

# DRAFT

## Johns Island History

by Bill Horder

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### EARLY HISTORY

Johns Island was named in 1841 by the American Wilkes Expedition on its round-the-world voyage of exploration. It is not known for whom the honor was intended. The Coast Salish people had been living on the island for thousands of years prior to this, harvesting the camas bulbs growing on the island and catching salmon by reef-netting. The large, shallow pits in the ground at Mission Point were used to bake the camas bulbs.

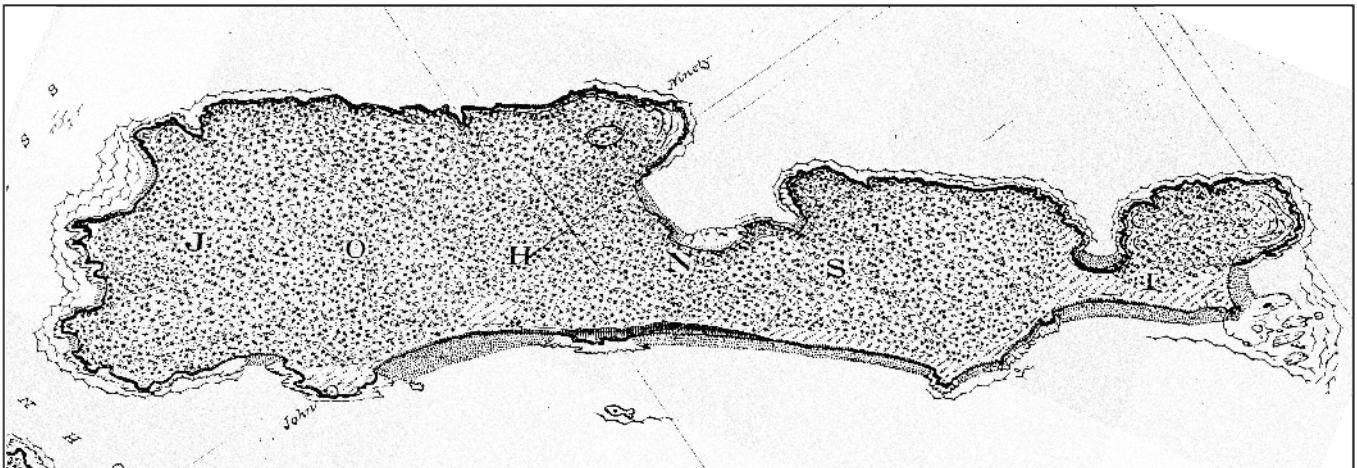
In 1872, Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany settled the US/Canada boundary dispute in favor of the Americans and the San Juan Islands became part of the United States. The first thorough survey of San Juan County was conducted by the federal General Land Office (today's Bureau of Land Management) two years later. Field notes describing the landscape were taken as part of the survey. The entry for Johns Island, dated September 30, 1874, reads:

A large proportion of this island is good agricultural land. The island is comparatively low with gently rolling surface. Timber - fir, laurel [probably madrona], alder, cottonwood and juniper. Timber is generally open, its southern coast is beautiful gravelly beach; its northern and eastern and western shores are very rocky and rough. The rock is sandstone of hard quality. [Stuart, Johns and Satellite Islands] are at present ranged over by the sheep of Mr. John Todd.



Hon. John Tod

The John Todd referred to may have been the Honorable John Tod, Chief Trader for the Hudson Bay Company. He lived in Oak Bay, Victoria, BC, but his daughter married an American who raised sheep on San Juan and Pender Islands.



Map of Johns Island, drawn by John J. Gilbert of the US Coast & Geodetic Survey in 1894. Most of the island is heavily forested with only a few clearings along the south coast. Open areas include Mission Point, the south end of what is now the airfield, and a narrow strip along the south shore of the eastern half of the island. The only building on the island seems to be at the south end of the airfield.

