



Port of Friday Harbor 1950 ~ 2025

A Special Section Celebrating 75 Years of

- Economic Vitality
- Community Partnerships
- Service



Welcome to the 75th Port of Friday Harbor Anniversary!

BY RICH GOODHART, CURRENT COMMISSION PRESIDENT

Your Port of Friday Harbor is celebrating its 75th Anniversary, and while to many islanders of a certain age it doesn't seem that old, it is a significant achievement. Maybe not in the sense that a publicly created layer of government has managed to survive that long, but rather that so much has been accomplished in those few years.

As you look through this supplement, be sure to notice and compare the waterfront and airport of 1950 with what it has become today. You will see the changes that incrementally took place because of the hard work by countless employees, the vision of a cadre of commissioners, and

the oversight and suggestions from an island of neighbors.

Why did our elders decide to create this port district? I believe one consideration was to acknowledge that there needed to be a way to ensure public benefits for our waterfront, and they felt a port's business model was best suited — it is government and yet it is a business, where profit can be made but only if it is reinvested for public good.

All of San Juan Island is part of the port district officially known as the Port of Friday Harbor. The legislature created a list of enterprises that all Washington Ports are empowered to pursue, wisely



Rich Goodhart, Port Commission President



(COURTESY SAN JUAN ISLANDS HISTORICAL MUSEUM)

Aerial view of the waterfront, perhaps 1940s

leaving the actual choice of activities up to the local commissions. Our Port has always taken its economic development responsibility very seriously, as is evident by the number of businesses located on Port property and the number of people employed as a result. We also understand the island sensibility that there are a decreasing number of places where the pace of life isn't frantic and that maintaining that pace is why many choose to live here.

So, the Port of Friday Harbor is 75

years young! Read through this publication. There are stories looking back on our history and looking forward to our possibilities. While it is full of the names of the people who helped make this happen, there are many others who, over the years, also worked diligently to create what we have today. Their do-it-yourself attitude is what has helped this Port punch above its weight for all of our benefit.

Happy Port Anniversary to Us All!



Jay Julius cooking salmon the traditional Northwest Coast Native way, 75th Anniversary Party, where 400 lbs. of King Salmon was served, September 2025



Port's 60th Anniversary Party, Jackson Beach, 2010

On the cover:

- Lee Brewer's schooner Rainbird, a 1949 Bill Garden design
- Harbormaster, Tami Hayes, 2010. Tami served as staff from 1991-2024, and was the Port's longest serving harbormaster.
- George Mulligan's Pitt's model 12 aerobatic biplane at Friday Harbor Airport
- Popeye, the Port's official "seal" from 1990 - 2019

Building on the Legacy of Those Who Came Before

By TODD NICHOLSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Todd Nicholson, Port Director

Spring Street Landing: Completely rebuilt, it now stands as a welcoming landmark for visitors and houses several local businesses, employing dozens of residents.

Jensen and Shipyard Cove Marinas: The Port acquired these marinas to safeguard public access and has finished renovating Jensen Marina, while restoration work continues at Shipyard Cove. The adjacent uplands are being redeveloped to boost living wage opportunities in marine trades. Upgrades include a new commercial barge landing and an expanded waterfront supported by a 75-ton haul-out pier, all amid ongoing remediation of legacy soil and sediment contamination.

Friday Harbor Regional Airport: Renewing Critical Infrastructure

The Expansion of the airport runway is neither necessary nor supported by the community, but other key projects are underway. All Port-owned buildings are being rebuilt or replaced. New commercial hangar space and upgraded fueling systems are being developed to benefit both general and commercial aviation tenants. The Port continues to attract both aviation and non-aviation businesses to airport properties, and the Commission prioritizes lease proposals based on their potential to create living wage jobs.

Public Waterfront Access and Recreation

Maintaining and enhancing waterfront access remains central to the Port's mission. Major improvements have been made at Fairweather Park and Jackson Beach, including paved roads and parking, pavilions, boardwalks, new restrooms, and picnic areas—projects that enrich the community's recreational spaces.

Financial Stewardship and Resourcefulness

Expanding and maintaining facilities is a significant financial undertaking for



Port Staff celebrates the Port's 50th Anniversary, 2000

a small organization. The Port relies on two key strategies to advance its projects: aggressive pursuit of grant funding and the effective use of in-house manufacturing and construction. Over the past eight years, the Port has secured more than \$29M in grants and saved over \$4M in labor costs by utilizing internal staff—savings and funding that are nearly equivalent to the Port's operating revenues.

Continuing the Tradition of Progress

Every phase of expansion presents real-time challenges, just as it did for previous generations. Their cumulative efforts have created the Port of Friday Harbor as we know it—a testament to the enduring vision and collective dedication of the community.



Dave Ryan, Airport Manager and Pat Mayo, former Airport Manager, and new Friday Harbor Airport sign, 2008

The Port was established by the people of San Juan Island as an instrument for local economic growth, dedicated to benefiting island residents. Over its 75-year history, each generation has shaped and broadened the Port's focus to meet the changing needs of the community. Yet, the Port's core mission has endured: to foster a vibrant, sustainable island-wide economy through long-term development, balanced carefully with environmental responsibility. The Port strives to provide exceptional service for customers, tenants, and the broader public.

Recent Developments and Infrastructure Enhancements

Today's leadership has concentrated efforts on maintaining the crucial tourism infrastructure, while also launching new initiatives that support the creation of year-round, living wage jobs to complement the tourism-driven economy. This balanced approach has led to significant improvements and additions to Port facilities.

