

VASHON MAURY ISLAND BEACHCOMBER

Time and Again: Church to museum

The story of a sacred place.

By Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly • October 25, 2023



Vashon Lutheran Church Sunday school, 1958 (Photo from the Vashon Heritage Museum).

The Vashon Heritage Museum campus, comprising the Museum, which resides in the former Vashon Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Parsonage next door, both built in 1909, are being nominated as a King County Landmark. On Thursday, Oct. 26, a public hearing will be held at the Land Trust Building at 5 p.m. where the King County Landmarks Commission will hear the application for Landmark status.

The fact that the Heritage Museum is located in a former church is doubly significant, because both a church and a museum are sacred spaces.

A church by its very nature as a place of worship is a sacred space. The Vashon Evangelical Lutheran Church was built by Norwegian immigrants to Vashon and their children, who came to worship, to hear faith-based stories, and to reflect on their faith.

A museum is also a sacred space. The word museum, which is derived from the Greek word *mouseion*, and the Latin derivative *mouseion*, means the shrine of the muses. The muses are the nine inspirational goddesses of literature, science, and the arts who give us knowledge. The place of the muses is a sacred place where we go to consult the muses, to learn, and to gain knowledge.

The Vashon Heritage Museum is a sacred place where we go to find answers to our questions about who we are as islanders, to hear Vashon stories, and to reflect on how we islanders became who we are.

The four-way stop at Vashon Highway SW marks the center of Vashon's historic commercial district. The Vashon Heritage Museum's campus is located approximately two blocks to the west on Bank Road. This stretch of Bank Road, between the four-way stop and Mukai Way (107th SW), represents the symbolic agricultural, senior, environmental, safety, and heritage heart of Vashon.

VIGA's Village Green and Saturday Market anchor this stretch beginning just north of the four-way stop. The Senior Center (former Vashon Library) at the next corner, with the Land Trust (former Christian Science Reading Room) next door, represents Vashon seniors and the incredibly successful preservation of open spaces on the Island.

The Vashon Fire District Station next door and across the street, King County's Local Services Center and the Penny Farcy Memorial Training Center ensure Islanders are safe in emergencies. The Vashon Heritage Museum campus, and a quarter mile further west on Mukai Way (107th SW), the Mukai House and Garden represent the best of preserving and telling the history of the Island. Interspersed along this stretch are numerous small businesses and homes.

The Museum building is easily identified as a former church with its steeply pitched front-gable roof, and the tall lancet (pointed arch) windows on both sides lighting the open space within. The parsonage, with its hipped roof, prominent dormers, cornice returns, and full-width front porch with square columns represents a simplified Victorian eclectic style represented widely in late 19th century plan books.

The paired church and parsonage represent a rare and intact property type that represents the ethnic settlement patterns and religious and cultural practices of Norwegian immigrant communities in the early 20th century settlement of the Salish Sea region.

The church building served the Lutheran community on Vashon until 1962, when a new Vashon Lutheran Church was built on land purchased south of Vashon Town.

The parsonage was rented out during much of the first half of the 20th century since ministers usually came from off-island. After World War II the parsonage was occupied by the minister, or was used as a Sunday School classroom, meeting space, and minister's office when not used as a minister's residence.

After 1962, the church building served numerous community uses over the course of the next thirty six years, until purchased by the Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Association in 1998 to become the Vashon Heritage Museum. The character defining features of the former church building were preserved while it was adapted to serve as a preschool, antique shop, arts center, daycare center, and the Vashon Heritage Museum.

Beginning in 1969, the island's first Head Start program operated out of the building, and from 1976 through 1979 a retail shop known as The Old Town Shop or Old Town Shop Antiques, was in the building. From 1978 to 1981, the church was home to the nonprofit organization Vashon Allied Arts (VAA).

VAA evolved from the Vashon Arts League, formed by Island artists in 1949, and the group secured federal 501(c)3 status in 1966, making it the oldest nonprofit community arts organization in Washington State. When VAA rented the former Lutheran church in late 1978, the building had already been painted blue and Island artist Kji Wyn Berry christened it the Blue Heron Arts Center.

The nonprofit community theater organization Drama Dock, established in 1976, also used the facility for performances during VAA's tenure. VAA rented the former Oddfellows Hall and Rebekah Lodge at Center in 1981, and transferred the name Blue Heron to this new home, which was designated a King County Landmark in 1985, and purchased by VAA in 1988.

Following VAA's departure from the Lutheran church, the building was sold in 1983 to the nonprofit Vashon Children's Centre (VCC). Founded in 1970, the Centre operated the first state-licensed daycare on the Island, opening initially at 5:45 a.m. to support parents who commuted off-Island.

VCC operated at the church property through 1998, when they offered the building on favorable terms to the Vashon Maury Island Heritage Association (VMIHA). For VMIHA, acquisition of the former church in 1998 represented a major accomplishment toward the organization's primary goal of establishing a community museum, an effort more than two decades in the making.

A founding committee comprised of George McCormick, Mike Kirk and Reed Fitzpatrick issued an invitation in 1975, to all community members, to join a new group dedicated to "reflecting the past, present and future of these islands" with the goal of establishing "a living museum with places for historical relics, but with constantly changing exhibits about the present and future as well as the past."

Members began collecting artifacts, photographs and documents related to Island history. VMIHA incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 1976. Following the purchase of the former Vashon Lutheran Church VMIHA began to restore and remodel the building into the Vashon Heritage Museum. A large crowd attended the ribbon cutting and grand opening celebration on June 29, 2003.

Following the decision to construct a new church building in 1959, the Vashon Evangelical Lutheran Church sold the parsonage to a series of private owners. The owners, or their tenants over the years, kept the parsonage generally well-maintained, with occasional modest renovation projects that supported ongoing use as a single-family home, while preserving the historic nature of the building.

In 2014, the Vashon Maury Island Heritage Association purchased the former parsonage, with funds donated by community members and secured through a grant from 4Culture, King County's cultural development authority. Currently, the parsonage is rented to a residential tenant, and VMIHA plans to adapt it in the future for use to enhance the Museum's mission.

The Vashon Evangelical Lutheran Church, and its associated parsonage, represent the aspirations of a specific immigrant community a century ago, and the church building has remained a community gathering place through numerous incarnations of adaptive reuse, including its current role as the Island's collective repository for its history, memories, and stories.

Describing the role of American Country Churches, historian William Morgan wrote: "These churches express community – the something that is larger than our everyday concerns and to which we all belong. In reminding us of who we are, they provide a sense of security, especially in times of crisis. Most of all, they strike a chord of continuity."

The Vashon Heritage Museum continues this tradition of "reminding us of who we are" and providing the "chord of continuity" from the past to the present and into the future.

Historical information for this article is based on the King County Landmark Nomination for the Vashon Heritage Museum written by Holly Taylor, with support from 4Culture.

The Vashon Heritage Museum is collecting interior and exterior photographs of the former Vashon Evangelical Lutheran Church in all of its incarnations (church, pre-school, shop, arts center, childcare center) and the parsonage. Do you have family photos that you can share? Please email them to administration@vashonheritagemuseum.org.

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