
Echtle: Olympia's Backyard: The History of Priest Point Park

By Edward Echtle

2005 marks the 100th anniversary of the designation of [Priest Point](#) as an official Olympia city park, although residents and visitors used the area as a site for outdoor recreation since the 1800s. Prior to that, Priest Point was across roads of regional history, hosting generations of native peoples, early missionaries, itinerant settlers, and weary travelers. While Priest Point lies at the outskirts of town, its role in Olympia's past makes its history a key story in an overall understanding of the community's past.

When the first Americans arrived on Puget Sound in the 1840s, the shores of Budd Inlet were Squaxin land. Tribes, including Nisqually, Puyallup, Chehalis, Suquamish, Duwamish and others shared access to the inlet's abundant shellfish beds. Seasonal encampments and year-round dwellings dotted the shores of Budd Inlet. At Priest Point, a natural spring and a productive fish trap located on Ellis Creek supported permanent residents. Early settlers noted a native cemetery consisting of tree-burials near the site as well.

The abundance of resources made Priest Point an attractive site for a claim. In 1848, responding to a request by French Canadian Hudson Bay Company employees for spiritual leadership, Catholic clergy came to the northwest. Father Pascal Ricard chose Budd Inlet as the site of a mission due to its location along the main route of travel through the region, its proximity to the American settlement at Tumwater, and the large numbers of prospective Indian converts in the vicinity. Ricard filed a Donation Land Claim that encompassed the mission site and the current park lands. There they organized a school for the purpose of converting the native population and to teach carpentry and other industrial skills mainly to young converts.

By the 1850s St. Joseph's mission complex included orchards, gardens, and three structures; the school, a dwelling and a dining hall. The buildings were of hand hewn timbers with shake roofs. Despite the rough conditions, travelers often commented on the well-kept grounds and the hospitality of the priests. Many early Olympians visited the mission regularly, including Margaret Stevens, wife of Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens, to practice her conversational French.

In 1855–56 tensions between settlers and Indians over recently negotiated treaties turned violent. American settlers built stockades and lived in fear of raids while the territorial government forced local natives to internment camps on Squaxin and Fox Islands. The missionaries' amicable relations with the Native Americans made them suspect in the eyes of American settlers who cast them as sympathizers. While the priests attempted to appear neutral, some early settlers later recalled that they kept the American settlers apprised of the mood of the local Indians. During the war, some South Sound natives who chose to lay down arms did so after consulting with the mission priests.

In 1860 the priests abandoned the mission. Ricard, who returned to France in 1857, died in 1867 and his executors disposed of the land. Over the next decades, a series of settlers used the mission structures as temporary housing. The John Sternberg Family occupied the school and partitioned it into smaller rooms, but shortly thereafter moved to town because they disliked the isolated setting.

By the late 1800s Olympia residents used the former mission lands as a picnic site. Lying within an easy row of the town, the area served as a popular destination for day outings. In summer, some local entrepreneurs offered steam powered small-launch service to Priest Point. Olympians camped, hiked, hunted, and swam in the relatively undeveloped land.

By the 1890s, the expansion of Olympia made Priest Point lands desirable to developers. Delinquent taxes on the property forced foreclosure and the city set an auction date. Meanwhile, local community activists who wished to see the land become a park sprang into action. While accounts vary, all agree that prominent businessmen Theodore Brown, Elias Payn (also known as the promoter of a proposed ship canal between Olympia and Grays Harbor,) and TJ Kegley were the main promoters behind the town's acquiring of the land for a park. Their attorney, PM Troy, became Olympia City Attorney in the 1890s, and sealed the deal with popular support. By 1905 Olympia completed the necessary actions, including purchasing the land and extending town limits to encompass the park. In 1907 the state deeded the tidelands to the city, on the condition they were used for park purposes.

Immediately, the city and local residents began remaking the park as a community space. The city celebrated with a series of community clam bakes and volunteer work parties.

Leopold Schmidt, founder of the Olympia Brewing Company, donated a chalet used to display his products at the Portland Lewis and Clark Exposition in 1905. For years the Chalet served as the social center of the park, hosting dances, weddings, and other community events. It remained in place until time rendered it unusable and dismantled in 1964.

In 1917 Olympia hosted a Fourth of July Picnic Celebration at Priest Point Park in honor of Fort Lewis Soldiers. The event was caught on film and its brief scenes of happy picnickers may be the earliest existing footage of Olympia.

Over the years the city added many features to the site, including a dock and landing for boats. As the age of the automobile emerged, the park also added a motor camp for overnight visitors. Records are unclear, but it appears park managers may have allowed the use of dredging spoils from Olympia's Harbor to enlarge the popular swimming beach. Concessionaires placed bids with the city for the opportunity to be the sole purveyors of candy, cigarettes, and other sundries to summer crowds. In the 1920s the city granted the Boy and Girl Scouts permission to use the land north of Ellis Cove as they saw fit, their only stipulation: do not remove the trees.

There were also animal attractions, a standard feature in municipal parks in the early 1900s. Historian Gordon Newell alludes to the existence of a small zoo at the site. Anecdotal accounts also suggest a caged bear was a park attraction for a time. Olympia Light and Power donated a number of elk to wander the grounds and peafowl roamed freely. The peacocks and peahens remained a popular feature until the mid 1960s and they are still one of the most frequently recounted memories of the place.

Along with the memories of good times associated with the park, there were activities and events that reflected difficult issues faced by citizens in any era. During lean economic times from the 1910s through the 1930s the town hired unemployed heads of families at \$1.25 a day to cut firewood at the park for sale to the public. In one letter to the parks department written in the 1920s a park concessionaire explained his inability to fulfill his contract after he was the victim of an armed robbery at the park. Motor campers who stayed at the park wrote letters complaining of trash and maintenance issues at the park. In all, the incidents reflect the impact of extensive use by people from a wide and diverse spectrum of social and economic backgrounds.

In January 1933 unemployed men and women from Seattle and Tacoma marched on the Capitol at Olympia to demand government relief. Olympia business men feared violence from the “hunger march” but none materialized. When organizers announced a second larger march later that winter, the Olympia business community made it known the protesters were unwelcome and many residents joined the “American Vigilantes of Thurston County” to guard the city. When the marchers arrived, the guards diverted them to the camp at Priest Point Park and kept them there under armed guard. The large group strained park facilities to their limits; local police cleared the park within a few days.

Relief from the effects of the Great Depression eventually came from the federal government. As in many municipal parks nationwide, programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration supported the improvement of park structures such as the kitchens and better trails, the results of which are still in evidence in the park today.

By the 1970s, popular interest in historical sites led to a proposal for the construction of a replica of the mission and an interpretive trail telling the early mission history. While these improvements never materialized, the importance of the site in local and regional history, while little known to today’s population, has not diminished. Its central role as Olympia’s community backyard for over a century made it a stage for community outings and family events, including celebrations and ceremonies as well as the site of occasional iniquity and injustice. Along with its early history, the enduring legacy of Priest Point Park in local history is its role as a place where Olympia and Olympia residents in all eras are most themselves, relaxing and having a good time.

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