

A Sense of Place

Where We Live and What It Feels Like



Friday Harbor named distinctive destination by National Trust for Historic Preservation

By Mike Macdonald ~ Photos by Claudia La Cava

Every year the National Trust for Historic Preservation, a Washington D.C. based non-profit organization, picks a dozen towns of merit as a distinctive destination.

This year, Friday Harbor was added to a list of more than 100 interesting, beautiful, and historic towns, including Durango, Colorado, Key West, Florida, Monterey, California, and Newport, Rhode Island.

Each of the chosen cities and towns has a distinctive sense of place, from the gilded marble mansions of Newport to the ranches of Durango. Friday Harbor, a seaside village set in unmatched natural surroundings, is a world-class destination in a charming rural environment.

“Cultural and heritage tourism is the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry,” said Friday Harbor Historic Preservation Coordinator Sandy Strehlou. “People want an authentic taste of the place they are visiting.”

“Friday Harbor is a working town, not a museum,” Strehlou said. “This is not a ghost town. People live, work, shop, and dine in historical buildings, many more than 100 years old. It is remarkable that Friday Harbor still has so many turn-of-the-century wooden-framed buildings.”

A series of fortunate and unfortunate events shaped Friday Harbor. The town escaped the waterfront fires that razed most seaports, spreading from piers and canneries through wooden buildings. Economic downturns and the expense of transportation slowed the replacement of wood with brick or concrete buildings.

Part of the look of Friday Harbor was fostered by ordinances that restricted advertising signs or encouraged ongoing use of old buildings.

Doctor's Office: Dating back to c1905, this house was the residence for the Superintendent of the Pacific American Fisheries Cannery, later known as the Friday Harbor Packing Company. In recent years the building has undergone extensive alterations that have substantially changed the original structure. The current name comes from a more recent and close-to-the-ferry espresso and deli business—the right prescription for catching the red-eye to the mainland.

The town established a voluntary and advisory Historic Preservation Review Board in 1997 to “encourage and foster preservation of historic structures, sites, or districts.”

Friday Harbor outlined

The award-winning *Friday Harbor Historic Preservation Manual*, written by former Historic Preservation Coordinator Nancy Larsen and illustrated by Tina Rose, is the bible for preservation, renovation, and restoration of historic structures in the town.

Anyone considering working on any old building in the county would benefit from the research contained here.

To condense Larsen’s description of the town’s character, Friday Harbor is a compact high-density mixture of commercial and residential areas connected by paths and sidewalks for easy walking.

Individual structures are primarily wood, with horizontal siding, recessed

entries, false fronts and parapets often with distinctive cornices, unobtrusive roofs, and rectangular windows trimmed in wood. Picket fences are common.

As iconic newspaper editor Virgil Frits might have said, that is Friday Harbor in a nutshell.

“Part of my job is to explain to people what the vernacular design is that defined Friday Harbor,” Strehlou said.

According to the Historic Preservation Manual, vernacular design is defined as “a type or tradition of design that is generally

**We’re not in the travel business,
we’re in the wonder business.**

Deborah Hopkins, SJI Visitors Bureau

Friday Harbor is a working town, not a museum.

Sandy Strehlou, Historic Preservation Coordinator

indigenous to a local region and/or culture. Vernacular design traditions generally evolve over time through adaptation and experimentation by non-professional designers.

Strehlou pointed out the Nichols Walk complex, at the corner of Nichols and A Street, as an outstanding example of preserving an entire corner of commercial and residential houses to historical vernacular standards. "It was the Pope family's vision to insure that no one owner could change the character of the project," Strehlou said.



Spring Street School, 505 Spring Street was built in 1905. This was the second home of Elijah Hamlin Nash and Deborah Kelly Nash and their large family. The Nash family had long been active in the civic and commercial life of Friday Harbor. EH owned and operated Friday Harbor Drug Company and he was the FH postmaster for many years and served as the Mayor of FH from 1915-1921.

The Popes restored the historic structures according to preservation guidelines, then sold the individual buildings as condominiums, keeping control of common areas and future development.

In an outstanding example of practicing what he preached, Sam Pope was the first chair of the Friday Harbor Historic Preservation Review Board.

Stalking a sense of this place

There is something profoundly different about the sense of place projected by Friday Harbor in particular, and San Juan Island in general.

