



Today we see dense forests, sparkling lake waters and breathtaking views at every turn. It wasn't always the case. Over time, natural and human influences combined to create the lovely and bucolic environment surrounding Eagle Lake. Centuries of seasonal occupancy by first peoples affected the land cover on the northeast end of Orcas Island, but we don't know exactly how they impacted the area. We might recognize the underlying island topography but the plants and appearance of the island has changed dramatically since the 1800s.

Vancouver Expedition naturalist, Archibald Menzies, was one of the first to provide a written description of Orcas Island when he first glimpsed it on June 8, 1792. He had joined Lt. Broughton in a small sailboat to explore the waters between Cypress, Blakely and Orcas Islands after cruising along the shores of the Olympic Peninsula, Puget Sound and Whidbey Island. Menzies immediately noticed the different topography and vegetation in the San Juan archipelago as did Vancouver. They wrote about the rugged, rocky moss covered cliff-like formations that rose into the hills in their journals. Forests were thin, at best, and composed of spindly, growth stunted pines. Patches of dense forest did cover the landscape but these appeared spindly compared to the forests found on the mainland. No more thought was given to Orcas Island exploration or settlement for a long time.

Over fifty years passed before Euro-Americans focused their attention on the San Juan Islands again. In 1853, the British Hudson's Bay Company set up operations on San Juan Island. Using the grassland on San Juan to graze commercial sheep was the most obvious benefit to the company; there were other enticements. The grazing sheep limited the land available for

settlement by civilians, including US pioneers, and staked a claim to the land for Great Britain. Tensions over international boundary disputes escalated into the Pig War and resulted in the establishment of Great Britain and US Boundary Commissions. The British focused on claiming the navigable waters and the Americans claimed the islands themselves.

US Boundary Commission Specialists notes give us an early glimpse into the land on Orcas Island. It was described as being largely forested but the timber was not great quality. Observers felt that logging, sawmills and other lumber operations would not be of benefit until the transportable timber on the mainland had been exhausted. Perhaps then island settlement would be beneficial. References were made to the use of fire to flush deer out into the open for hunting. It's debatable how much the impact of fires on the spindly quality of island pine (Doug Fir) actually affected the forests.

Orcas Island was dotted with open areas and grassy pastures that remained green most of the year. Potential agricultural land was noted in sections all over the island, including the slopes leading to the summit of Mt. Constitution. During the late 19th century, knowledge about the influence of soils, weather, location and fires upon forest growth and agricultural potential were not well understood. Blaming sparse growth patterns solely on fire damage was a bit naive and misleading. However, optimism won the day and island settlers began to arrive in the late 1800s. Some settlers chose to live near what was to become Eagle Lake.