

Mount Vernon, a city of just over 32,000 residents, is located in Skagit County about 60 miles north of Seattle. The area was home to Upper Skagit Indians long before the first Europeans -- mostly fur traders -- passed through in the late 1700s. The first settlers came in 1869 or 1870, and the town itself was founded and named in 1877. Two massive logjams that blocked navigation on the Skagit were cleared by 1879, allowing upstream navigation, but the city has carried on a running battle with the oft-flooding river ever since. In 1884 Mount Vernon became the Skagit County seat, and by 1890 its population had grown to nearly 1,000, supported by logging and mining to the east and farming in the fertile bottomlands of the Skagit Valley. In recent years, Mount Vernon's economy has become more diversified, and major employers now include food processing plants, the Skagit County Hospital, Skagit Valley College, and local and county governments.

The Upper Skagit Indians

Humans have existed within the basin of the Skagit River for more than 11,000 years, and the region is the ancestral land of the Skagit Tribe, a branch of the Lushootseed linguistic group of Coast Salish. For centuries, they led a largely sedentary life of hunting, fishing, and gathering, living in small groups at sites from Whidbey Island to the west and along the course of the Skagit River to the foothills of the Cascade Mountains in the east.

In more recent times, tribal identity split into two divisions that came to be known as the Lower Skagit and Upper Skagit. The Upper Skagit, who ranged from near today's Mount Vernon east to the Cascade Mountains, were further subdivided into 10 or 11 small bands that lived in close proximity to the river. Those living nearest to present-day Mount Vernon were called the Nookachamps (Nook-wa-cha-mish in the Native language), and a creek east of the city still bears that name.

Both the Upper and Lower Skagits were signatories to the Point Elliott Treaty of 1855, which did not serve them well. The Lower Skagits were consolidated with other Coast Salish tribes and bands into the Swinomish Tribe, and were relocated to the Swinomish Reservation on Fidalgo Island in 1873. The Upper Skagits were deemed too scattered to merit status as a separate tribe or a right to their own land. Most were taken to the Tulalip and Lummi reservations, but many drifted back to their traditional lands along the Skagit. Through the decades of this diaspora, they somehow managed to maintain tribal identity, and in 1974 one of the manifold inequities of the Point Elliott Treaty was redressed when the federal government granted the Upper Skagits full tribal status. The tribe established a reservation on an 84-acre parcel of land east of Sedro Woolley, and also bought a 15-acre site adjacent to Interstate 5 north of Mount Vernon at Bow. In 1995 the tribe opened the Skagit Valley Casino there, and in March 2001, a 103-room hotel and conference center.

The First Settlers and the Dammed River

The earliest significant non-Native settlement in what are now Skagit and Island counties was in the 1850s and 1860s, first on Whidbey and Fidalgo islands, then at LaConner and places to the north and east of the wide delta of the Skagit River. This river, the second largest in Washington, splits into two forks before emptying into Skagit Bay, and both forks were navigable except near their mouths at low tide. But about 10 miles upriver and very near present-day Mount Vernon, before the point where the river divides, two massive logjams blocked all navigation. An early history of the region gave the following description:

"The great jam consisted of two divisions, the lower beginning at the old Kimble homestead below Mount Vernon and extending up the river to a point about opposite the present Kimble residence, a distance of perhaps half a mile. The upper part of the jam was considerably larger, beginning about half a mile above the upper end of the lower jam and extending over a mile. The lower one was believed to be at least a century old and was probably much older, while the upper one was to all appearance of comparatively recent formation" (*An Illustrated History*, 113).

These logjams may have dated back to reported eruptions of Mount Baker in the eighteenth century, but however formed, they were massive, and the upper jam grew every year as more natural debris made its way downriver. It was described at the time as being

"So solidly ... jam packed that it could be crossed at almost any point in its entire extent and upon it had grown a veritable forest, in some instances trees of even two or three feet in diameter growing upon what was merely a mass of rotten debris with no lodgment in the earth at all. Underneath the tangled mass of logs, moss, bushes and trees the impetuous torrent of the Skagit forced its way in some places in furious cataracts, in others in deep black pools filled with fish ... (*An Illustrated History*, 108).

