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

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Gabriola's wharves— The Maples and Degnen Bay

by Jenni Gehlbach

The wharf at the Maples

At the southeast end of False Narrows, at the foot of the hill near the Community Hall is a shallow bay locally known as the Maples where there was once a well-used wharf. We don't know when it was first built, but June Harrison writes:¹

"The wharf at the Maples had been discussed as far back as 1894 as a suitable landing and docking area for a larger boat and the ranchers at the south end were anxious that something better be done for their needs."

The shore there is suitable for wharf construction, so it seems likely that the early landowner would have constructed one; however, the preemptor of the land in that area was Magnus Edgar and on September 10, 1891, *The Nanaimo Free Press* reported:

"PIC-NIC ON GABRIOLA

At the invitation of the Lower End Settlers, all the settlers of Gabriola Island have been invited to a grand pic-nic to be given at "The Maples," (Mr. Magnus Edgar) a beautiful spot on the banks of the False Narrows. A gala time is expected, as all are entering into the reunion with earnestness and in a jovial spirit."

There is no mention of a wharf at the Maples in that 1891 article.

When writing about the Gabriola arguments in the late 1920s about which

wharf an official ferry service should use, June Harrison said:²

"The ranchers at the south end began to agitate for The Maples Wharf to be fixed as there were sizeable launches being used and they wanted a safer mooring."

So clearly there was a wharf of some kind there by then. Dated June 6, 1929, a letter from the Department of Public Works transferring administration of wharves and floating landings to the Minister of Marine & Fisheries lists "Gabriola Centre" (Green Wharf), North Gabriola Island (Descanso Bay), and "Maples BC", but the latter might refer to Maple Bay near Duncan.

The first pictorial record I have found of The Maples Wharf was in Peggy Lewis Imredy's contribution to the history of Gabriola.³ Under a picture of the wharf, she wrote,

"...we first lived near here; the house can be seen in the background. I remember seeing the *Atrevida* coming up the channel on her maiden voyage,⁴ and waiting 'til it was time to go to the North end for the

² Harrison 1982, p.208.

³ Peggy Lewis Imredy ed., *Gabriola Island—Gabriola Three Schools Reunion*, p.68, 1984.

⁴ This is slightly puzzling: "up the channel" from where? The ferry was built in New Westminster. It was the ferry's official inauguration at Descanso Bay on August 14, 1931, but the *Atrevida* had sailed before that—it did its first trip between Nanaimo and Gabriola on the morning of July 31 and made a moonlight excursion out of the CPR terminal in Nanaimo that evening. It berthed overnight in Nanaimo. Possibly, on the inaugural day, it went down to the south end from Nanaimo before heading back to Descanso Bay.

¹ June Lewis-Harrison, *The People of Gabriola*, 1982, p.201.



Pictures of the dock at the Maples are hard to come by. This probably familiar one appears to be all that has survived.
Gabriola Museum 1997.008.010

ceremonies. Bill (Capt.) Higgs found an Indian skull jutting out of the ground in the ditch at the side of the road”.

and without specifying dates, June Harrison wrote:⁶

“The popular wharf at the Maples was

The remark about the *Atrevida*'s maiden voyage dates the memoir as 1931, and another picture⁵ of people is captioned, “...at the Maples...1931”. And a quote from the 1939 school newsletter (p.49), *Anecho*, says: “There has been a new float put in at the Maples.”

Wharves require lots of upkeep,



The wharf at the Maples in 1951

BC1437:23

⁵ Imredy 1984, p.118.

⁶ Harrison 1982, p.200.



Some "People of Gabriola" at The Maples Wharf in 1931. Left–Right: Maud Logan (Logan Bay is at the end of Stalker), Peggy Lewis (grand-daughter of James & Mary Lewis who bought preemptor Aaron Martin's land on the west side of Degnen Bay), Dick Edgar (grandson of preemptor Magnus Edgar), Walter Logan, Babs Lewis (Peggy's sister), John Fynamore (best known these days for being photographed firing the kiln at the brick factory). Mrs. Poyner's house in background.

Gabriola Island—Gabriola Three Schools Reunion 1984, p.118.

constantly maintained by the local residents and would become the subject of much controversy later on when attempts to keep the Maples in use were to come about."