Port Commissioners

1950 to present

(Listed in alphabetical order)

1950 - September 1951 R.F. Buck, Nourdine Jensen, John Jones	October 1980 - November 1981 Linda Browne, Richard Lawson, Charles Nash
October 1953 - December 1957 Nourdine Jensen, John Jones, Harold Snell	November 1981 - August 1984 Linda Browne, Charles Nash, Dan Weber
January 1958 - July 1958 Nourdine Jensen, Ed Ringler, Harold Snell	August 1984 - December 1990 Linda Browne, Richard Kneipp, Charles Nash
October 1958 - August 1951 Nourdine Jensen, Ed Lambert, Ed Ringler	January 1991 - December 1993 Linda Browne, Greg Hertel, Charles Nash
September 1961 - October 1962 Hughes, Nourdine Jensen, Ed Ringler	January 1994 - December 1997 Brian Calvert, Greg Hertel, Charles Nash
November 1962 - September 1964 Nourdine Jensen, Ed Ringler, Hershel Shreve	December 1997 - December 1999 Brian Calvert, Greg Hertel, Charles Nash
October 1964 - September 1965 Alan Carter, Nourdine Jensen, Ed Ringler	January 2000 - December 2001 Brian Calvert, Greg Hertel, Charles Nash
October 1965 - May 1966 Alan Carter, Nourdine Jensen, Robert Judkins	January 2002 - December 2005 Mike Ahrenius, Brian Calvert, Greg Hertel
June 1966 - June 1967 Alan Carter, Nourdine Jensen, Hays Rehm	January 2006 - October 2017 Mike Ahrenius, Greg Hertel, Barbara Marrett
June 1967 - December 1973 Alan Carter, Nourdine Jensen, Bill Talbot	November 2017 - December 2021 Gib Black, Greg Hertel, Barbara Marrett
January 1974 - July 1974 Charles Nash, Wes Tollenaar, Dan Weber	January 2022 - April 2023 Gib Black, Victoria Compton, Barbara Marrett
August 1974 - December 1974 Bill Brant, Charles Nash	June 2023 - November 2023 Gib Black, Steven Carleton, Barbara Marret
December 1974 - January 1976 Bill Brant, Jim Browne Jr, Charles Nash	December 2023 - Present Gib Black, Richard Goodhart, Barbara Marrett
February 1976 - June 1980 Linda Browne, Bill Brant, Charles Nash	
July 1980 - September 1980 Linda Browne, Charles Nash	

Nordine Jensen Saw the Port as Vital to the Island's Economy

BY GREG HERTEL, FORMER PORT COMMISSIONER



KATHLEEN BALLARD PHOTOGRAPHY

Nordine Jensen served on the Friday Harbor Port Commission from 1950 – 1973. He believed the port could ensure an economic future for the island.

If any one man could be said to be responsible for the Port of Friday Harbor as it currently exists, it would have to be Nordine Jensen (1914-2009). Better than anyone else in the days after World War II, Nourdine—a local boat builder and a Friday Harbor Port Commissioner from 1950-1973—saw that the future of Friday Harbor lay in the recreation industry: Farming was dying a slow death due to cheaper crops from other parts of the state, where it was less costly to transport goods. Fishing had good years, but it wasn't reliable. Nourdine saw that tourism was the best bet for the future. He saw that a safe year-round

harbor that served local boaters and invited others to stop and stay was the best way to ensure an

economic future for the community.

The Port's current mission statement reads: "The Port of Friday Harbor shall strive to maintain a healthy economy with family wage jobs, and to improve the social, economic, and natural environments of the island." The Port's mission and mission statement have remained largely unchanged over the last 75 years. While other interests have had their say, the mission of bringing in visitors and giving them a safe place to moor and enjoy themselves has always been a core value.

Grocer Vern Howard had it right when asked once how important the port was to him as a main street merchant. He responded, "When the port's full, I make money. When it's not, I don't." Simple, to the point, and I think Nourdine

would be pleased with that statement. Seeing the port as this big part of the local economy is quite an affirmation of Nourdine's vision.

On behalf of all of us who enjoy employment due to this healthy economy, and who enjoy a diverse experience far beyond what this population should furnish: Thank you, Nourdine. You and your friends really got it right.

FYI: Nourdine Jensen's son-in-law, Mike Ahrenius, served as a Port Commissioner from 2002-2017 and as the president of the Washington Public Ports Association in 2010.

The author, Greg Hertel, is a writer, retired teacher, and charter boat captain who is the longest serving Friday Harbor Port Commissioner. His 30-year service extended from 1991 until 2021.



Jensen Shipyard, foreground, and Shipyard Cove Marina, background, circa 1960



Commissioner Charles Nash, Executive Director Mike Valiga, Senator Henry Jackson, Commissioners Dan Weber and Linda Browne, discuss plans for the marina expansion, circa 1982

Charles Nash Worked for Economic Diversification

BY GREG HERTEL, FORMER PORT COMMISSIONER

Charles H. Nash (1921-2010) was appointed to the Friday Harbor Port Commission in 1974 to succeed Nordine Jensen, who resigned after serving as a commissioner since the port's inception in 1950. Nash served as a commissioner for 27 years, retiring in 2001.

When the legislature created port districts, they were viewed as economic development agencies, and it was felt that stability would be created by long terms of office. The terms of port commissioners, unless changed by local vote, are six years.

Charlie, as he was locally known, oversaw the development of the Spring Street Landing area as a business center, the purchase and building of the airport, and the Jackson Beach recreation area. A commercial fisherman most of his life, he recognized the port was far more than a commercial fishing location, and throughout his term, he worked to diversify the activities taking place on port property. Even before he was a

commissioner, Charlie fought to keep the Friday Harbor waterfront from becoming condominiums.