## DRAFT

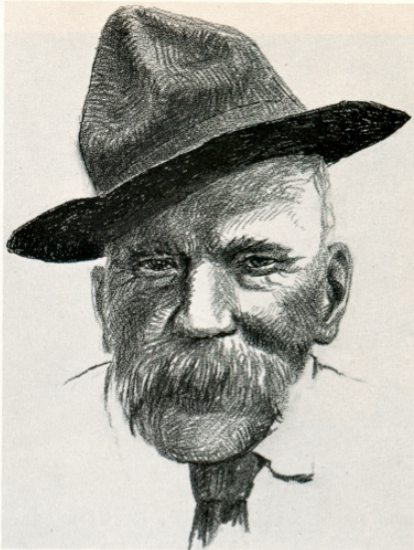
### LOGGING

Local legend has it that Johns and the other outer islands were heavily logged over the years to supply cord wood for the lime kilns in Roche Harbor which operated for 70 years from 1886 to 1956. The 1874 survey of Johns Island described the area around the southern end of Nell's Marsh as an "alder and grass swale," and a detailed map from 1894 shows most of the island covered in timber with a few small openings along the south shore and a larger meadow at the east end. In 1980 Nell Robinson had her end of the island logged. The area around the marsh was clearcut to create the runway, and the remainder of the property was selectively thinned. At the east end of the island, an old firepit built by loggers is inscribed with the date 1932. It is not known if they clearcut everything or only selectively logged.

### HOMESTEADING

The western half of Johns Island, now home to Camp Nor'wester, was homesteaded on September 28, 1891 by Paul K. Hubbs, Jr. It has remained undivided and under single ownership ever since. At the time it was homesteaded the property was surveyed at 128 acres but current surveys have revised this to approximately 133 acres.

Paul K. Hubbs, Jr., was a key figure in the early history of San Juan Island. Born in Tennessee in 1832, his father, Paul K. Hubbs, Sr., was a well-to-do lawyer and a friend of President Jackson. The family lived in Paris for five years when Paul, Jr. was a child. News of the 1849 gold rush drew the family to California, but instead of finding gold, Hubbs, Sr., got involved in politics and became state superintendent of public instruction. Paul K. Hubbs, Jr., had a restless and adventurous spirit, and a hankering for the great unknown, and in 1853, at age 20, he left his family and headed north to a logging camp on the west coast of Vancouver Island. He soon moved further north to the Queen Charlotte Islands where he married an Indian woman, the first of several wives. In 1853 he joined the Washington Territorial militia and fought in the Yakima Indian War.



Paul K. Hubbs, Jr., early San Juan Island settler and a chief actor in the Pig War drama.  
Drawing by Bill Holm

In 1857, Hubbs was appointed customs inspector on San Juan Island after the previous two inspectors resigned due to the difficulty of the job. Indeed, soon after Hubbs arrived on San Juan Island he was shot at by a party of Clallam Indians from the Olympic Peninsula encamped on the island, and that was only the beginning of his difficulties. Both the British and the Americans claimed sovereignty over the San Juan Islands and relations between the two were sometimes strained. Hubbs was the only representative of the United States government on an island dominated by the British Hudson Bay Company, there being only about 18 American settlers on the island at the time. Hubbs had his headquarters in a log building near the Hudson Bay Company station at what later became American Camp at the south end of San Juan Island.

On June 15, 1859 the American settler, Lyman Cutler, started the Pig War when he shot a British pig that strayed into his potato patch. Legend has it that when Cutler asked the British owner of the pig, Charles Griffin, to keep his pig out of Cutler's potato patch, Griffin replied that it was Cutler's responsibility to keep his potatoes out of Griffin's pig. Three weeks later, on the Fourth of July, the Americans gathered at Hubbs's cabin to raise a large American flag. This was viewed as a provocative act by the British. When

## DRAFT

Hubbs complained to the American military authorities about the way the settlers were treated by the British, the US government stationed about 60 American troops on the island. The first official election on San Juan Island was held at Hubbs cabin on July 11, 1859.

Hubbs was involved in another incident involving the British. He and another American settler were apprehended by the Royal Marines while mining the rich limestone deposits in Roche Harbor which the British claimed were part of English Camp. Apparently Hubbs was later released.