It is a multi-dimensional, layered response matching the visual references. A single imposing landmark does not dominate. In other places, a huge mass like the glacier-covered dormant volcano Mount Baker, or the snow-capped ravines and escarpments of the Olympic range would dictate to your eyes and hijack your vision.

Here, these imposing features are revealed through an ever-shifting foreground, sometimes peeking past an intervening set of hills, sometimes fading into continuo instead of featured instrument.

A drive down Spring Street, Friday Harbor's main drag, from the airport provides a graphic example of the ever-shifting perspectives that give this town a very special sense of place.



Land Bank/Homes for Islanders: This c1898 house, set back from Argyle Avenue, is most closely associated with G.B. Driggs, a prosperous merchant and berry farmer. The Driggs family moved from a smaller, one-story home across the street, (450 Argyle, still standing) after this more stately house was built.

From upper Spring Street, given the right weather, the cone of Mount Baker and supporting Cascades dominate, with mountains behind the city of Vancouver adding scale.

Further down the hill, Turtle Back and Mount Constitution on Orcas Island inject horizontal lines that alter the skyline into layered subtext obscuring the volcano.

In the heart of downtown across from King's Market and the movie theater, the perspective shifts again. Three ridgelines, beginning with Shaw Island across the San Juan Channel, layer the vista and direct your



Latitude 48 building: Known historically as the Davis/Chevalier House, built c1920 by Captain Davis of the Mosquito Fleet, and his wife, Mary Crook Davis. It is most closely associated with the Chevalier Family, with their long ties to the islands, settling first on Spieden, then on Waldron and Stuart islands, and finally San Juan island. Today this building is one of several historic buildings on "A" and Nichols streets that comprise the Nichols Walk Condominiums.

This Place Matters

May is National Historic Preservation month. Events will be held in and around Friday Harbor all month long.

Every Saturday in May, 9 am. Free guided walking tour of Friday Harbor's downtown historic district. Reservations required. 378-2810 during bus hours. Info, www.historicfridayharbor.org.

Saturday, May 3. Mothers' Day Tea. San Juan Historical Museum's James King House. Museum volunteers in costume serve tea and sweets. Call 378-3949. www.sjmuseum.org

Sunday, May 4, 2-4 pm. Historic vessel open house MV *Catalyst*. the former UW Friday Harbor Labs research vessel built in 1932 has been completely restored and refurbished. She now ranges from Friday Harbor to Alaska on cruises and nature charters. Call 378-7123. www.pacificcatalyst.com

Wednesday, May 14, 7 pm. Rural Architecture talk. Historian and architect Boyd Pratt speaks on rural architecture in Friday Harbor at the San Juan Historical Museum. 378-2810 www.historicfridayharbor.org

Monday, May 26. Memorial Day parade. The continuation of an eight-decade tradition of honoring veterans both living and fallen by the Hackett Larson American Legion Post 163. 378-5705. www.post163.org

Saturday, May 31, 10 am. Lecture and guided walk, pre-history of San Juan Island. UW archeologist Dr. Julie Stein explains early residents of San Juan Island at Alaska Packer's Rock, Salmon Banks Road, American Camp.

11:30 am. Pig War Story Tour. American Camp headquarters, San Juan Island Historical Park. Rangers and volunteers recount the Pig War and occupation of San Juan Island.

12:30- 3:30 pm. English Camp. Life during the occupation, Rangers and re-enactors feature activities of military and civilian life during the British and American occupation before the Civil War.

For more information on all events at the SJI Historical Park, call 378-2240 or www.nps.gov/sajh.

vision lower with green trees against blue water. You are constantly reminded that you are not only on an island, but also in an archipelago.

Proceed down the hill, and the harbor grabs your attention, with the evolving view of Brown Island and the Friday Harbor Labs filtered through the two dignified Dutch Elms seemingly miraculously growing out of solid rock, their feet wet from the still-running spring that gave the main street its name.

For me, the sense of place that is Friday Harbor is a shape shifter, a picture puzzle. Your eye is never drawn to just

one thing, but to the relationships of things. Visual compositions are not notes, but scales and runs of chords played improvisationally, different on nearly every seeing. Spring Street is one of the few main streets in the lower 48 states over which bald eagles regularly soar.

