

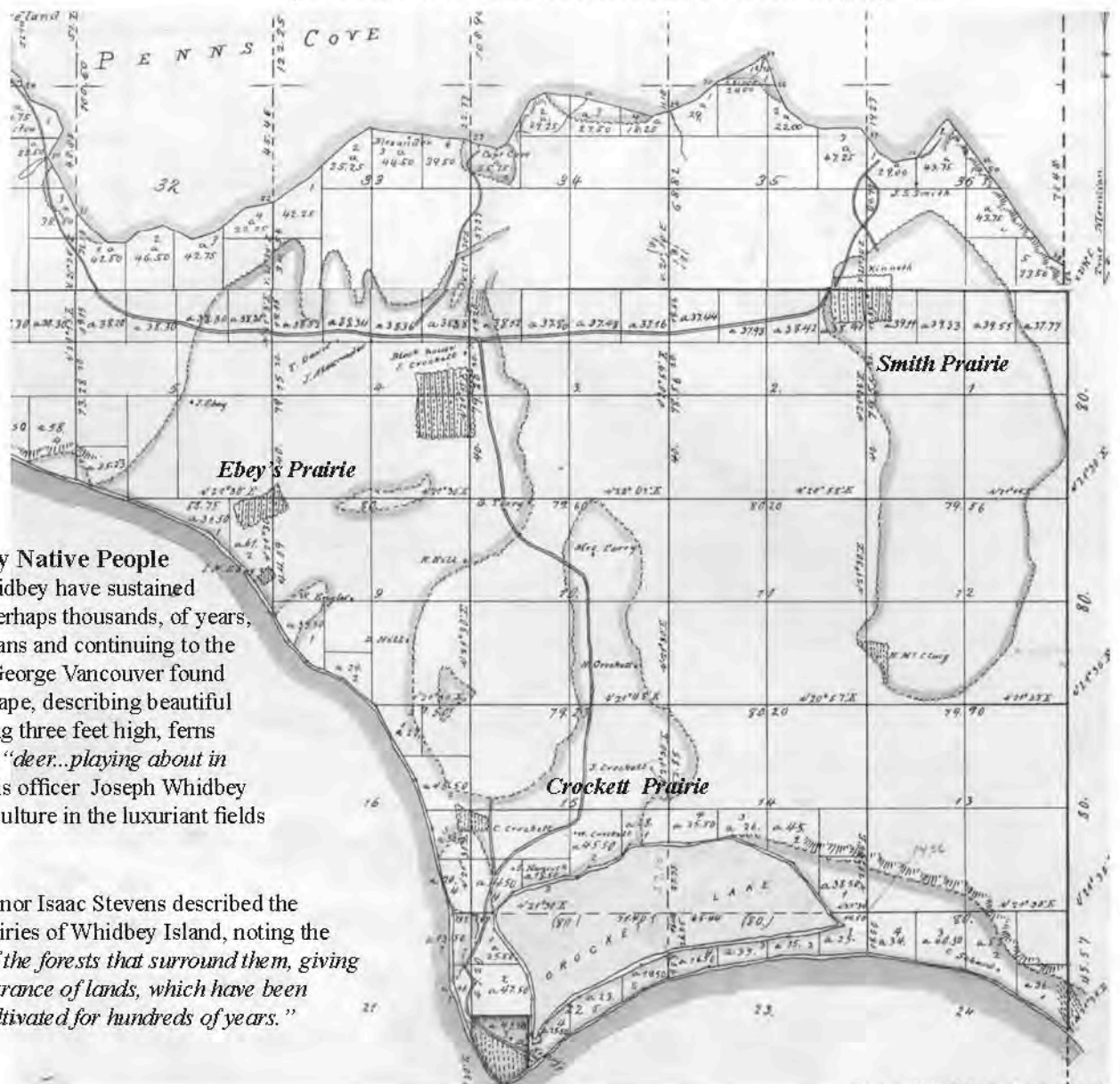
# Ebey's Landing

## Working Prairies

Over 100 years of agriculture in Ebey's, Crockett and Smith prairies

Courtesy of Island County Historical Society

This 1856 government survey map shows the boundaries of Ebey's, Crockett and Smith prairies that were originally maintained by local Skagit Indians and then claimed by settlers from the eastern U.S. You can also see locations where settlers first farmed.



Courtesy of Island County Historical Society

### A Landscape Shaped by Native People

The prairies of Central Whidbey have sustained agriculture for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years, beginning with Skagit Indians and continuing to the present. In 1792 Captain George Vancouver found a tended Penn Cove landscape, describing beautiful pastures with grass growing three feet high, ferns twice that height and with "deer...playing about in great numbers." He and his officer Joseph Whidbey saw great promise for agriculture in the luxuriant fields and organic black soils.

In 1855, Governor Isaac Stevens described the remarkable prairies of Whidbey Island, noting the "abruptness of the forests that surround them, giving them the appearance of lands, which have been cleared and cultivated for hundreds of years."