Nash's main work on the port commission was in shepherding through the purchase and development of the airport during that stormy period in the 1980s. A steady hand at the helm was his contribution during those challenging years.

FYI: Charlie Nash was at home on the water. During his career, he served as an officer on a submarine, the USS Finback, during World War II; was licensed as a third mate of oceans in 1947; ran a fleet of seiners to Shanghai, China; delivered mail to the outer islands; and fished in Bristol Bay for more than 50 years. He also served as Friday Harbor postmaster, as a school board member, a Cub Scout leader, chamber president, and started the annual Islands count of eagles in 1964. He continued the count for over 20 years, receiving a state Environmental Excellence Award in 1977.

Linda Browne, a Steady Voice During a Turbulent Time

BY STEVE SIMPSON, FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Linda Browne was elected to the Friday Harbor Port Commission in 1976, becoming the first woman commissioner for the Port District and one of the very few women commissioners in the state. Linda held the position until 1993, during a period of rapid growth when the Port expanded from managing only the Friday Harbor Marina to acquiring the airport and Jackson Beach.

When Linda began her tenure, the Port's marina operation was managed by Jack Fairweather. During that time, the Port expanded the marina using a unique breakwater system composed of giant plastic tanks. Unfortunately, the system suffered from faulty materials, prompting legal action to address the issue.

The Port Commission hired Mike Valiga as the executive director after Jack Fairweather resigned. Under the direction of the Port Commission, Mike obtained funding from the Army Corps of Engineers to install a new breakwater, which doubled the size of the marina. The Port also created the waterfront park (named Fairweather Park, after Jack) with the help of state grant funding.

During the early 1980s, the Port Commission took on the task of creating a public airport for the Island. After prolonged, controversial public hearings, the Commission decided to acquire the existing private airport at the edge of town. Using a generous gift from Paul and Lucy Whittier, the Commission obtained grants from the Federal Aviation

Administration to build a safe airport and the existing terminal building. This allowed safe passenger and freight service to the island and provided space for new businesses as well as a branch campus of Skagit Valley College.

However, the new airport spawned even more controversy and litigation over its unexpected size and noise pattern. Linda chaired the commission during much of this period and was a steady voice through the many changes, always sympathetic to overall community interests. Linda remained confident and supportive of port employees through financial crisis, unfavorable news commentary, and volatile public meetings. Linda insisted that the Port look good and act well towards all people. Her family shared, "Her proudest civic role was serving as a Port Commissioner alongside Charlie Nash and Bill Brant, and harbormaster Jack Fairweather." Linda passed away in June of this year, leaving a legacy of community service. She was 87 years old.

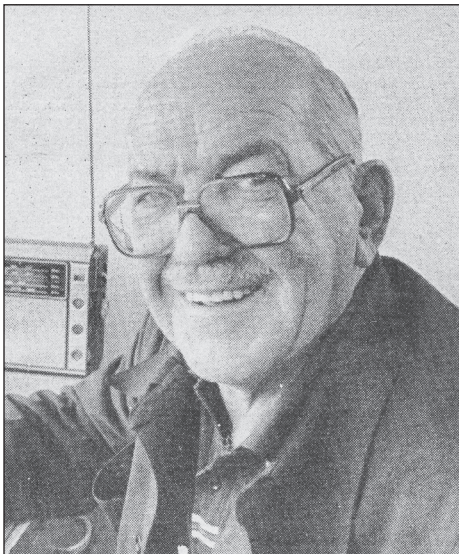
Fun facts: Linda's daughter Debbie Rishel and her husband Hogan own and operate Downriggers Restaurant, a much-loved fixture on our waterfront. Downriggers is situated next to where the old Browne Lumber (same family) mill was located on what is now port waterfront property.



The Port of Friday Harbor Marina serves a mixture of working, pleasure and tourism-related vessels and aircraft.

The Enduring Influence of Port Executive Directors

By BARBARA MARRETT, COMMISSIONER



Jack Fairweather

From the port's early days, executive directors (EDs) have been visionaries, collaborators, and leaders—trusted to interpret changing times and steer the port's future. EDs serve as the public face of the Port, driving its operations and executing the policies and objectives set by the elected Port Commission. The ED navigates relationships with community leaders, businesses, tenants, government agencies, and other stakeholders. It's a tall order; no wonder the average ED in Washington State only lasts 6 years in the job.

Jack Fairweather — 1972 -1982

Though officially titled harbormaster, Jack Fairweather acted as the port's de facto director until 1982. He was known for his warm welcome to both local and visiting boaters and was liked and respected in the community. Times were much simpler then, the marina was mostly full of fishing boats, meeting minutes were minimal, and the Port budget only had a few entries. Jack started the port on its trajectory of success. His granddaughter, long-time former harbormaster Tami Hayes, continued his legacy of service until her retirement in 2024.



Steve Simpson

Mike Valiga — 1982-1986

In his short four years as Port Director, Mike's tenure stands out as one of the most transformative periods in the Port's history. His talent for securing grants led to major expansions of the main marina and airport, and he facilitated the acquisition of Jackson Beach. Mike left before community pushback arose over these swift developments. He later served as planning director for SeaTac airport. After his departure in 1986, the Port entered a new chapter under Steve Simpson.

Steve Simpson — 1986-2007

Steve Simpson reflects, "The biggest challenges I faced as a new ED in 1986 were responding to legal challenges to the airport and the financial shortfalls resulting from the rapid expansion of port facilities. After that, it was all fun." Steve helped the Port secure land around the airport to prevent future litigation and served as treasurer on the Washington Public Port Association Executive Board.