The logjams were so dense and long-established that living trees up to 90 feet tall grew from them. Together, the two obstructions rendered the river largely useless in both directions. Goods could not make it to Mount Vernon by river from towns closer to the salt water, and the wealth of the interior -- lumber, coal, and minerals alike -- could not be rafted or barged down from their source to mills and markets accessible from Skagit Bay. So long as the river remained closed to navigation, Mount Vernon had little hope of being much more than a fertile but somewhat isolated agricultural outpost.

That wasn't enough to deter a few intrepid settlers. The earliest on record were David E. Kimble (1828-1908), Jasper Gates (1840-1923), and Joseph F. Dwelley (1839-?), who in 1869 and 1870 homesteaded on land near what was to become Mount Vernon, and in Gates case, on the very site where the town would first be built. In late 1870 several women, including the wives of Kimble and Gates, arrived on the vessel *Linnie*, which was the first steamer to make it as far as the lower logjam, and Dwelley's wife and two children joined him the following year.

The valley downstream from these early homesteads was attracting more settlers, some of whom had married Native women, and the growing population was creeping upriver. By 1877 it appears that Kimble, Gates, Dwelley, and their families had been joined by several others in the area near the logjams. That is the year that Harrison Clothier (1840-1906), a teacher who had come west from Saratoga, New York, made it up the river. He and Edward G. English (1850- 1930), a former pupil from Clothier's teachings days in Wisconsin, bought 10 acres from Jasper Gates for \$100, opened a store, and prepared a town plat (the original of which was never recorded, and thus of dubious validity). They named their aspiring community Mount Vernon, after the Virginia home of the nation's first president. Clothier became the town's first postmaster, and in later years, doing business as "Clothier & English," the two men would play leading roles in the political and business development of the area.

The first residential home in Mount Vernon was built by William Bice in 1877, and one Jonathon Schott opened the town's first hotel that same year. By the next year there was a saloon, and before the decade was out, a larger hotel and a drugstore. Started with little more than a name, Mount Vernon had in the span of three years become the first permanent town in the inland territory of what would soon become Skagit County.

Unlocking the River

The two huge logjams on the Skagit, which local Indians said had been there "since time immemorial" (*An Illustrated History*, 108), continued to stifle development of the rich mineral and timber resources east of town. In 1876 a newspaper described the situation this way:

"All of the settlements are crowded within the delta or along the forks of the river and Skagit City, while a magnificent country along a fine navigable steam for over sixty miles above the jam is by this means prevented from being opened to settlement and cultivation, to say nothing of the numberless mines of the best coal found on the Sound, or the great amount of ... timber that this obstacle prevents coming into market. Logging can be carried on only to a limited extent until after their removal, as the high land is too far back from the river to haul lumber from" (*Washington Standard*, April 29, 1876).

Another reason for clearing the jams was perhaps even more compelling -- the safety of those who had started to live and farm in the rich Skagit Valley downriver from Mount Vernon. The water that backed up into the Skagit's sloughs regularly found its way to cause trouble in the lowlands, and a sudden burst of the natural dams when the Skagit was in flood could have taken a heavy toll on livestock, buildings, and in all probability, human lives.

The daunting task seemed too great for local resources, and the people of the valley turned to the government for help. It was not forthcoming. As early as 1874 or 1875, a general with the Engineering Corps of the U. S. Army had examined the obstructions and estimated that they could be cleared at a cost of \$15,000. A request for funds was taken to the nation's capital by the Territorial delegate Orange Jacobs (1827-1914), but nothing came of it.

Realizing that they were on their own, a group of settlers formed a company in 1876 to take on the logjam themselves. The effort was initially funded by public subscription, and the men had hopes that much of the cost would be recouped through the sale of logs salvaged from the jam. It took them six months to cut a 250-foot channel through the lower obstruction and an additional two years to breach the upper blockage. Floods sometimes added to their work by piling more flotsam on the upper jam, and at other times aided them by sweeping loosened debris down the river. It was laborious and highly dangerous work, but they kept at it.

