

HOW MAGNOLIA GOT ITS NAME

By Bob Kildall

As legend has it, native madronas dotted the bluffs seafaring explorers observed as they passed this place we call Magnolia before it had a name. Supposedly an explorer mistook those trees for magnolias and Magnolia Bluff was born. The mistake is understandable. Both the magnolia and madrona trees are broadleaf evergreens. They are of comparable size, with large leathery leaves that are alike in shape and have a brown- to rust-colored undercoat. The tree canopies look similar as well, especially in the early stages of a madrona's growth.^{1,2} But who chose the name for our community—and when did this occur? Interestingly, the answers are uncertain and have been debated for many years.

Aleua L. Frare mentioned several possibilities in her 1975 Magnolia history book:

“The Magnolia area was first recognized when an early explorer of Puget Sound looked up at the high promontory emerging in the early morning fog, saw the huge madrona trees leaning down from the 300-ft. yellow cliffs, and made a black mark on his chart. Down in his dimly lit cabin he entered ‘Magnolia Bluff’ in his log.

“Historians have had a field-day ever since guessing who had the bad eyesight. Some say [Capt. George] Vancouver, who named everything in sight. Others say Lt. Charles Wilkes, who named West Point and fifty other landmarks. And then there was Dr. George Davidson, a botanist with a United States Coast & Geodetic Survey team—badly in need of glasses.”³

In Brandt Morgan's 1979 book *Enjoying Seattle's Parks*, Morgan attributed the mistake to Davidson: “Magnolia is actually a misnomer. The name was originally given by the Navy geographer George Davidson, who in 1897 mistook the Bluff's abundant madronas for magnolias, and people have been calling it Magnolia ever since.”⁴ Others have noted the obvious error without making an attempt to finger the author of the name. In the 1997 *Access Seattle* travel guide, an unnamed writer explained how Magnolia got its name:

*“... this hamlet—named in 1865 after a United States Coast Survey misidentified a stand of madrona trees as magnolias. . . .”⁵ And author Roger Sale wrote in his book *Seeing Seattle*: “The area was named for the trees along the Bluff, but the namer could not tell a magnolia from a madrona, and these madronas are stately creatures—throwbacks to a time before white folks, when so much of the Pacific coast was lined with them.”⁶*



*Magnolia Village gateway at 33rd Avenue West and West Smith Street.
This sculpture depicts a true magnolia blossom,
not to be mistaken for one of the madrones native to the Magnolia community.
Photo by Monica Wooton. 2006.*

The date of the actual naming varies by as much as 40 years in historical sources. In 2000, the same year Sale's book was published, John Owen in *Walking Seattle* placed the blame for the inaccurate name squarely on Davidson: "Extending beyond Discovery Park is the neighborhood of Seattle known as Magnolia Bluff. The name should actually be Madrona Bluff. Navy Geographer George Davidson is responsible for the error. In 1897, he mistakenly identified the native madrona trees as magnolias."⁷

Before George Davidson came to the Pacific Coast in 1850, he served the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey in the Gulf Coast states. Davidson had begun his career with the Coast Survey in a sedentary desk job, a position that did not suit him, before he was sent into the field.⁸ Davidson spent time in America's southern states, where magnolia trees grow so abundantly that the evergreen magnolia is the state flower of Louisiana and Mississippi.⁹ It could have been easy for Davidson to mistake the Pacific madrone for the magnolia tree if he saw and recorded information while on the survey ship at a distance from the Bluff. The records do not show Davidson coming ashore at any time.

But, if the mystery is ever to be solved, it may be George Davidson himself who offers a clue to the answer. In the fourth edition of his report "Pacific Coast Pilot—California, Oregon and Washington," published in 1889, Davidson does not actually say he gave the Bluff its name, but he does say, "This long Bluff was named Magnolia Bluff in 1856,"¹⁰ a year in which Davidson was surveying in Puget Sound. Davidson also gives a detailed description of the Bluff.

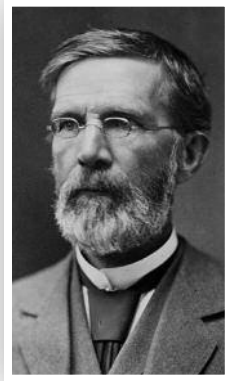
Tellingly, in the previous edition of the "Pacific Coast Pilot—California, Oregon and Washington," published in 1869, Davidson does not mention the year Magnolia Bluff was named or provide any description of the Bluff. In fact, all he says about Magnolia Bluff is, "If the current be flood, vessels bound out should work under the north shore, and close to West Point; if bound up, should work under the north shore, about three and a half miles to Magnolia Bluff, beyond a low marshy indentation in the shore, or until they can fetch well clear of Battery Point."¹¹

Since Davidson substantially expanded his 262-page 1869 edition¹² to 721 pages for the fourth edition,¹³ including adding the year that Magnolia Bluff was named and a detailed description of the Bluff not in the previous edition, it appears he probably returned to his original notes and logs to do so. It seems unlikely he could remember without aid such detail when writing the fourth edition some 30 years after finishing his survey work in Puget Sound.