Over his 21 years at the helm, Steve was known for his approachable manner and deep institutional knowledge. Simpson left a legacy, mentoring staff and commissioners alike and shaping



Marilyn O'Connor

the Port's forward-thinking culture for the decades that followed.

Steve's leadership advanced environmental stewardship, making the port one of the first "Clean Marinas" in the state.

Marilyn O'Connor — 2008-2016

After Steve's retirement, the Commission promoted Deputy Director Marilyn O'Connor to Executive Director. She not only navigated the Port during shifting economic tides, most notably the 2008-2009 recession, but also through evolving community expectations and regulatory landscapes. At the same time, she cultivated partnerships that strengthened the Port's role as both economic engine and community cornerstone. Marilyn shared, "I had the honor and pleasure of working for many years with Port team members on projects and programs that have helped to support our island's economy."

Marilyn led the cleanup of legacy site pollution and the rebuilding efforts after the 2013 Downriggers fire. Her aesthetic sensibility ensured the new Downriggers/Spring Street Landing complex was both functional and visually appealing. Through a deep commitment to public service, Marilyn ensured the Port's

continued vitality, setting the stage for the dynamic leadership that followed.

Ted Fitzgerald — 2016

With a law degree and years of managing small port operations at the Port of Brookings Harbor, Oregon, Ted was able to negotiate a reduction in contractor and architect fees after the completion of the Downrigger/Spring Street Landing complex, saving the Port tens of thousands of dollars.

Ted's time as director was short-lived; however, he was a catalyst for change. Ted had to resign for health reasons before he could create a more lasting impact. His tenure helped pave the way for a smoother transition to our next ED.

Todd Nicholson — 2017 - Present

Todd Nicholson's background in civil engineering has enabled the Port to achieve notable savings by handling much of the construction work internally. Under Todd's direction, the Port expanded its facilities to include Jensen and Shipyard Cove marinas, as well as the Jackson Beach cannery parcel. The Port overcame challenges such as the Jensen Marina boathouse collapse and managed the rebuilding of that facility. At the airport, he oversaw new leases and the construction of both replacement and new hangars, further enhancing the Port's infrastructure.

Port staff morale has soared, with teams building public docks not only across the Islands but also throughout the Salish Sea. This hands-on approach has supported the addition of several year-round family-wage jobs. Throughout his tenure, Todd's positive attitude and approachable nature have fostered a highly collaborative and rewarding work environment.

Executive directors have made the Port a better place and ensured its status as a valued community asset. Their legacies serve as both anchor and compass, grounding the Port's mission and pointing toward new possibilities.

It's an Airport—But it's also the Port!

BY RICH GOODHART, COMMISSIONER

History is so often written as a string of dry facts. Roy Franklin established scheduled flights from Friday Harbor in 1948. In 1981, the Port of Friday Harbor purchased the airport. With the assistance of grants from the Federal Aviation Administration and private donors, the Port undertook a major reconstruction of the entire airfield, which was completed in 1985. Facts can be presented clearly, succinctly, and, if you weren't an active participant, easily forgotten.

What transforms history are the stories of the people who lived it. I am old enough to have been friends with aviator Roy Franklin, but I was a new pilot in a different part of Washington and didn't know him well. I do know, across the country, many lived a similar story to his.

Roy Franklin's Journey, Reflections and Legacy

For many readers, Roy Franklin was the age of your grandfather, and he grew up a few miles from here in Ferndale. When he graduated from high school, World War II was only a few months along. Enlisting, Roy trained and was soon flying from the Navy's short model version of an aircraft carrier (called a CVE) in the Pacific. You don't get through that type of ordeal without skill, training, and luck. He must have had enough of each because he came home, worked as a flight instructor, then a charter pilot on Orcas, and finally as an owner "flying out of Lyle King's cow pasture on San Juan Island."

Flying in those days was more challenging. There were no navigational aids, the weather was often difficult, and the urgency of flights was often high. To land on a farmer's field at night, Roy developed a three-car approach - one stationed at the far end of the landing area with brake lights on, a second car at the start of the area with brake lights on, and a third car halfway down the 'runway' with its front lights shining across the midpoint. He learned quickly that you shouldn't buzz the middle of a herd of cows and separate them. Roy recalls, 'You want to get alongside them and push them as a group away from where you want to land or they'll just bunch up again.' This type of flying is still common in many parts of the world but is certainly quite different from what most Americans expect today.

Roy's quotes reveal the spirit of those early days: "If you have ever worked all night on a sick engine with frozen fingers and lockjaw from holding a flashlight in your mouth, you will automatically be making plans for a lighted and heated aircraft maintenance building," and "... if you have ever experienced the joy of parents greeting a well and happy child when only nights before the same child was near death; seen the dignity and courage of a senior citizen on his last ride; experienced the thrill and wonderment of a first airplane rider, young or old—then you will begin to understand how it was with us." I have had the opportunity to hear Jackie Hamilton, of Island Air, speak, and her sentiments sound similar.

To progress from a cow pasture to an airport, Roy secured a loan in 1954 and purchased 64 acres of woodland, now part of the current 203-acre airport site. He logged, cleared, and graded two runways, then built the terminal and hangars. The airport officially opened in



Aviator Roy Franklin on the wing of a WWII Corsair, 1945

January 1960. His business, Island Sky Ferries (ISF), was affectionately called "Insufficient Funds" by the Franklin family.