Hazel Windecker (née Cox, 1929) says Mudge Islanders used The Maples Wharf and she remembers travelling as a child between the Maples and Mudge Island in *Breezy*, the speedboat owned by her uncle William "Punch" Cox. A 1946 Davenport map of the Nanaimo Alberni district has a wharf marked ("WH") at this location, and an aerial map from 1951 clearly shows the wharf at the Maples. A large float or barge is nearby.

A similar aerial map from 1962 shows no dock in this location, and Neil Aitken and Aula Bell wrote in *Gabriola Place Names*

that the wharf at the Maples ended its life in the early 1950s.

Wharves in Degnen Bay

Several of the earliest European settlers farmed the south end of Gabriola and were clustered near beautiful, sheltered Degnen Bay and along what became Peterson Road. The Gray and Degnen families⁷

⁷ By 1884, Thomas Degnen held the NE part of the NE ¼ of Section 1 (40 shoreline acres) and the SE ¼ of Section 6 (160 acres). His son James had the NE ¼ of Section 6 (160 acres). Robert Gray held the W ½ of the NE ¼ of Section 1 (67 shoreline acres) and the NW ¼ of Section 1 (160 acres). Also, his son James Gray held the SE ¼ of Section 17 (140 acres near Clark Bay). Peterson held the E ½ of the NW ¼ of Section 6 (80 acres) and the SW ¼ of Section 30 (88 north shoreline



Degnen Bay - Wikimapia

settled on the shores of the bay—Degnen on the northeast of the bay and Robert Gray on the west and northwest. Henry Peterson and Alexander Shaw settled inland, north of them, and across to the forested cliffy north shore of Gabriola.

Degnen Bay is called "Degnen's Cove" in one early map, and on a 1930 hand-drawn copy of part of Admiralty Chart No. 3618,⁸ the bay is called "Dingmans Cove", a name used apparently by members of the Royal Vancouver Yacht Club. This chart shows a public wharf and the Degnen family's farmland at that time, and marks the "South Gabriola P.O." at the location of the Gray family's farm.

Modern marine charts show the public and commercial wharves in the bay and also mark old pilings in front of the Gray farm,

acres). A. Shaw held the SW ¼ of Section 2 (110 acres).

⁸ Chart 3618 of the Flat Top Islands area is listed in the 1923 UK Admiralty Catalogue. Nowadays, Admiralty Chart 3618 is of an area up near Quatsino Sound; the chart that includes Degnen Bay, Silva Bay and the Flat Top Islands is 3475.

where the wharf of the Gray family once was.

Degnen Bay in the 19th century

Thomas Degnen was about 30 years old when he came to Gabriola. He had arrived in Victoria in the mid-1850s and preempted his first Gabriola land in 1862.

He and Robert Gray were both Irish immigrants who had rejected the life of

coalminers in Nanaimo, and both acquired good farming land with access to the waters of Degnen Bay. In 1868, Degnen married Jane Janimetga, the Cowichan woman who reputedly had first brought him over to Gabriola by boat.



JANE DEGNEN

Gabriola Museum Archives

June Harrison wrote:⁹

"Thomas Degnen wasted no time in finding a solid dugout canoe, purchased the worthy craft and brought it to Gabriola. It was a sturdy canoe, capable of carrying two tons, propelled by 12' sweeps. Five of the nearby ranchers were always on hand to man the sweeps, while Thomas Degnen

⁹ Harrison 1982, p.196.



Waiting for a ferry in Degnen Bay; judging by their clothes, in the 1930s.

Gabriola Museum 1995.017.001

and Robert Gray manned the steering sweep. This craft proved to be a boon to the farmers, and Degnen would call along the shore to pick up neighbours and their goods.”

Much of the shoreline of Degnen Bay is gently sloped and would have allowed easy canoe launch and landing—no need for an elaborate wharf at first. The journey from Nanaimo took 4 or 5 hours apparently, and Harrison writes: “Degnen’s canoe was one of the first means of transportation between Gabriola Island and Nanaimo.” But what about larger freight and animals? Old-timers told June Harrison that:

“Scows made of logs lashed carefully together, provided a flatbed for bringing ploughs, hardware, oxen, cattle and sheep over to the ranchers. Careful steering would make the precarious voyage a safe one, although there are many stories of horses swimming ashore.”

By 1871, Thomas Degnen had acquired a more substantial boat—the *Patsy I*. At this time, there were 18 settlers on Gabriola, many with large families, no doubt very grateful for a less precarious mode of transport than canoes and scows, and Degnen had a wharf at Degnen Bay by then because Harrison reports:¹⁰

“Thomas Degnen...in 1871 obtained a revolutionary new craft. The *Patsy I* was an excellent steam launch that would carry some forty passengers and a considerable amount of produce...and his son James worked as the engineer.

