a considerable quantity of oats, not to say anything of the very excellent beef it feeds.”

The article concludes, “...the main want at present is a regular mail service with Nanaimo”. Official delivery of mail to the island would have required a sturdy public wharf and decent roads, which would of course also enable a more efficient transfer of people and their produce to markets in Nanaimo.

Meanwhile, while governments dallied, settlers got on with the task of building private wharves and used their own boats to travel back and forth to Nanaimo. In those days, if you wanted to visit Victoria, you spent a couple of days rowing there.

The need for a proper ferry and where to locate a public wharf or any other public facility on Gabriola became subjects of much controversy for 100 years or more. Because attempts to provide regular boat

¹ Only 18 are listed; Manly and Easthom are missing names.

² The newspaper called Mr. Degnen, “Dingman”, one of many ‘alternative’ spellings of this Irish name that have been used over the years, sometimes within the same newspaper article, including Degnan (still occasionally seen), Dignan, Dignam, Dagnan, Deignan, Diegnan, Dignol, Duigenen, Duignan, Duignam, Dygnan, and no doubt, others.

³ The Martins were Jonathon and his son William.

⁴ “Magnus” would have been Magnus Edgar.

⁵ See *Gabriola's Industrial Past—the brickyard*, published in *SHALE* 15, May 2007.

⁶ The Dick family lived on what is now Somerset Farm. The Chapples, Edgars, and Martins lived along the south shore east of the McGuffies' property. The Eassons owned land in the centre of the island west of Tait Road. The McLay, Hall, Easthom (at that time), and LeBœufs held adjoining lands out toward Lock Bay.

service to several points on Gabriola often proved disastrous or uneconomical, there has always been fierce competition among the various community areas for mail delivery facilities, ferries for people and produce, and eventually, in the recent past, even for a medical emergency evacuation dock.

This article introduces a series of five articles on the history of Gabriola's wharves. These are:

- Gabriola's wharves in the Northumberland Channel
- Gabriola's wharves at the Maples and in Degnen Bay
- Gabriola's wharves in Silva Bay
- Gabriola's wharves at Twin Beaches and Berry Point, and possibly in Peterson Bay; and
- Gabriola's wharves in Descanso Bay.

Acknowledgments

Several Gabriolans contributed to my research for these articles: Janet Stobbs helped me find archived photographs in the Museum and Barrie Humphrey skillfully burrowed in old Gabriola directories and Nanaimo newspapers. Nick Doe is a tireless researcher and always a fund of useful information, old maps, and aerial photographs.

I had informative discussions with Peggy Parkinson, Gordon McDonald, Hugh Tufnail, and Heather & Robert Gray about Degnen Bay, and with Russ Beattie and Frank Hackwood about Twin Beaches; Hazel Windecker shared her family's stories and photographs.

I am very grateful to them all. ◇

[EDITOR: This is the first of six articles on Gabriola's wharves by Jenni Gehlbach.]



The Descanso Bay terminal and the Emergency Wharf in 2010.

Google Earth.