In 1859, Hubbs married Flora Ross. He was American and she was British. A humorous article in the Victoria Gazer about their marriage read, in part:

A joint occupation of the Island of San Juan has been agreed upon. . . . Paul K. Hubbs, Esq., U. S. Revenue collector for the Island of San Juan, on the part of the United States, and Miss Flora Ross, a true and loyal subject of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, resident of Bellevue [the Hudson Bay Co. farm at the south end of San Juan Island], on the part of Great Britain, have agreed to enter into a matrimonial connection and jointly occupy the Island. Therefore the high and mighty dignitaries of the two nations may congratulate themselves upon so happy a termination of that vexed and dangerous question, which threatened to involve two of the greatest nations of the earth in a terrible war.

At one time Paul K. Hubbs owned a farm he called Floraville near Cattle Pass on San Juan Island. After he and Flora were divorced in 1866, he sold the farm and moved to Orcas Island where he opened a small store. As the owner of the island's only grindstone, the bay where he lived became known as Grindstone Harbor. The 1870 census lists Hubbs and his then wife, Susan, as the only inhabitants of Blakely Island, in what it calls the "Disputed Islands." By the 1880 census, the border had been settled and Blakely was part of Washington Territory. There were now ten people living on the island, including Hubbs, who was single again and working as a fisherman.



In 1884 Hubbs settled on Johns Island and filed his homestead papers. This was still two years before John S. McMillin founded the Roche Harbor Lime and Cement Co. on San Juan Island. A few years after he settled on Johns, Hubbs married a woman named Susanna. In 1891, after completing his required five years of living on and improving the land, he was granted title to the west end of Johns Island – the land that is now Camp Nor'wester. He lived there for most of his remaining years, moving to Friday Harbor not long before his death on February 12, 1910. He is buried at the Valley Cemetery in Friday Harbor.

### OTHER OWNERS

Over the next 14 years the property passed through a number of hands. After Paul Hubbs died it was sold to Fred and Olga McCullough for \$3,500. Less than six months later, the McCulloughs sold it to Stacy and Bernice Shown and W. L. Sanders. Stacy Shown was a watchmaker with a store in Seattle's Smith Tower. Three years later, the property was sold to Warder Crow, but he lost it for failing to make a mortgage payment. In 1919 Susanna Swain, widow of Paul K. Hubbs, bought the property at a sheriff's auction for \$4,055.27. Four year later she sold it to Emil and Maren (aka Nettie) Lehmann. Originally from Sweden, they had been farmers in the San Juans for many years. Emil and Nettie are buried on Orcas Island. Their son, Arthur, married Ellen Chevalier, daughter of Ed and Mary Chevalier of Spieden Island. In 1924, Ed Chevalier bought the west end of Johns Island from the Lehmanns.

## DRAFT

### E. A. CHEVALIER

Edward A. Chevalier (1874-1958) was often called the "King of Spieden Island." He married Mary Smith (1878-1966) in 1894 on Pearl Island. Mary's father was a British soldier stationed on San Juan during the Pig War. She was born on Spieden and was living there with her grandmother when she met Ed. In her book, "Living High," June Burn describes Ed and Mary Chevalier as they were in the early 1920s:

[Dad Chevalier was] a bareheaded man with a long nose and a shock of curly black hair. . . . [He was] half-French, wild and rough and good, had come to Puget Sound when he was fifteen, worked in the Roche Harbor lime quarries, and married a lovely half-Indian girl whose father had homesteaded part of Spieden Island. Gradually he had bought the rest of the island and now owned nearly everything in sight, on islands all around. . . . Ma Chevalier was shy, gentle, and pretty.

There were five children: Bill, about twenty-five, kind and dark like his mother, but with his father's quick temper; Ellen, twenty three, blond and daring like her father; Alfred, twenty, a dark brooding boy of few words and unruly temper; Elmer, sixteen, with his father's looks and his mother's disposition, lies now in the little burial plot on top of Spieden; Caroline, twelve, called Tootsie, the baby, so quiet you might have dreamed her there, but growing up into a dark beauty which rivaled Ellen's.