Growth and Community Involvement

Over the next two decades, ISF became San Juan Airlines. Aircraft and buildings changed, and people got older. Roy was ready to retire and, like in so many towns in Washington, the local Port stepped up to continue a public service.

Like projects in our rural county, it could only have been afforded because of the generosity of people like philanthropist Paul Whittier, who played a major role in the airport's acquisition. As Port property, the airport was then eligible for federal and state grants for construction. In 1985, the current 3,400-foot runway was completed with the new terminal building.

Aviation in San Juan County

San Juan County boasts one of the highest per capita concentrations of pilots in the U.S. The region's natural beauty and rain shadow—resulting in half of Seattle's annual rainfall—attract pilots who've noticed the hole in the clouds above the San Juan Islands. Notable residents once included aviator, author Ernest K. Gann (Ernie's airport restaurant is his namesake) and his aviator wife Dodie, but many local pilots and airport workers share a deep love of aviation and dedication to community.

The "Eagles" pilot group transports cancer patients for mainland treatment. Three medical evacuation services pick up patients here. San Juan Airlines continues to operate, and Kenmore Air flies from the airport and seaplane base at the marina. Pilots work with state Emergency Management to prepare for essential deliveries during an



Roy standing in front of the Bushman, his favorite plane, 1950s

isolation emergency. A West Isle Air pilot once earned a Guinness World Record for the fastest scheduled airline flight—from Center Island to Decatur Island in less than a minute. Maintenance crews keep aircraft ready for emergencies and recreation, and commissioners, managers, and staff have kept the airport running smoothly for 44 years.

Modern Facilities and Achievements

It is quite a change from Roy's farm landings. Your airport now has hangar spaces for about 100 planes, tie-down spots for 45 more, and currently 15 airport property business leases. Recent mundane maintenance includes projects on stormwater drainage, and more exciting things like hangar construction and paving projects. We are in the beginning stages of installing modern above-ground fuel tanks in preparation for decommissioning our aging below-ground ones. Almost every public airport in the State requires money from some other source to defray operational costs. We have been working hard toward being an exception and can report our airport was able to totally pay for itself this in 2024 — yeah!

Closing Thoughts

Ultimately, the airport's infrastructure is only a tool that gains meaning through the people who use and care for it. This airport had an effect on me in 1977 when I began flying with my cross-country students to Roche Harbor's, then, more challenging airstrip and onto Friday Harbor Airport for a walk into town for that excuse-for-a-flight lunch. Unlike Roy, I never had to move cows from the runway; instead, I found myself wondering how I could ever figure out how to make a home in this beautiful place. Happy Anniversary, Airport of Friday Harbor!

Progress Came Slowly, but the Vision Never Dimmed

By GREG HERTEL, FORMER COMMISSIONER

If you lived in Friday Harbor in the fall of 1950, you might have gone to the movie playing at the theatre downtown. Greer Garson (she looks great in Technicolor!) was starring with Walter Pidgeon in “Blossoms in the Dust”. Maybe you were tempted to skip movies and buy one of the new Philco TV’s that Roberts Hardware was carrying. A 16” tabletop set was \$289.95. (call phone # 380). That would be around \$2,800 in today’s money, so it would be a significant purchase.

Along with these entertainment decisions, you were also considering whether to vote in the September 12 special election to form a port district on San Juan Island. On election day, 354 people voted “yes” and 146 voted “no”. The Port District was authorized and on Oct. 19, the County Commissioners passed a resolution creating the Port of Friday Harbor and collecting a tax on all privately held real property of \$2 for every \$1,000 of assessed valuation. The first three commissioners were Robert Buck, Nouridine Jensen and John Jones.

Envisioning the Harbor’s Role

In retrospect, it was probably a given that Friday Harbor would become the main port in the islands. What wasn’t obvious was that Friday Harbor would become a premier recreational port on the west coast of the United States. All of the islands had their harbors, but none were as deep and protected as Friday Harbor’s.

But still, it wasn’t perfect. A north wind could blow in and wreak havoc with the floats and boats tied to the fuel dock. In the late 1940’s some men in town began to think about how they could fix this problem. Their vision was to build a protective harbor that would invite recreational boaters heading north to stop and visit the town. In that vision, they were spot on. Not only did the boaters stop on their way north, but many, never went any further, and Friday Harbor became a destination in its own right.

Building the Infrastructure

When the port district was established, the waterfront was piers and buildings over the water. The cannery buildings were

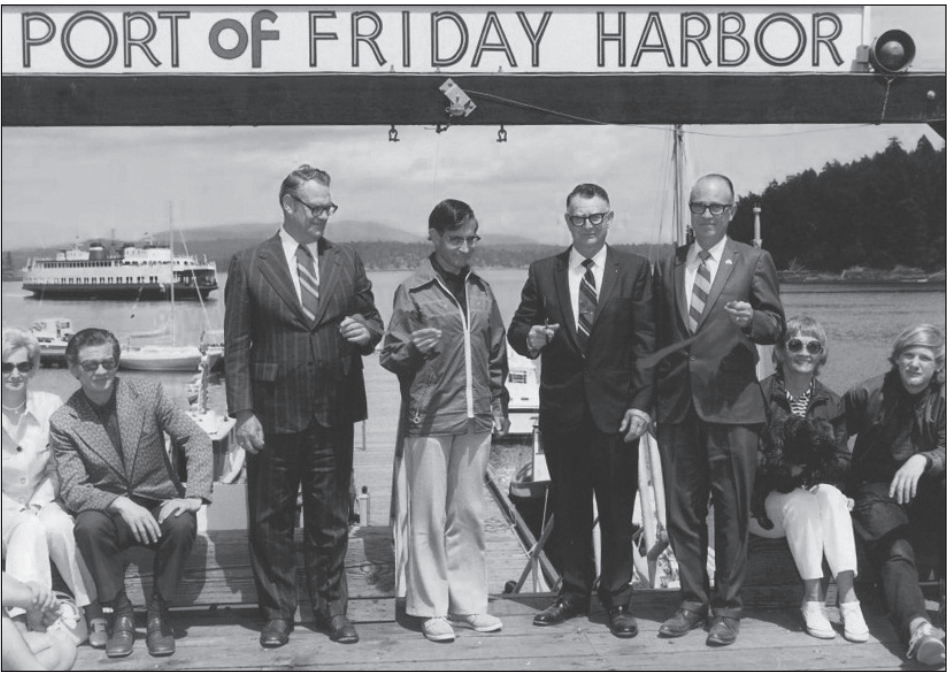
south of where the state ferry docks are now located and Brown Lumber was in the Spring Street Landing area. There was a sawmill and other industrial construction farther west. One of the oldest operating facilities was the fuel pier, built in 1928 and still operating in its current location.

