
Potential Interpretive Themes for the National Maritime Heritage Area

Themes for the proposed Heritage Area help to organize the presentation of the region's stories. They can be used to support the organization of interpretive materials, to group destinations for theme-based itineraries, and to identify where there are strengths and weaknesses in telling the region's stories. Most importantly, they help to provide a structure for visitors to understand the different aspects of the region's maritime heritage, and understand it in the context of the diverse information and experiences available.

Final themes for the Heritage Area will be developed in the management planning process, with the help of partners and community stakeholders. These potential themes are illustrative of one potential approach for telling the region's stories.

Theme 1 – Canoe Cultures

For thousands of years Washington State's Native American tribes built their cultures on saltwater shores. Canoes, crafted from cedar trees for a wide range of uses and types of water, were vehicles for maintaining family connections, harvesting marine resources, and trade. This type of saltwater canoe culture is unique in the United States.

Like many practical items created for everyday use, canoes, paddles, fishing implements, and other items of maritime material culture had significant cultural importance. Today, renewed tribal participation in canoe journeys is revitalizing the Pacific Northwest canoe culture, and strengthening bonds between generations and tribes.

Subthemes

- Canoe construction
- Types of canoes
- Cultural significance of canoes
- Decorative traditions
- Traditional canoe routes
- Canoe-based fishing and whaling
- Paddle to Seattle and Tribal Journeys

Key Facilities/Experiences

- Tribal journeys
- Makah Cultural and Research Center
- Squaxin Island Museum Library and Research Center
- Suquamish Museum and Cultural Center
- Tribal Journeys Canoes
- Center for Wooden Boats
- Washington State Ferries



Theme 2 – Voyages of Discovery

Seeking to expand territories and trade, European ships of discovery visited the Washington Coast and alternately claimed Washington for Spain and England.

These voyages mapped what would become Washington's coasts—including the Pacific Ocean, Strait of Juan de Fuca, and Puget Sound, and formed the basis for establishing the nation's northwestern boundaries, and later, early settlement.

This era included stories of territorial conflict between European nations and the fledgling United States, and the future relationship between Native American inhabitants of the region and non-native settlers.

Subthemes

- Timeline—two centuries from terra incognita to recognition as a territory of the United States.
- Competition between European seafaring nations
- Territorial expansion of the United States
- Initial contacts with Native Americans
- Early trade with Asia

Key Facilities/Experiences

- *Lady Washington*, Official Ship of the State of Washington
- Museum of History and Industry
- Spanish Settlement Memorial at Neah Bay
- Nicolai memorial

Theme 3 – Trade and Commerce

Trade has been central to the coastal way of life for thousands of years, and the goods that were traded were carried by boat. Native American inhabitants would routinely travel hundreds of miles by canoe to trade. As first European and then American mariners arrived, the fur trade with Asia would become the economic activity that attracted interest in the area. Non-native settlement was based on opportunities to ship timber, lumber, and seafood to the growing cities of Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. As the region has grown so has marine trade, and today the region's ports transfer millions of tons of cargo annually.

Subthemes

- Native American trading routes and trade goods
- The role of the fur trade in attracting non-native interest in the Pacific Northwest, relationships between the region's first peoples, European, and American traders.
- Building for trade—early non-native communities and the lumber and seafood trade
- The mosquito fleet, Black Ball and Alaska Steamship Co. fleets—transporting people and goods
- Gateway to Alaska
- Arrival of the railroads and the developing role as a transfer point for goods bound to and from a global market
- Contemporary ports and international trade

Key Facilities/Experiences

- Port Gamble
- Port Townsend
- Klondike Gold Rush NHP
- Foss Waterway Seaport
- Major regional ports



Theme 4 – Water Highways

Western Washington's uplands are rugged and difficult to traverse. From the region's earliest inhabitation the easiest and most direct travel routes were by boat. Beginning with canoe routes and continuing to today's ferry fleet, the waters of Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca were the region's first highways and remain critical transportation routes today.

