

Sierra Country Club is fortunate to have a first-hand written account of the property that would ultimately become the Sierra development. This narrative describes life at “Oceanside Farm” from late 1945 until all but 5 acres were sold to the developers of Sierra Country Club in 1967. Access this link to enjoy this fascinating historical review: <http://sierracountryclub.net/data/uploaded/file/Sierra%20History.pdf>

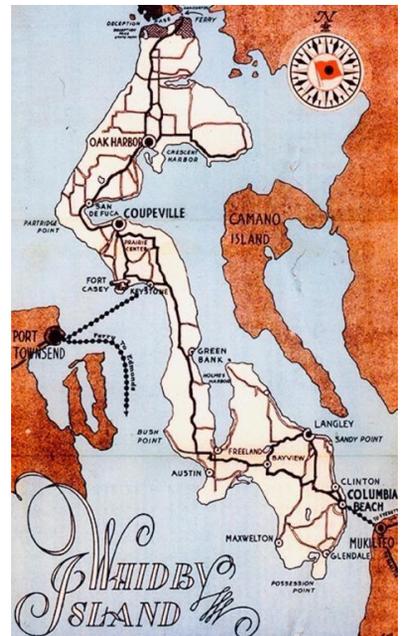
The below series of articles attempts to provide historical context for the time and people of early Whidbey Island, including pioneer Samuel Libbey, who received 320 acres here in a Donation Land Claim grant in 1853.

## SIERRA PREQUEL: THE LIBBEY YEARS, PART 1

Sandi Bumpus

### Westward Ho – Whidbey or Bust!

With ample timber, quarries, farms, fisheries, and thriving industrial and maritime operations, one might wonder at the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century mass exodus from established settlements on the east and mid-Atlantic coasts. What would cause these easterners to leave the relative comforts of home to head into the great western unknown? The roots of migration in any generation seem to remain static: political unrest, freedom from religious persecution, land, prosperity, survival, and sometimes, just an insatiable curiosity. In 1852/53, early Whidbey pioneers, Samuel Libbey and Captain Benjamin Barstow, natives of Maine, were two men who braved loneliness and deprivation, even risking their lives, to discover prosperity on these untamed western shores.



New Englanders seem to have a special affinity for the sea, so perhaps it is not surprising that so many eastern pioneers sought their fortunes in the Pacific Northwest. It has been said that those who plied the Atlantic and plowed its coastal plains and valleys were equal parts farmer, fisher, miner, mason, and shipwright. If they were lucky enough to get here in one piece, history has shown that many of those eastern travelers were successful in bringing about western settlement.

On Whidbey Island, and specifically, in Coupeville, eastern maritime influences are seen even today in historic homes and farms. One example is the original Samuel Libbey farmhouse built circa 1860 within our own Sierra Country Club community.

## **The Incredible Journey**

Samuel Libbey was born November 7, 1818 near the Great Salt Bay of Maine. He undoubtedly learned the family farming trade early in life, but also showed a gift for mathematics and accounting in his youth. On January 15, 1845, Samuel married 25-year old Sarah Barstow, also a native of the Pine Tree State, who hailed from a prominent family of ship builders. The couple had two sons; George in 1847, and Joseph in 1850.

Perhaps inspired by stories of rich California gold-fields, Samuel found himself afflicted by the fledgling nation's penchant for wanderlust. More likely than the glitter of gold, however, was the availability of large tracts of free farmland in the Oregon Territory. Conveniently, his ship-building brother-in-law, Benjamin Barstow, longed to see what may lie over the horizon, and could provide the means to do so.

With plans to send for his family when he was established, Samuel left Boston harbor with Captain Barstow sometime in 1852/53 in a Barstow-built ship bound for San Francisco. At that time, there were three ways to get to the west coast from the east: by ship around South America at Cape Horn; by ship to Panama with a 40-mile slog on foot across the swampy Panama isthmus before continuing north by ship; or overland.

As "49'er Fever" created near-hysteria for would-be miners and merchants seeking their respective fortunes, The Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 was just as tempting, offering 320 acres in Oregon Territory to eager men who met eligibility requirements. Enterprising San Francisco-bound ship captains began trying to shave hours and even days off their trips. Through this endeavor, "The Deep Sea Derby" was born, with the goal of an anchor-to-anchor journey from Boston harbor to San Francisco Bay coming in at 110 days or less. It is not known if Barstow's ship was one of the 95 "Derby" participants in this unofficial race, but the time and harbor departure points may not be just coincidental.

A "fast" trip didn't necessarily equate to an uneventful one. Journals of those who successfully made the journey describe gale-force winds strong enough to "unhair a dog," and 80-foot cresting swells as "typical." Survivors of these trips described wrecked clippers washed up on the rocky shores of Tierra Del Fuego, water-logged trunks bobbing in the surf, and half-submerged machinery meant for the gold fields jutting at odd angles out of the sand.

Samuel, described as a "slight man" of approximately 125 pounds, undoubtedly arrived somewhat worse for wear, but did not let the rigors of 19<sup>th</sup>-century travel, nor his uncertain future deter him.

It is not hard to imagine Samuel's first glimpses of Whidbey or his first steps ashore, as he must have experienced feelings of both foreboding and triumph. While he was familiar with the bounties of turf and surf in his homeland, no small amount of danger and mountains of hard work awaited him.

**NEXT: Samuel Libbey's many pioneer hats in Part 2 of "Sierra Prequel: The Libbey Years."**