The ferries docked at the base of Spring Street and cars parked on Front Street waiting for the boat on sleepy summer afternoons. Where the port’s main dock is now was a town float that was deployed on a seasonal basis. This was the only tourist-friendly facility. A float rises and falls with the tide and a boat can be moored and ignored for a while. A pier is a different story. The lines must be constantly adjusted to account for the changing tide height. If you want to walk up town and leave your boat for a few hours, a float is the only way to go. The town float had to be moved every season because north winds would tear the floats apart if left in place.

A handful of men pushed for a permanent fix to the seasonal harbor. They saw that farming was fading and fishing was unreliable. They felt that a tourist-based economy catering to visitors was the answer. The original vision was for a rock-fill breakwater extending from the north end of Brown Island toward the U.W. Friday Harbor Labs. A large opening close to the Labs dock would allow ferries and other boats access, while the breakwater would close off the harbor to the north wind. The port was supposed to shepherd this vision through. It would be a long uphill journey to completion.

Efforts and Setbacks

The first three commissioners approved a budget of \$2,600 from property taxes collected on San Juan Island. These three men and a handful of others are responsible for what the port is, and to a large extent, what the town has become. They had a vision for economic growth that is still sound and still working. Like an oil well working a large, easy-to-pump basin of oil, the port keeps adding revenue to the town and jobs to the local economy. Nouridine Jensen felt that the future was in recreation, and he always fought to increase the visitor capacity. In



From left, standing in suits and ties, Port Commissioners Alan Carter, Nouridine Jensen and Bill Talbot celebrate the dedication of the new breakwater dock, late 1960s

one of the first actions aimed specifically at visitors, a 1951 resolution reserves the outer 80 feet of a 20-foot float for visitors only.

Still, things moved slowly in the old days. The third meeting of the port wasn’t until March 1951! It wasn’t until 1953 that a permanent small-boat basin was authorized. It wasn’t built until 1973 – 20 years later.

The breakwater was first put to a vote in 1958. The port had a signed offer to buy Brown Island for \$40,000 but it was going to require revenue bonds and a vote of the people in the district. The island would be the source of the rock that stopped previous plans and that had led to negative findings by the Army Corps of Engineers based on the cost of transporting the material. With Brown Island as the source, transportation costs would be minimal. The minutes are full of discussion and design prior to the November election but absolutely nothing afterward. The election failed by a vote of 343 “yes” to 587 “no”.

At least twice more the Army Corps of Engineers turned down plans for breakwaters in Friday Harbor. The basic feeling on the part of the Corps’ engineers was that there just wasn’t enough payback for the money expended, the town was too small, the harbor too deep, the breakwater would simply consume too much rock and money.

Improvements, Innovation and Legacy

All through the late 1950s and early ‘60s, small landside improvements were made. The Port worked with the town and State Ferries to move the terminal to its current

location. The first port manager was hired in 1960 for \$10 a month. Restrooms for visitors were planned but the dream of a protected boat haven was still out of reach.

Finally, in the late 1960s, a new type of breakwater was proposed: a floating breakwater. This would cost less and have less impact on the harbor bottom. New plans were drawn up and, finally, Nouridine Jensen’s vision of a protected boat haven became a reality in 1973. It had taken him 23 years.

The original floating breakwater was wooden planks on plastic flotation tanks. It was the first of its kind in the country. The theory of a floating breakwater is that a heavy anchored float absorbs the wave energy and keeps the water behind it calm. The original flotation was large ABS plastic tanks that were quickly found to be too fragile. Within 10 years, most of them were replaced with the current concrete floats that protect the inner harbor.

The floating breakwater is now a common construction technique around the country and since ours was built in 1973, it has been serving guests and residents year-round, through all kinds of weather. It survived the north winds and ice in 1989 and 1991 that were equal to any in old-timers’ memory. And the biblical snowstorm of 1996 failed to sink it.

Through it all, the harbor is true to its original vision of a protected space that helps the local economy. The marina is flexible in use and can accommodate local boaters, tourists, whale watch companies, scout ships, and occasional tour boats up to 200 feet long. A recent survey found it sound and ready to serve in the new century as well as it did in the last.

Port of Friday Harbor Timeline

The Port of Friday Harbor was established in 1950 by the taxpayers of San Juan Island. At that time, a board of three commissioners was established.