Subthemes

- Canoe routes to ferry routes
- The mosquito fleet and the evolution of ferry travel
- The Black Ball fleet and the origins of the Washington State Ferries

Key Facilities/Experiences

- Tribal Journeys
- The *Virginia V*
- Washington State Ferry System
- Black Ball Ferry
- The *Kalakala*

Theme 5 – Protecting Our Shores /Building the Fleet

Western Washington has been a strategic military location since the early days as an American territory. Ports and boat building facilities supported naval activities in the Pacific, and the region has also been considered a potential target of naval attack. Shipyards, navy bases, and coastal fortifications have been an integral part of Western Washington communities, and supported fleet activities throughout the world.

Subthemes

- The revenue service and early military presence
- Strategic importance of the North Pacific
- Military shipbuilding
- Protecting Puget Sound

Key Facilities/Experiences

- Puget Sound Naval Shipyard National Historic Landmark
- Puget Sound Naval Museum
- Naval Undersea Museum
- USS Turner Joy
- Fort Worden National Historic Landmark, Fort Flagler National Historic District, and Fort Casey
- Port Townsend National Historic Landmark District (early location for the Customs House and official Port of Entry)



Theme 6 – Harvest from the Sea

Western Washington’s marine fisheries have been the basis for subsistence and market fishing. The local fisheries of the Heritage Area have built not just economies but communities, with commercial fishing an important way of life for coastal towns. Aspects of our marine fisheries including the Pacific Salmon fishery, the relationship to Alaska, and Native American whaling traditions are unique to the region and nationally distinctive.

Subthemes

- Native American inhabitants of the region relied on marine resources for food, fiber, and medicine. The battle over rights to contemporary fisheries remains a landmark in treaty relations and sovereignty for the region’s tribes.
- Exporting abundance—salmon, oysters, and other seafood were the basis of early economies, both for local markets and for export.
- A way of life—the culture, rhythms, and folkways of community based fishing.
- The Alaska Fleet—homeport for the northern Pacific fishery.
- The biggest quarry—whaling from canoes, tall ships, and diesel-powered harpoon boats.
- Restoring our heritage of abundance—contemporary efforts to maintain and restore salmon populations and the health of the region’s marine ecosystems.

Key Facilities/Experiences

- Tribal museums and cultural centers/
public first salmon celebrations
- Gig Harbor Netshed Museum
- Fishermen’s Terminal at Salmon Bay

Theme 7 – Communities Shaped by Water

Most communities in the Heritage Area were founded around the water, and their community life was built around the docks. The impact of maritime activities in communities can be seen in their historic structures, urban fabric, and contemporary waterfronts. These communities are special places because they are places by the water, and their residents value the relationship with the community’s waterfront.

Subthemes

- Historic waterfront industry—mills, canneries, shipyards, wharves, and other water-dependent land uses were the earliest foundation for most community economies.
- Living on land, working the sea—Many of the most influential citizens of local communities worked on the sea, and their homes have become local landmarks.
- Contemporary working waterfronts—Waterfronts are some of the most dynamic economic areas in a community, and today’s working waterfronts are diverse and vital parts of contemporary communities.

Key Facilities/Experiences

- Ports and marinas
- Most communities in the region
- Port Gamble National Historic Landmark District
- Port Townsend National Historic Landmark district
- Langley National Register Historic District
- Coupeville (Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve)



Theme 8 – Navigation and Lifesaving

As maritime traffic in the region increased, so did the need for improved navigational aids and emergency assistance. Lighthouses, buoys, lifesaving stations, and Coast Guard vessels kept ships off the rocks and have saved thousands of lives from vessels in distress.

Subthemes

- Lighthouses and lightships of the Washington Coast & Puget Sound
- The Graveyard of the Pacific—shipwrecks, lifesaving, and navigation aids from the Columbia Bar to the Swiftsure Bank.
- Revenue Service to Coast Guard—Patrolling the Pacific, Strait, and Sound

Key Facilities/Experiences

- Coast Guard Museum Northwest
- Western Washington Lighthouses
- Lightship *Swiftsure* National Historic Landmark Vessel

Theme 9 – For the Love of the Water – Recreational Boating

The saltwater isn't just for work. For as long as people have lived here they have taken to the water for the sheer joy of it.

Subthemes

- Recreational fishing.
- Tour boats.
- Building and racing sailboats.
- Small craft on the big water.

Key Facilities/Experiences

- Marinas
- Boatyards