Ed and Mary Chevalier with their family on Spieden Island.  
*Courtesy Mrs. Norman Mills, Prevost, Stuart Island.*

In addition to farming and raising sheep on Spieden, and working at the lime quarries in Roche Harbor, Ed was a commercial fisherman and developed the ancient technique of reefnetting into a fine art. His youngest daughter, Toots, grew up to marry Norman Mills of Stuart Island in 1937. Norman and Toots own the beautiful beach at the south end of Stuart across from Mission Point.

The current in Johns Pass can run very fast – too fast to row against. June Burn tells the following story:

Once an old man was standing up in his boat rowing and rowing against that tide, trying to get through. Bill Chevalier was living on Johns that winter. He's the best hearted guy! He went out and hailed the man. "Hey, Dad!" he shouted. "Come on in and wait till the tide changes! Come in and rest awhile!" Old Man Peterson turned in to the Johns Island float, stayed two years, resumed his rowing then and went on to Alaska.

## DRAFT



Farrar Burn rowing the *San Juanderer*

June Burn goes on to describe how she and her husband, Farrar, acquired their first cabin for their homestead on Sentinel Island. The Chevaliers suggested they row over to Johns Island, tear down a cabin on the island and row home with it. They could then rebuild it on Sentinel. The Chevaliers said that a fisherman had built the cabin several years earlier and had never returned.

In the summer of 1928, June and her two young sons, North and Bob, spent seven “joyous, laughing months” living in a cabin on Johns Island and exploring the San Juans in their boat, the *San Juanderer*.

The 1930 US Census shows that the Chevaliers were renting the west end of Johns Island to Louis Smith (Mary’s brother). General Cayou, his wife, Sarah, and their three children were living in another dwelling, possibly the red fishing cabin or the log cabin at the east end of the island. (General was not a title, it was his given name.) Both General and Louis were working as woodcutters. On the 1940 Census, General Cayou and his family (now with six children) were still living on the island, as were Norman Mills, his wife Toots, and their infant daughter.

On November 24, 1943, Ed and Mary Chevalier sold the land to John and Nell Hankin for \$5,000. The Hankins acquired immediate use of the property but the actual change in ownership occurred only after the five-year note was paid in full. The Chevaliers also retained use of the white house, together with about three acres surrounding it, until the full amount was paid.



Farrar and June Burn, 1946

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General Cayou and Bill Chevalier with Lewie Smith in front, before WWI

Here’s June Burns again, writing in 1946:

John and Nell Hankin of Mercer Island own the west and larger end of Johns Island, one of the Friday Harbor Carters the other end. Ma and Dad Chevalier live though, in the house on the Pass. Or Ma lives there. Dad prefers their place on Stuart Island, spends most of his time over there building boats and going to Friday Harbor. Ma spends most of hers fishing and visiting her children and having company.

## NELL ROBINSON

Nell Jones, born in 1909, was the daughter of a bank manager in the small town of Chesaw in the rolling hills of north central Washington. Chesaw sprang up during a brief gold rush in the late 1800s but it soon went bust and it has been a ghost town for decades. She grew up in eastern Washington and graduated from Okanogan High School.



Chesaw, WA – now a ghost town.

## DRAFT



Nell Robinson

Although she cared for a number of foster children over the years, Nell never had any children of her own. When Nell and John lived on the island, they kept two horses and a cow which they milked for the foster children. Animals were kept in the big meadow which is now the airfield.

John T. Hankin, Nell's first husband, was born in England on September 7, 1909. His family moved first to Canada and then, when he was 11, to the US. He worked for a number of years as a school bus driver on Mercer Island. John and Nell were married on July 30, 1938.



John Hankin

On June 30, 1947, four years after they purchased the Johns Island property, a two year old boy they were caring for fell overboard while they were boating in Johns Pass. John jumped in the water to try to rescue the boy but was swept away by the current. Mary Chevalier, who was probably living in the white house at

the time, was able to rescue the unconscious child as he floated near the beach, but John Hankin's body was not recovered until nearly a month later.