- In 1958, there was a very small pier and small floats installed for fishermen to tie to.
- In 1968, the Port's main largest pier was built.
- In 1972 the first employee was hired, administrator/harbormaster, Jack Fairweather, for whom the waterfront park at the Port is named. Also in 1972, the Robinson Carusoe Marina completed its first installation of dock slips for permanent customers. The total number was 172 slips.
- In 1972, the Port began to lease land in the harbor area to businesses. Today, there are 15 building leases in the marina and about 20 commercial businesses.
- In 1977, the Port purchased its first real estate, the Williamson pier and building, which was remodeled in 1986 to include the San Juan Island Yacht Club, built on top of the building.
- In 1980. The Port purchased the property where the old OPALCO generator stood, now the marina parking lot.

- In 1982, the Port purchased the waterfront land on the northeastern side of Front Street from Spring Street to the Williamson building, from San Juan County for \$210,000.
- Between 1982 and 1984, the port marina expanded to almost 500 slips and installed the floating breakwater that protects the marina. The breakwater was built and installed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and was the first one constructed and installed of its kind, for the price of \$3 million. Each summer during those years, the Port hosted hundreds of fishing vessels for the fishing season. As the fishing industry faded, guest boating increased, and the breakwater is now used mostly for larger vessel moorage.
- In 1982, the Port purchased Friday Harbor Airport from Roy Franklin and by 1984 had extended the runway. In 1986 the new airport terminal was constructed. Today, the airport has 50 leases and at least 15 commercial businesses
- In 1985, the Port purchased Jackson Beach, and in 2000 - 2001 installed a new free boat launch facility and restrooms.

- In 1988, the Port installed portable, "temporary" restrooms, which were removed in 2023. In 2008, the Port installed a floating restroom facility in the marina.
- In 1993-94, the Port purchased back the San Juan Marina lease and rebuilt the Spring Street Landing passenger terminal and marina in front of Downriggers.
- In 2015 - 2016, after a catastrophic fire, the Spring Landing building, which includes Downriggers Restaurant, was completely rebuilt. The project also included rebuilding the bulkhead and cleaning up legacy soil contamination. In 2018, the Port acquired the Albert Jensen & Sons Marina and Shipyard.
- In 2019, the Port acquired the Shipyard Cove Marina.
- In 2021 - 2023, the Jensen Marina was completely rebuilt after a portion of the old boathouses collapsed under a heavy snow fall.
- In 2025, the Port acquired the Jackson Beach Cannery building and the surrounding two acres of waterfront land.



COURTESY OF MATT PRANGER

Commissioners Greg Hertel, Mike Ahrenius, Barbara Marrett, and Executive Director Marilyn O'Connor at the reopening of Spring Street Landing Building in 2016, after the 2013 fire

Jackson Beach: A Journey Through Time

From Time Immemorial to Restoration: The Changing Face of Jackson Beach

By GIB BLACK, COMMISSIONER

Our crescent of shoreline known as Jackson Beach has a history as rich and varied as the tides that wash its shores. For centuries, this area has been a place of significance, shifting from a vital Native American gathering ground to a hub of industrial extraction, and finally, to a public space dedicated to recreation and ecological restoration.

A Native American Gathering Ground

Long before European arrival, the lands and waters of Jackson Beach were part of the ancestral territory of the Coast Salish peoples. The rich marine life—including salmon, shellfish, and other sea creatures—made this area a vital place for gathering, fishing, and cultural practices. The landscape itself—the beaches, lagoon, and uplands—was intricately woven into their daily lives, sustaining generations through respectful stewardship of the natural world.

An Industrial Hub

The area’s industrial story began around the 1930s, when sand and gravel mining began on Bald Hill opposite the east end of Jackson Beach. Over time, large quantities of sand and gravel were shipped both from a pier near present-day Shipyard Cove and Jensen Shipyard, and an extensive pier built into Griffin Bay. This industrial activity left its mark—in the form of a large pit where there was once a 300-foot hill. The natural shorelines on both sides of Bald Hill were expanded and re-shaped by runoff and spilled sand and gravel, creating the broad, shoreline familiar today at Jackson Beach.

On the far west side of the beach, John Jackson established a fish smokehouse in 1948 and then a cannery in 1950 on Little Island, which connected to Argyle Spit at low tide. Jackson filled in the gap between the spit and the island to provide better road access to the cannery; the beach became known as Jackson or Jackson’s Beach.

Jackson’s facility played an important role in the local economy, processing salmon and employing both permanent and seasonal workers. In 1972, the cannery was sold to J.J. Theodore, a Seattle entrepreneur. The cannery was one of the Island’s largest employers at the time, with over 100 seasonal workers at its heyday. Longtime islanders still recall working the cannery’s

“slime line.” After years of operation, overfishing, the state’s upholding of Native treaty fishing rights, and other factors led to the closing of the J.J. Theodore Cannery by the mid-1990s.

Now, a new chapter is about to begin; the Friday Harbor Port Commission approved the purchase of the Cannery building and parcel on September 12, 2025.

A Place for Recreation and Research

The era of extraction gave way to a new chapter in the 1980s, when the land began its transformation into a space for the public. In 1985, the Port of Friday Harbor acquired Jackson Beach, turning it into a celebrated recreational area. Nearby, Argyle Lagoon had already been leased in 1965 and purchased in 1984 by the University of Washington’s Friday Harbor Laboratories, serving as a protected site for marine research and education. The gravel pit ceased operations in the 1990s, later donated to the San Juan Island Park & Recreation District (“Island Rec”), leading to the creation of a popular one-mile loop trail and expanded trail connections linking the

elementary school and the beach.