“...One day, when the *Patsy I* was being repaired at the Degnen wharf, a sudden fire brought about its destruction when it burned to the waterline....”

Thomas Degnen’s great grandson Gordon McDonald told me that his family’s original wharf was tucked into the

¹⁰ Harrison 1982, p.197.



A steamer docked at the Government Wharf on two different occasions and tides. The large structure moored on the opposite side to the steamer was probably a fish-buying camp.

Gabriola Museum 1995.017.002
Gabriola Museum 1996.003.005.11

protected northeast corner of the bay, below their house. He says that the ramp sloped down near the petroglyph carved into the sandstone.

The stories about old mail services indicate that boats were coming into Degnen Bay throughout the 1870s and 80s. It is not clear when public money was first used to build or maintain wharves at Degnen Bay, but there must have been a pretty substantial public wharf there in the mid-1890s because on July 26, 1896 the *Victoria Daily Colonist* announced:

“Nanaimo, July 25

R. Nightingale is constructing a large pile-driver for the provincial government. It will first be employed to repair the south wharf at Gabriola Island.”

We can certainly see a fairly substantial wharf at the Degnen farm end of “Dingman Cove” in the 1930 hand-drawn chart, but it’s not clear whether the wharf was marked on the original chart or just by the RVYC copyist. Also we don’t know when the original chart was surveyed, though we know it was before 1923.

Steamers sometimes came into Degnen Bay in the 1890s. Helen Hill-Tout (née Taylor), who lived as a child in Taylor Bay, told June Harrison about her Christmas trip to Victoria in 1896:

“Of course, we could have gone to Nanaimo and taken the train (E and N) but Dad knew Captain Gardiner of the SS *City of Nanaimo* who would be calling in at Degnen Bay in early December. We had to trek the ten miles to Degnen Bay on foot. I

walked part of the way but we took our toy wagon...and I was pulled by Dad in the wagon. Ten miles is a long, tiring walk and too much for even a tough little girl barely five years old."

The schedules for the SS *City of Nanaimo* for December 1896 published in the *Victoria Daily Colonist* read: "Leave Nanaimo for Victoria Saturdays at 7 a.m.", giving no details of intervening ports of call, so it is not clear whether Degnen Bay was a regular port of call. Its local route is a puzzle too—it's hard to imagine substantial steamers negotiating tricky tidal currents in False Narrows with its reefs, Dodd Narrows, or Gabriola Passage on a regular basis.

As late as 1930, people at the south end were apparently still dependent on the Gray or Degnen families for transportation to and from Nanaimo. In a letter petitioning the authorities for improved boat or ferry service, on February 16, 1930, Mrs Euphemia Shaw wrote about their difficulties, saying, "we have only one boat a week from this end and that is through the kindness of Mr. James Gray".

The Government Wharf in Degnen Bay

Included in the Hansard record of Canada's Parliamentary proceedings on June 14, 1929 is a list of "Public works chargeable to income, Harbours and Rivers" for British Columbia.¹¹ Amongst the approved constructions is "Degnen's Bay—float". June Harrison writes: "In 1929, the federal government installed a wharf at the northeasterly end of Degnen

Bay, and the road leading to the wharf was upgraded." Although this wharf was not among the BC marine construction and repairs listed in October 1929, it appears in a 1932 aerial photograph.

The Gabriola Museum Archive has some interesting early but undated photographs of the federal government wharf in Degnen Bay. One black-and-white picture shows boats at the wharf and Hugh Tufnail says, "they're pretty old", and he thinks that the vessel at the back behind the dock is probably a fish-buying camp; he says it looks just like the NORPAC camp that used to be at Les Page's in Silva Bay.

There is also a good photograph of a large group of relaxed people gathered at the landward end of the Government Wharf, with the wood planks looking quite fresh. A much later colour photo shows the typical red railings used on federal wharfs and piers in the 20th century.

Hugh Tufnail told me that the grid beside the government dock was built by his father Roy Tufnail, who came to Gabriola in 1934 when he was only 17, with local fishermen including Randy and Bill Thompson.