Sometime around 1960 Nell married Ray Robinson. He died suddenly in Pasco, Washington, in October 1961, not long after their marriage. After Ray died, Nell divided her time between her sheep ranch on Johns Island and her home on Mercer Island.

Nell's sheep roamed all over the island in the 1960s. When it was time to round them up, she would walk to the east end of the island with her dogs. Island kids would help shoo the sheep westward where a man from one of the islands would shear them. The fleeces and some of the sheep would be sent off the island on the Nordland barge.

Nell had her end of the island logged in 1980, probably to help pay the taxes. She had the airfield cleared at the same time. Before that the area had been a large meadow running clear across the island, with a scattering of small evergreen trees. It was also at this time that the letters NELL were carved in the marsh, apparently without Nell's permission!

In 1985, New Channel Nori Farms built a large and very visible nori farm off the south shore of Johns Island. Nori is a seaweed used to make sushi. Nell Robinson challenged the permits for the farm and won and the farm was shut down after only one year of operation.

Spending a few days in Vancouver, B. C., are Mrs. John Hankin and Mrs. Phyllis Jones.

Seattle Times – Nov. 21, 1948

As she grew older, Nell began transferring partial ownership of the ranch to her niece, Phyllis (Jones) Harsh. Phyllis was born in 1923 and married George Harsh in October 1950. They had two children: John and Terri. Phyllis died in Seattle on May 29, 2011.

A couple of stanzas from the poem "The Lady Called Nell" by Johns Island resident Selma Hansen paint a nice portrait of Nell.

She has Poncho and Peppy, two loveable dogs;  
They're as warm and friendly as two burning logs.

## DRAFT

She also has Joe, a bird of black feather.  
You can readily see that they're fond of each other.

She has sheep by the dozen and chickens galore,  
Wherever you look you are bound to see more.  
She has agates and driftwood, all found on the shore;  
There's a feeling of welcome when you knock on her door.

When Nell died on February 6, 1997 at age 87, her remaining share of the ownership of the ranch passed to her niece, Phyllis Harsh, and Phyllis's two children. At the time they sold the property to Camp Nor'wester on June 22, 1999, it had been in their family for well over fifty years.



Nell Robinson, age 72

The twelve months after Nor'wester purchased the property were a time of feverish activity as the Camp prepared to reopen after a hiatus of three years. Permits were obtained, water and electrical systems were installed, buildings were barged over from the old site on Lopez Island, shower houses were constructed, and work on the lodge was begun. On July 25, 2000, Camp Nor'wester was officially reopened and a new generation of campers stepped off the boat onto Johns Island for the first time.

### THE EAST END OF JOHNS ISLAND

The identity of the original homesteader on the east end of Johns, and the date that it was homesteaded, are unknown at this time. By 1933 most of the east end was owned by L. B. Carter, with F. E. O'Connell owning the land around Anchorage Cove on the north side of the island. Launor B. Carter was born in 1857 in Lebanon, Oregon. He was a farmer on San Juan Island in 1887, and by 1910 he was living in Friday Harbor and selling dry goods and groceries. He died in 1937.

By 1949 all of the east end of the island was owned by Glen B. Carter, son of L. B. He sold to Jerald Scofield in January 1961, and Scofield subdivided most of the land and sold the lots under the name of Scofield Realty. The islanders used a hand-dug well, built by the loggers in the 1930s, until 1963 when a new 100' well was dug.

Sometime around 1929 a cement wall was built on the south beach at approximately the property line dividing the east and west ends of the island. It extended well into the water and was probably built to keep sheep from roaming onto the east end of the island. Most of the wall is long gone, but remnants can still be seen at low tide.



L. B. Carter, age 77, about 1934

### FISHING

Reef netting, a traditional style of fishing in the Northwest, is still practised in the San Juans today. There are several sites near Johns and Stuart Islands. The boats are very distinctive with a spotting tower at one end. Another fishing method, using fish traps, was banned in 1934. Sometime before that, a fixed fish trap was built on pilings off the southeast shore of Johns Island.