Reversing the Industrial Footprint

Today, Jackson Beach is undergoing restoration. For years, old creosote pilings from the gravel pier stood as reminders of the industrial era, posing environmental risks and detracting from the natural beauty. The County has removed these structures and continues to clear embankments. The Port now oversees the area in partnership with local kayak businesses and a canoe club, moving toward a healthier shoreline and honoring both the Native legacy and modern conservation values.

Washington’s history has long been driven by its natural resources, with industries like fishing, timber, and mining laying the foundations for economic growth. Many communities sprang up around mills, canneries, and quarries—Friday Harbor being a prime example. The expanded shoreline, the result of years of gravel mining, stands as a tangible reminder of this period, when immediate economic benefits often outweighed environmental concerns.

A Shift to a Knowledge and Recreation Economy

As resources dwindled and values changed, Washington’s economy pivoted toward education, technology, and recreation. The University of Washington’s investment in Argyle Lagoon highlights this transition, with education becoming a central force in the state’s development. At the same time, appreciation for natural beauty led to growth in recreation and tourism. The Port’s acquisition of Jackson Beach, for public enjoyment reflects a wider movement to preserve landscapes for future generations.

The Path to Restoration and Stewardship

The story of Jackson Beach, from its past as a native hunting ground to its industrial peak and, finally, its restoration, serves as a powerful and ongoing lesson in the delicate balance between economic development and environmental stewardship. It’s a reminder that a healthy economy and a healthy environment are not mutually exclusive but, in fact, are intrinsically linked.



J. J. Theodore Cannery building purchased by the Port, September 2025

Now and the Future

By GREG HERTEL, FORMER COMMISSIONER

Over the years the Port has faced and met many challenges. Most of these in the early years revolved around growth: trying to size the Port to fit the community and the growing economy. In recent years the challenges have been tougher, harder to predict. The 2008 recession, the 2013 waterfront fire, 2021 Jensen Marina boathouse collapse, and the changes in boat ownership. During the 2000's, boat nights were declining. Staff tried advertising and specials to attract more people, but a slow steady decline continued. This was due to the changing demographics as the Baby Boomers aged out of boating. Younger generations weren't interested in owning "things" but wanted experiences instead. COVID stood that wisdom on its head! Suddenly being on a boat with just your family became highly desirable. New boats were sold and used boats were going for high prices.

While the COVID boat boom is over, the effects are still around. There are more people boating and more new boats on the water, and all those boats need a slip. New slip construction was at a stand-still due to low demand and long permitting windows but the Port had made some moves which are paying off now. The purchase of first Jensen's and then Shipyard Cove gave the Port access to a contiguous waterfront at the south end of the harbor that allows it to expand as the future needs. The uplands are available for waterfront industry to meet one of the Ports' original goals of economic growth, while the extensive waterfront will allow continuing public access.

New designs will be undertaken with continuing public input to ensure the Port fits the community. Decisions made will affect the future, but so far, the purchase and builds have turned out to be wise moves as the Port heads towards its centennial in 25 years.

Port's Bite of Property Taxes Keeps Shrinking

In 1950, the San Juan County commissioners passed a resolution creating the Port of Friday Harbor, taxing all privately held real property in the district at a rate of \$2 for every \$1,000 of assessed valuation. Today, that tax bite is only .09 cents per thousand. Of course, property values have skyrocketed during this period as well.

What does the public get for its tax contribution?

- Jackson Beach waterfront park and free picnic shelter
- Fairweather Waterfront Park, with picnic tables and world-class sculptures
- A free aquarium at Spring Street Landing
- An international airport, with

scheduled and charter flights throughout the region

- Access to passenger ferries from Port Townsend and Bellingham
- Free summer music in the park
- Free small boat launch at Jackson Beach and Shipyard Cove
- Three public marinas serving residents and visitors, providing economic development
- A boatyard with a travel lift
- Affordable business space for over 50 businesses

It's a bargain when compared to other local junior taxing districts, which take up to .70 per thousand.



Friday Harbor Airport, owned and operated by the Port of Friday Harbor



Port of Friday Harbor Marina

The Port of Friday Harbor through Time . . .



Original Friday Harbor Airport terminal, built by Roy Franklin, circa 1960



Friday Harbor Airport prior to 1980

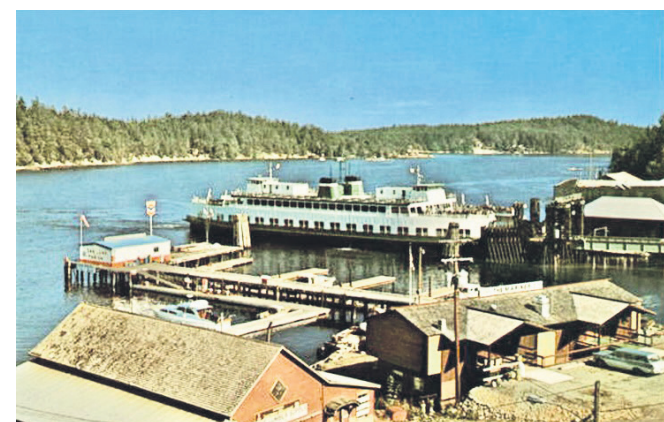


Friday Harbor Waterfront circa 1940



"Lydia Thompson" and the "Rosalie" docked at the foot of Spring Street Landing in 1907

(COURTESY OF SAN JUAN HISTORICAL MUSEUM)



1950s waterfront, Browne Lumber, foreground, Mariner Restaurant, background



1990s waterfront, Mariner Restaurant is now Downriggers

P.O. Box 889 • Friday Harbor, WA 98250 • VHF66A • (360) 378-2688 • www.portfridayharbor.org