By the summer of 1879 the logjams had been cleared enough to permit navigation through and above Mount Vernon, but at substantial personal cost to those who had risked their lives to do it. The seven men who were most involved in the effort -- Joseph S. Wilson, Dennis Storrs, James Cochrane, Fritz Dibbern, Daniel Hines, Marvin Minnick, John Quirk, and Donald McDonald -- each ended up in debt, and the great bulk of the logs removed from the jam proved rotten and of no commercial value. Petitions were made to Congress to compensate them for their efforts, or to at least let them purchase timbered land upriver from Mount Vernon at a discounted price. There is no indication that any of the petitions were granted or that the men were otherwise made whole. It appears that all they received was the satisfaction of performing a minor miracle of amateur engineering, opening the upper Skagit to navigation, and ensuring that the new town of Mount Vernon would be able to grow and prosper.

Gold found near Ruby Creek far up the Skagit River around 1878 drew more settlers and prospectors to the area, and by 1881 Mount Vernon had a population of about 75 people. In 1884 the town's first newspaper, the *Skagit News*, was started by publisher William C. Ewing. Under different ownership it continued publication with that name for 12 years, then became the *Skagit Valley News* in 1897, the *Mount Vernon Herald* in 1913, and in 1956, the *Skagit Valley Herald*, which still publishes today. Another paper, the *Chronicle*, was started in Mount Vernon in 1891, renamed *The Democrat*, then the *Post*, and is still published (2010) as the weekly *Argus*.

From Backwater to County Seat

With the river now open, the optimism of those who first settled near the logjam was vindicated, although pioneer Joseph Dwelley and his family had decided to move down to LaConner in 1873, six years before the river was cleared. In November 1883 Territorial legislators from Whatcom County who lived and worked in the towns and settlements around LaConner, Anacortes, and the Skagit River successfully petitioned for the creation of a new county, to be calved off from the southern portions of Whatcom. LaConner was selected as the first seat of government for this new Skagit County, but in November 1884, just seven years after Clothier & English had drawn up its first (and unrecorded) plat and just five years after the logjams were substantially cleared, voters selected Mount Vernon as the county seat.

Whether intentionally or through disregard, the citizens of Mount Vernon by 1884 had still not petitioned the Territorial Legislature for official incorporated status, and did not do so for another four years. In 1888, one year before Washington became a state, Mount Vernon's population reached a thousand, and residents finally

saw fit to prepare incorporation papers. The law required that the petition be approved by a federal Territorial judge, and in early March 1889 Judge Cornelius Hanford (1849-1926) refused to do so, ruling the Territorial Community Incorporation Law unconstitutional. Apparently unwilling to take the judge at his word, the townspeople tried again later the same month, with predictable results. Neither the law nor the judge had changed, Hanford again refused to approve the petition, and Mount Vernon remained unincorporated.

Washington achieved statehood on November 11, 1889, and was designated a federal judicial district. None other than Judge Hanford became the district's first, and for the next 10 years, only federal judge. Now both the law and the judge had changed, and Mount Vernon tried again. This time a petition signed by more than 100 citizens was approved by the Skagit County commissioners and by a county judge named Winn. Mount Vernon was just one of 43 cities and towns officially incorporated in 1890, the first post-statehood year. On June 27 the city held its first municipal election, and C. D. Kimball (despite the different spelling, this was the son of early settler David Kimble) was elected mayor, together with a five-man city council. Together, they then appointed other city functionaries, including a city clerk, a marshal, and a police court judge. Mount Vernon was now, at last, an official incorporated city under state law.

To Grow and to Prosper

Skagit County's abundant resources -- minerals in the mountains, seemingly endless stands of old-growth timber, rivers teeming with fish, and some of the most fertile soil in the world deposited in the valley by the Skagit River -- were attracting new settlers to the inland areas even before the town of Mount Vernon incorporated. By 1885 the county's population had topped 2,800. Town founders Clothier & English, among the many to prosper, had crews out logging the forests east of town and were soon selling several hundred thousand feet of logs to the Bellingham Mill Company. Clothier had also been a leader in the 1883 push to establish Skagit County, and would hold various public offices during his career, including, in 1886, county probate judge.

And as the town he cofounded grew, so did its needs. The first school was built in 1881. A regular steamboat mail run was started in 1883, and a larger school went up in 1884, with an enrollment of 19 boys and 26 girls. That was the same year Mount Vernon's first church congregation, of Baptists, was organized, although the city's first church building didn't come until 1889, 11 years after its first saloon opened. But cultural pursuits were also served, and the city's first opera house opened in 1892.