### Island Farming

The rich soil, mild climate and centralized shipping position gave an early advantage to Whidbey Island pioneers. However, as land transport developed island farmers had to work together to compete with agricultural areas that were closer to population centers and major shipping ports.

The history of agriculture on Whidbey's prairies is one of cooperation, from farmers helping each other with grain harvest to jointly purchasing new machinery and barn silos, establishing cooperatives for processing milk products and marketing eggs, and gaining singularity in disease-free cattle and uncontaminated seed production. JoAnne Engle Brown recalls prairie farmers during the harvest season in the 1930s: "The harvest crews often consisted of more than 20 men from around the prairie. Wagons and horse teams were shared as each farm's grain was harvested."



Farmers worked together to harvest grain, moving a steam powered thresher from farm to farm.

Courtesy of Island County Historical Society

## Native Agriculture

The earliest Euro-American settlers in the 1840s and '50s found a landscape already cultivated by its original residents. The Skagit Indians living around Penn Cove are believed to have burned the prairies periodically to enhance grasses for game and to create favorable conditions for plants such as bracken fern, nettles, berries and the highly valued camas lily that provided a staple of their diet. By 1841 they were also growing potatoes and beans, with seed probably acquired through the Hudson's Bay Company.

> 1850s drawing of Penn Cove, from the Pacific Railroad Survey.



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“they had to hang together or they couldn't survive”

Pre 1850's | 1850-1860 | 1860-1880 | 1880-1900 | 1900-1920 | 1920-1945



Image source

## Homesteading in Paradise

The earliest homesteaders selected the most fertile farmland on the cleared areas, with Isaac Ebey, the Crockett family, and Joseph Smith bestowing the prairie names still used today. During this period pioneers not only grew their own food but used the island's central proximity on Puget Sound to gain market advantage. They sold their crops of potatoes, onions, turnips, cabbage, wheat, oats, beef and butter to the military at Fort Townsend and Fort Victoria, and supplied miners as far away as San Francisco.

< In an 1853 letter Walter Crockett noted that the native camas made fine fodder for his hogs.

## Shifting Markets, Diverse Crops

With agricultural development in the West and the building of mainland railroads, island farmers couldn't compete with grain and produce grown in California and other parts of Washington Territory. Whidbey farmers responded by frequently shifting the focus of their operations and by producing diverse crops, raising sheep and the hay to feed them, and barley, wheat, oats, cattle, milk cows, pigs, potatoes, fruit, and market garden produce on a single farm.

> In a letter to his family, dated 1876, Eason Ebey wrote of the difficulties the prairie farmers faced.

In? time to come here to stay unless you have means enough to live easily without the making on the farm for a living and schooling for the children, for really farming is no profitable business here. We now have to compete with California in almost everything, not only in grain and hay as of old, but now potatoes and cabbages that come in quantities from S. F. by every steamer. I do not think there would be any profit to be made here.

“farming is an ‘uphill’ business here. We now have to compete with California in almost everything, not only in grain and hay as of old, but now potatoes and cabbages that come in quantities from S. F. from every steamer.”

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Courtesy of Island County Historical Society

## Boom and Bust

Farmers' fortunes rose and fell with rebuilding after the Seattle fire of 1889, a national depression in 1893 and the revival brought by the Alaska gold rush of 1897. For a stable income, many of the original settlers rented their fields to Chinese tenant farmers who produced record potato crops, especially on Ebey's Prairie. Landowners also planted orchards and raised wheat and oats, exporting excess goods from the long wharves built on Coupeville's waterfront.

< Herding sheep on Ebey's Prairie in 1905. Note the split rail fence used to keep animals out of cultivated fields.

## The Rise of Cooperative Dairying

As transportation costs and depleted prairie soils made potato growing less profitable, Whidbey farmers increasingly turned to dairy and poultry for year-round incomes. They organized cooperatives to process milk and to market egg and dairy products. Wheat and potato yields set national records, hundreds of acres of dry peas were teased from Ebey's Prairie and orchardists shipped apples, cherries and prunes to Seattle markets.

> Whidbey Island was featured in this 1893 promotional pamphlet.  
> Dairy cows on Ebey's Prairie circa 1900.



Image source

Courtesy of Island County Historical Society



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## Island Provenance

Whidbey agriculture held on through the national depression of the 1930s, relying on its mild weather advantage, close-knit island community and improved connections with the opening of the Deception Pass bridge. Through the benefits of cooperative organizations, island farmers were recognized for breeding disease-free Guernsey cows and leghorn chickens, growing clean seed crops and producing high-quality eggs marketed nationwide. Growers tried new ventures suited to the drier climate of Central Whidbey, raising thousands of turkeys, planting gooseberries and storing thick-skinned squash to sell to Seattle markets through the winter.

<> Turkeys and gooseberries on the Sherman Farms.



Courtesy of Island County Historical Society

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