Canada's National Harbours Board was created in 1936 to centrally manage Canada's ports and harbours. The Harbour Commissions Act of 1964 provided significant local autonomy with major expenses to be approved by Canada Transport and the Minister of Public Works responsible for major repairs. In 1973, more than 2000 public harbours and government wharves were transferred to the Department of the Environment and throughout the 1970s and 80s the federal government moved toward a policy of devolution for ports and harbours.

¹¹ Journals of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada From the 7th of February 1929, to the 14th of June 1929, both days inclusive ... Third session of the sixteenth Parliament of Canada session 1929. Printed by order of Parliament, Volume LXVI.



Degnen Bay in 1932. (a) Government Wharf; (b) Degnen; (c) Taylor (*formerly* Martin); (d) Gray; (e) Lewis? (*formerly* Martin); (f) Snunéymux^w village. Old surveying annotations—Rock, Tur[nabout], Vil[lage], Isle, Log—are red on the original contact print.

Adapted from UBC Geog. Dept. A4530-33

Responsibility for managing small harbours was shifted to local groups such as the Degnen Bay Harbour Authority, but with federal monies still available for significant repairs.

Private wharves in Degnen Bay

In the 1932 aerial photo, Degnen Bay's low-lying shores are surrounded by farmland. You can see the curve of what is now South Road turning back inland at the top of the picture and side road (Martin Road) that turns off at Gossip Corner

down toward the tip of the northeastern arm of the bay where Thomas Degnen's house and wharf had been in the 1870s. You can also just see a very small dock near that end of the bay in 1932, and there is a big private dock in the narrow cove on the opposite side, across from the Government Wharf. There are also private docks visible on the long shore (off Gray's property) and another halfway along the lower shore in the picture. A similar aerial picture (BC2244:83) from 1957 shows little change except for the disappearance of the two biggest private docks.

The substantial private commercial wharf that is next to the Degnen Bay Government Wharf today is not shown on aerial photos up to 1957 and Margaret Hesthammer says it was still not there when she first came to live in the area in 1976. Peggy Parkinson, who came to Degnen Bay in 1966, says that in the 1980s Steven and Margaret "Mugs" Taylor held the water lot lease there and had a slip where people could haul out and work on their boats. After the Taylors, John Bateson maintained and managed the enlarged wharf.

Hugh Tufnail told me that his father Roy bought land¹² near Degnen Bay from the Martin family—about 40 inland acres, which they called the "back 40", and about 4 acres on the little point across from the Government Wharf. Their road access was via Martin Road and the previous owner had started building a house on the land in 1906. Hugh said that the long private wharf in the narrow cove in the aerial picture most probably belonged to William Taylor who had a fish boat and had also bought some of the Martin land. Hugh was born in 1953 and says the

Tufnails had their dock a little further along the shore, with steps down to it, and in his boyhood, their dock was the only one in Degnen Bay apart from the Government Wharf.

Roy Tufnail and Kenny Crocker developed the Bevmaryl Crescent area around 1960, and Roy also owned a pile driver and a landing barge with big skids, so he worked on various docks and also brought large keel beams from Chemainus to Withey's Shipyard in Silva Bay. Hugh told me that the small V-shaped structure visible in the 1932 aerial photo near their cove was a set of "stiff-leg" booms designed to keep logs away from the beach—there had been a log dump there.

In 1966, Peggy and Roy Parkinson became partners with their friends Ernie and Elsa Creamer, and Al and Jen MacNeill to buy Roy and Betty Tufnail's land. Parkinson's group were long-term close friends and business partners and they built their wharf together as soon as they got their land, coming up from Victoria on vacations and weekends to do so. Their wharf was on the little cove's shore opposite the Tufnails' dock. Peggy (who lives now on Bevmaryl Crescent) told me: "When we first came, we had lots of boating friends in Vancouver, Victoria, and Nanaimo and sometimes we had as many as 13 boats tied up at our dock." Hugh Tufnail said the Parkinson group shared the access ramp down to their wharf.

There are several private docks in the northeastern arm of Degnen Bay now. About a half-dozen are accessed from Bevmaryl Crescent or Martin Road near where it meets South Road. Also, Peggy says there are now three in their little cove, and a prominent cantilevered ramp to a

¹² The land was part of the 112 acres in the SW ¼ of Section 4 held by the Martin family in 1884.



'The Maples' public dock is a memory now, but the site remains—now owned privately.

Caption and photograph from Gabriolore

float has recently been built on land that belonged to Palmer the boat-builder. ◇

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



Degnen Bay, 2009. Google Earth