The Skagit Sawmill and Manufacturing Company was incorporated in 1887 by, among others, Clothier & English, another of the many investments they, and particularly Edward English, would make in the logging industry. The following year the company's, and the town's, first mill was built the on the riverfront by Captain David F. Decatur (1838-1913).

A devastating fire in 1891 destroyed most of the riverside commercial district, and much of it was rebuilt on 1st Street, a little farther back from the banks of the oft-flooding Skagit. But not all was disaster that year. In August 1891 the tracks of the Seattle & Northern Railroad reached Mount Vernon, allowing the economy to be more easily uncoupled from the unpredictable river. Just two years later a publication prepared for the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition by the Washington World's Fair Commission showed how far the young city had come:

"Mount Vernon, county seat, on Skagit River seven miles from its mouth, and on the line of Great Northern railway. It is the shipping and commercial point for an area of 60,000 acres of cultivated land; has a national bank, school, water works, a fire department, an electric light plant, Methodist, Baptist, Christian, Catholic and Free Methodist churches; a sash and door factory, two sawmills with a combined output in 1892 of 900,000 feet, two shingle mills the aggregate cut of which was 12,360,000 shingles in 1892, valued at \$19,293; and a weekly newspaper. Coal and iron deposits are in that vicinity. Population, census 1890, 770; present estimate, 1,500" (Edmonds and Meany, 173).

The year that was written, 1893, also turned out to be a pretty good one for Mount Vernon, despite the financial panic that seized the nation that year. The Skagit County courthouse had stayed in LaConner after Mount Vernon became county seat, and this was a source of considerable irritation. The slight was remedied in 1893 when the courthouse was packed up and moved to a substantial new building in downtown Mount Vernon. That building, its third-floor garrets now gone, still stands today (2010). It was also in 1893 that the city's first bridge across the Skagit, a wooden-truss structure with a draw-span to allow vessels to pass, was opened, supplementing a ferry that had been operating nearby for several years.

Into the Twentieth Century

Mount Vernon was included in the federal census for the first time in 1900, and the population at that time was 1,120. The Skagit County fairgrounds were established in 1901, new schools went up in 1905 and 1908, and by the 1910 census there were 2,381 residents, more than double the count from 10 years earlier. Steady development continued and the economy diversified. A government publication from 1905 had the following to say:

"[Mount Vernon] is in a wonderfully rich part of the valley and surrounded by farms noted for their huge crops of oats, potatoes, hops and grass Having both water and rail transportation the town is in good shape for business of every kind. At the present time the town is essentially agricultural, though admirably adapted for some manufacturing purposes. Dairying is one of the chief occupations of the nearby farmers. Probably 3,000 cows are within a radius of six miles of the town. There are large lumber mills, shingle mills, dairies, a bank, two weekly papers, the "Argus" and "News-Herald" The chief exports are hay, oats, lumber, shingles, butter, vegetables, cattle, fruit and hops The town is not a boom town, but one of quiet, steady growth, and will some day rise up in strength and show an astonishing development" (*A Review of the Resources*, 163).

Another contemporary account describes Mount Vernon seven years later, in 1912:

"The rapid growth in the recent past, and its present solid prosperity, comes from its being the most important center in the great productive territory known as the "Skagit Flats," which extend thirty miles along the river, with a varying width of five to ten miles. This section produces annually a million and a half bushels of oats and barley, 30,000 tons of hay, sustains 10,000 cows and grows a wealth of apples, pears, plums, cherries and milk. Among other industries are a fruit cannery, machine shops, sash and box factory and a number of other small enterprises. The city has a fine public school system, a dozen religious societies, many fraternal bodies, and a progressive Commercial Club. The county has here a fine brick court house, and there are many solid brick and cement business structures; three solid banks, two progressive newspapers, many fine modern homes, a modern sewer system, a gravity water system, and well paved streets" (Reid, 105-106).

In August 1912 Mount Vernon also welcomed the arrival of its first electric interurban train, owned by the powerful East Coast conglomerate Stone & Webster. This provided convenient connections to Bellingham and Sedro Woolley and was later to play a significant part in the construction of dams on the upper Skagit River.

