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Lake Washington Ship Canal

After decades of often-rancorous debate, construction of a Ship Canal to link Lake Washington and Puget Sound finally began on November 10, 1911. Following the failure of several private canal schemes, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Gen. Hiram M. Chittenden (1858-1917), advanced the project, and his name was later given to the Government Locks linking the Sound and Salmon Bay at Ballard. The canal required digging cuts between Salmon Bay and Lake Union at Fremont and between Lake Union and Lake Washington at Montlake, and building four bascule bridges at Fremont, Ballard, the University District, and Montlake. The Locks officially opened on July 4, 1917, but the canal was not declared complete until 1934.

From Lake to Shining Sea

Seattle pioneer Thomas Mercer (1813-1898) was the first to point out the benefits of building a navigable passage between the fresh waters of Lake Washington and the saltwater of Puget Sound and the Pacific beyond. At a village celebration on July 4, 1854, Mercer proposed the name Union for the lake lying between Salmon Bay on the west and Lake Washington on the east, in the full confidence that a canal would eventually connect these waters. Eighty years passed before this vision was fully realized.

In 1860, Harvey L. Pike dug a shallow ditch at the present Montlake Cut to permit the passage of logs from Lake Washington to the lower waters of Portage Bay. The Lake Washington Improvement Company, directed by Judge Thomas Burke (1849-1925), widened and deepened this passage in 1883, but not enough to allow it to accommodate vessels.

Meanwhile, in 1867, the U.S. Navy endorsed the idea of a canal linking Puget Sound and Lake Washington so that Navy ships could enjoy fresh water anchorage. At this time, only shallow-draft boats and barges could pass from Lake Washington to Elliott Bay via the Black River slough leading into the Duwamish River. Delays led the Navy to establish its Puget Sound Naval Shipyard near Bremerton instead of on Lake Washington, but it continued to urge development of a Seattle canal. In 1891, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers endorsed a canal via Lake Union.

Canal Controversy

Despite this, in 1895 former Territorial Governor Eugene Semple organized an effort to dig a "South Canal" through Beacon Hill. Work progressed enough to help fill in 1,400 acres of the Duwamish tide flats south of Pioneer Square. Great Northern Railway magnate James J. Hill (1838-1916) and his allies, particularly Judge Burke, preferred the northern route and ultimately succeeded in undermining Semple's finances and political support. The south canal was

abandoned, although Semple pursued landfills and waterway improvements on the Duwamish until his funds were exhausted in 1904.

The Washington State Legislature endorsed the northern route in 1900 and the federal government began deepening the channel leading from Shilshole Bay to the Ballard wharves in 1906. The canal itself remained stymied, so developer James A. Moore won Congressional authority to organize a private company to do the work. Ballard mill owners began to protest the project, fearing that shipping would displace their access to Salmon Bay for log transport and storage.

Hiram M. Chittenden had taken command of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Seattle in 1906 and although he did not think highly of Moore's efforts, he strongly urged completion of the canal. He continued his advocacy after his retirement in 1908, and helped to persuade Congress to appropriate \$2,275,000 for the necessary locks on June 25, 1910.

Federal aid was conditioned on King County taking responsibility for the rest of the canal. Construction finally began on November 10, 1911. Five years later, on October 21, 1916, a temporary dam at the Montlake Cut was breached to permit Lake Washington to empty into Lake Union, lowering Lake Washington by nine feet. The "Government Locks" and complete waterway opened to boat traffic on May 8, 1917. Admiral Peary's polar flagship, *Roosevelt*, led a ceremonial flotilla through the canal on July 4 of that year. The project had by then cost more than \$3 million.

Other improvements necessitated by the canal included removal of three fixed bridges at Fremont, Stoneway, and Latona and construction of four new bascule bridges: Fremont and Ballard, both completed in 1917, University, completed in 1919 (improved 1932), and Montlake, completed in 1925. The entire project was declared complete in 1934 -- 80 years after Thomas Mercer first dreamed of a canal.

By the time the Lake Washington Ship Canal's Government Locks opened in 1917, a stroke had confined Hiram Chittenden to a wheel chair. He died on October 9, 1917. In 1956, the Corps of Engineers renamed the Ballard locks to honor his memory. Twelve years later, the Corps dedicated the Lock's public gardens to Carl S. English Jr., who had created them. The Locks and canal now constitute a National Historic District.

Sources:

Clarence Bagley, *History of Seattle* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1916) and *History of King County, Washington* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1929); Paul Dorpat, *Building Washington: A History of Washington State Public Works* (Seattle: Tartu Publications, 1998); Melinda McRae, *Passport to Ballard* (Seattle: Ballard News Tribune, 1988); Richard C. Berner, *Seattle in the Twentieth Century, Vol. 1, Seattle 1900-1920* (Seattle: Charles Press, 1991). By Walt Crowley, July 01, 1999



Lake Washington Ship Canal near Shilshole Bay, 2000

Courtesy Alan Stein



Construction of Lake Washington Ship Canal, Seattle, 1912

Photo by A. Curtis, Courtesy UW Special Collections (Neg. 255121)



Hiram M. Chittenden Locks under construction, 1915

Courtesy National Archives



Lake Washington water gushes through Montlake Cut, 1917

Courtesy MOHAI



Formal opening of Lake Washington Ship Canal, 1917

Courtesy MOHAI



Chittenden Locks, ca. 1930s

Postcard



Fremont Bridge shot from Aurora Bridge, Seattle, July 2001

HistoryLink.org Photo by Priscilla Long



Great Northern railroad bridge (1917) across the Lake Washington Ship Canal, Ballard, Seattle

Postcard