

Dr. Alfred Burnham: Town Builder

Themes:

- Migration
- Westward expansion/colonization
- Land development
- Community development
- Post-Civil War era
- Early Gig Harbor

Dr. Alfred M. Burnham was Gig Harbor's first professional doctor. He was born in New York in 1824 and graduated from medical school in 1852. He moved to a farm in Albert Lea, Minnesota, in 1860 and served in the Civil War as a second assistant surgeon.

Dr. Burnham lived in several places, married his second wife, Rachel Hord, and had three children before the strain of a severe winter and working through an outbreak of diphtheria made him ready to move to California. In 1884 he packed up his family and a few possessions and headed south. He made it only as far as Colorado before changing his destination to the Puget Sound area of Washington Territory.

After establishing themselves in Tacoma, the Burnhams filed a homestead claim¹ on 160 acres near Gig Harbor. In 1886, when it was time to move to their new farm, the family came from Tacoma on a steamboat, but Dr. Burnham rowed himself and their belongings across the Narrows. Later, he rowed the first cow to Gig Harbor in a skiff (a type of rowboat). The same year, Burnham bought a one-third portion in a 36-acre piece of land at the head of the bay, part of which bordered his homestead. (He bought the portion from Peter Goldsmith, who along with Samuel Jerisich, and John Farrague, were three of the very early Euro-American settlers of Gig Harbor).

¹ The US Congress passed the Homestead Act in 1862. After the government and the settlers had pushed the Native Americans off their lands, the Act gave 160 acres of government land to anyone who had never borne arms against the US and who would improve the land.

Later in 1887, a few of his friends and neighbors from Albert Lea decided to build two lumber mills on the shores of Gig Harbor, prompting Dr. Burnham to trade his one-third portion in the 36-acre parcel for full ownership of the west 12 acres of the property. The mill workers would need a place to live, and sensing opportunity, in 1888 he platted² his newly acquired 12 acres into Gig Harbor City, the first town on the bay. Today, this is the area from Donkey Creek Park to the Bogue Viewing Platform and extending several hundred feet to the north. For the first time, Gig Harbor had streets. (Later that year Joseph and Caroline Dorotich and John and Josephine Novak platted the town site of Millville, part of today's "downtown" area, to also take advantage of the opportunity provided by the lumber mill being built on that side of the bay).

In addition to platting a town, Burnham also surveyed the rights-of-way for roads to Purdy and Olalla, although the easiest and most convenient way to travel was still by boat. For that reason, the Burnham's son, Bismark, financed by Dr. Burnham, began operating a passenger steamboat between Gig Harbor and Tacoma at the age of eighteen. Captain Biz went on to helm many steamboats and ferries, carrying freight, mail, cars, and passengers.

Besides working as Gig Harbor's first professional physician, Dr. Burnham also opened its second general store, managed by his son Clarence (known as Nick). The store occupied the first floor of the waterfront building, while the upper floor was used as a community hall. During the same time period, Mrs. Burnham served as the postmaster of nearby Rosedale.

Dr. Burnham died in 1896, and Rachel in 1933. Burnham Drive, which they named themselves when they platted the town, is a constant reminder of their influence in the development of the harbor. If you visit the Harbor History Museum, you will see on display a Burnham family pitcher and a Native American paddle given to Dr. Burnham. These artifacts help tell the story of a man fundamental to the story of Gig Harbor.

Discussion Questions: *(Questions based on the [C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards](#))*

- What are some of the sacrifices and benefits of the choices Dr. Burnham made?
- How did environmental factors affect Dr. Burnham's life? How did his culture and background affect how he adapted to his environment?

² A plat is a legal map showing the divisions of a piece of land.

- How did cultural and environmental characteristics affect the distribution of people, goods, and ideas? How did the cultural and environmental characteristics of Gig Harbor change over the Dr. Burnham's lifetime?
- How did changes in transportation and communication technology over time affect the distribution of people, goods, and ideas?
- What was happening in other parts of Washington, the US, and the world during Dr. Burnham's life?
- What are some examples of change or continuity in the historical events and developments of Dr. Burnham's life?
- Compare and contrast events in Dr. Burnham's life and his lifestyle to life today.
- What are some of the factors and context that may have influenced Dr. Burnham's perspectives on life? Why might other people from the same time period have different perspectives? How do our perspectives today compare?

This information compiled from HHM publications, the HHM blog, [An Excellent Little Bay](#) by J.A. Eckrom, and research conducted by Greg Spadoni.