Mount Vernon continued to do well into the 1920s. A new courthouse went up in 1922, along with a new high school. Skagit Valley College was founded in 1926, and Highway 99 came in the late 1920s, providing an excellent transportation link between the city and larger population centers to the south and north. Mount Vernon suffered during the years of the Great Depression along with nearly every other Washington community, but federal funds from the Works Progress Administration helped build more roads, another school, and a new post office during those dark years. By 1940, the city population stood at 4,278.

It was not until the end of World War II that the city fully recovered from the effects of the Depression. The decade between 1950 and 1960 saw the opening of several new schools and a new campus for the college. After a 1955 bond issue pushed by the city's Women's Guild passed with a 92-percent "yes" vote, construction began on Skagit Valley Hospital, which was completed in 1958. It has continued to grow over the years and is now the

major provider of comprehensive health care for the county. More business came along when Interstate 5, completed in the 1960s, cut right through Mount Vernon, cementing its links with the larger cities of Everett, Seattle, and Bellingham.

Mount Vernon's population began to boom in the 1970-1980 decade, expanding from 8,800 to more than 13,000. During that same period, the city annexed 2.32 square miles of county land to the north and east, most of which was developed as commercial property. Over the years since, additional smaller annexations have pushed the city's limits farther south, and its population has continued to grow, reaching 31,000 in 2010.

The Eternal Battle: City vs. River

The Skagit River has been the one constant in the life of Mount Vernon, for good and for ill. The relationship was fraught from the beginning and has remained so ever since. After the logjams were cleared in the 1870s, frequent floods bedeviled the city, with major inundations in 1892 and 1894, after the latter of which a massive and none-too-effective dike system was built at considerable expense.

Seeming to follow a two-year periodicity, the Skagit ran rampant again in 1896, and the Skagit County Times reported that

"West Mount Vernon is next in line of progress and received no favor from the impartial flood. The water, rising from 1-2 feet above the first floor of the dwellings, swept fences and everything movable with it. Among the miracles of the age was the ability of the residents of Mount Vernon proper to keep the dikes in shape to restrain the freshet [flood] from sweeping through the streets of the city. By heroic effort all day Saturday and the following night the main dike was strongly reinforced by three temporary ones, which action alone saved the city as the old one repeatedly gave way" (*Skagit County Times*, November 19, 1896).

The largest flood on record up to that time came in 1909, and it was said that "it was possible to row a boat all the way from Mt. Vernon to LaConner across the fields ..." (Bourasaw, *Skagit River Journal*). Residential development in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries tended to move from the lowlands to the eastern hillsides, safe from the river's reach, but much of the downtown commercial area remained at risk. Not every Skagit flood hit Mount Vernon, but the city has carried on a running battle with the river for at least 140 years (2010).

Other serious floods came in 1917, 1921, 1951, 1975, 1990, 2003, and 2006, with less severe but still serious flooding occurring in many of the years in between. The city has steadily refined its efforts to hold back the waters, including the purchase in 2007 of a 1,500-foot portable flood wall that could be erected by fewer than a dozen people in about four hours and is hoped to be a vast improvement over labor-intensive sandbags.

The city recently has become more proactive, and began a major flood-control project in 2010 with the goal of permanently protecting the urban core from Skagit's rampant waters. Plans include revitalization of the city's urban center and a riverwalk urban trail that will run the length of downtown.

A New Century

Today (2010) Mount Vernon continues as the center of government, education, and commerce for Skagit County. Major employers and economic drivers are the food processing industry, retail trade, education, and health care. Unlike many cities, Mount Vernon has kept a great number of its historical buildings intact, and the venerable Lincoln Theater, first opened in 1926 as a vaudeville and silent movie house, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The population has grown 22.5 percent since 2000, and in 2010 stood at a little more than 32,000, with Caucasians making up 60.5 percent of the population and Hispanics 32.8 percent. Although the city is currently

(2010) weathering difficult times and high unemployment, it has survived far worse, and its prospects as the leading city in the Skagit Basin remain bright.

This essay made possible by:

Washington State Department of Commerce

Sources:

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Note: This essay was revised on September 24, 2012, to give complete dates for David Decatur.