What design professionals call the built landscape compliments and reflects the views of our natural environment. There is no dominant structure or edifice. The charm lies in the run of the buildings and how they relate to their neighbors, the absence of jarring exceptions, obvious anachronisms, or buildings shouting to draw attention to themselves. The lack of loud signs or blinking lights adds places of silence, like the rests between notes.

"People travel here to experience authenticity and a sense of place," said

Deborah Hopkins, SJI Visitors Bureau Director. "They know they are coming to a real harbor, where real people live and work in historical buildings. This is the opposite of Disneyland. People are curious about the people who choose to live in the islands, being dependent on ferries, surrounded by so much natural beauty. They wonder what it's like to live without traffic jams or even traffic signals.

Art, culture, and history all contribute to the unique sense of place we enjoy here."

Nina Le Baron is an award-winning architect and the former preservation director for the San Francisco Art Deco

The most responsible way to build is to recycle an old building.

Yvon Chouinard, Patagonia founder

Society. She has a degree in Historic Preservation from Columbia University; but brings a practical sensibility to the topic of preservation. "Without the historical fabric and people who care, Friday Harbor might look like a strip mall. In this county, preservation is voluntary. We're lucky to have property owners who understand the value and irreplaceability of historic buildings."

"Electrical systems, plumbing, and windows have a lifespan shorter than a well-built historic wooden building. You have to take particular care in replacing windows, which are the eyes of a building," Le Baron said. "One difficult part of restoration is the small footprint of many older buildings. The trick is to add on without looking like an addition. Many old buildings were expanded as their owners' needs changed."



Herda House, Built in 1895 on Caines Street and relocated to Carter Avenue in 2001. Jennifer Fitch Herda and Gabe Herda moved and restored the house and were awarded a Partners in Preservation Award from the Town of Friday Harbor in 2003.



Carter House, originally built in 1911 and Churchill House (rear) built in 1892 and recently moved from its original location to Argyle Ave., are important assets to our community. Lynn Danaher refurbished and preserved both historic structures which now serve as office suites.

Churchill and Carter Houses Renewed

A little more than two years after the Nickels Brothers house movers trundled the bright yellow Churchill House from the rocky knob overlooking the harbor where it had been for more than a century, the venerable yet restored old building is ready for a new life and a second century of service to Friday Harbor.

In a serendipitous turn of events, the new prime lessee moving in May 1 will be The San Juan Preservation Trust, a private, non-profit organization that accepts and manages gifts of land and easements designed to protect and preserve the natural character of the San Juans.

The greenest building is one that's already built.

"Old buildings are a fossil fuel repository," said architect Mike Jackson in a recent issue of Preservation magazine.

Simply put, old structures like the Churchill House have already amortized the energy needed to produce, transfer, and install the necessary building materials. If the old building was torn down and replaced with a new one, the net energy used would be more than doubled. This energy use is outside of that needed to operate the building. Jackson estimated that it would take from 40 to 65 years to reach a break-even point in net energy expended, even constructing the most modern energy efficient replacement building.

As the former owner of several large wooden boats, developer Lynn Danaher was no stranger to the complex process of refitting an old wooden structure and the balancing act between modernization and authenticity. She



Burke House: This stately c1900 residence on Argyle Ave. originally was home to the prominent and controversial John L. Murray who served as SJC Auditor and later, Treasurer. He was also FH's second Mayor, from 1910-1912. His political career took him from SJC to Olympia where he served two terms as a State Legislator and later became Asst. Land Commissioner. Cynthia and Christopher Burke have spent the past six years renovating this structure to its better than original state.

has just finished converting the Churchill House, built in 1892, and the Carter House on Argyle Avenue into office and business space. The Carter House residence was built in 1911 as a wedding present.

"These houses have been completely restored," Danaher said. "We have new wiring, plumbing, heating systems, windows, roofs, and alarm systems."

Danaher believes she has given new life to two important pieces of the town's history.

"I was very aware of saving energy in the restoration," Danaher said. "Anyplace we opened up a wall, insulation was blown in. We have low-voltage lighting and alarms. We paid particular attention to sound insulation."

Besides saving two old buildings, Danaher used recycled materials where appropriate. "I spent a lot of time in the Re-Store in Bellingham."

"So many owners of old houses say why bother and don't maintain their property," said Le Baron. "That is why so many old

houses have been torn down. The appreciation for how much energy is saved by refurbishing an older house will help us preserve more of these irreplaceable structures in the future." **ah**