In addition, Edmond Meany—a respected professor of history at the University of Washington and a contemporary and friend of Davidson's—credits the naming of Magnolia Bluff to Davidson. In Meany's book, *Origin of Washington Geographic Names*, he states:

"MAGNOLIA BLUFF, a bluff in the northwestern part of Seattle, King County, named by Captain George Davidson of the United States Coast Survey in 1856. (*Pacific Coast Pilot*, page 607.) No magnolia trees are native there. Madrones and balms (*ceanothus*) were plentiful and may have been mistaken for magnolias."¹⁴

Available evidence and research strongly support the conclusion that Captain George Davidson named Magnolia Bluff. So, even if you are still wondering who gave Magnolia its name, I won't be with you. I'm satisfied Davidson was the one.



Captain George Davidson.
Courtesy of NOAA.
Circa 1880s.

Opposite:
Magnolia Bluff.
Photo by Webster &
Stevens. MOHAI,
PEMCO Webster &
Stevens Collection,
Seattle, #1983.10.7803.2.
Circa 1913.



THE FIRST FIVE PIONEERS

Information provided by Gary Zimmerman

Editor's Note: *We have changed some of the wording to make this piece understandable by all readers, but we have retained many of the genealogical research phrases and findings for those who would use these technical terms to pursue academic resources to do further study. Spelling discrepancies in old historical records are a common occurrence, as can be seen below.*

Lawton Wood—David Standlee

David Standlee, or David Standler as it appears in some records, had Donation Land Claim #231 from the Olympia Land Office. His file is on microfilm at the National Archives and Records Administration headquarters for the Pacific Alaska Region on Sand Point Way in Seattle on roll 96, beginning at page 18 and extending some 11 or 12 pages. Standlee was granted 149.50 acres of land in Section 10 Township 25 North Range 3 East. He settled his claim on April 16, 1855.

The file shows that Standlee was born in Kentucky. He and his wife, Polly, were married on June 16, 1814, in St. Louis County, Missouri. He testified that he arrived in the Washington Territory on October 1, 1854.

There is another affidavit by Standlee in the Donation Land Claim file for Osmine Frost (case #691 in the Olympia Land Office, roll 102, pages 770-790), again with the spelling of David Standlee. Frost arrived in the territory in August 1852 and settled his claim on May 24, 1855. Standler is the name in the federal Bureau of Land Management database for David Standlee's Donation Land Claim file. You can go to www.glorerecords.blm.gov and search under Washington for David Standler's file to get details and file numbers.

Pleasant Valley—Osman Frost

In the 1857 King County Census, Osman Frost is noted as being single, age 42, and a laborer. In the Donation Land Claim files, Frost stated he was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1815.

Osmine Frost is noted in the Indian Muster Rolls of October 25, 1855, as a private in Company H, 1st Regiment, age 39, born in Connecticut, enlisting in Seattle (AR82-1-12-2228). In another spot on the same muster roll, recorded as document AT82-1-12-2233, Osmine's profession is listed as carpenter. In another document (AR82-1-12-2227), Osmon Frost is listed in Company H of the Foot Volunteers. The Washington State Secretary of State's database has a new record for Osmine Frost, under miscellaneous records, that notes he settled his land claim on May 24, 1855, proof of the date was accepted June 24, 1860, and the patent certificate was issued in April 1882. (This is recorded on page 21 of record #1541.)

In 1875, there was a civil suit in which Charles LeBallister sued Osmine Frost for collection of wages. In 1882, the probate court considered the sanity of Osmine Frost in case #278. In 1885, a civil suit brought by H. G. Struve, J. C. Haines, and the firm of Struve

and Haines against Osmine Frost, defendant, dealt with collection of fees for services. The files may be found at Bellevue Community College in the Washington State Archives, Puget Sound Regional Branch, in King County.

Smith Cove—Erasmus Smithers

In the 1857 census for King County, Erasmus M. Smithers is found on page 3, where it is noted that he is age 27, a farmer, and married. The county and state entry for Smithers is Franklin County, Virginia. The next line in the census mentions David Stanley, age 63, a farmer, and single, with a county and state entry of Logan, Kentucky. The next line lists Alfred G. Terry, age 32, farmer, single, Oneida, New York.

The legal files for Erasmus Smithers are numerous. One of those files notes that in 1871, in criminal case #866 in King County, E. M. Smithers was found guilty of "obstruction, public highway" in a case brought by the Washington Territory.

The Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) also has a photographic print mounted on cardboard of Erasmus M. Smithers, Renton settler, taken by George N. Moore in the 1880s. The abstract that goes with this catalog entry reads:

"Erasmus M. Smithers came to Washington Territory by wagon train as a young man. He served in the territorial militia and worked in lumber camps. In 1857, he married Diana Tobin, the widow of another early Renton settler (see SHS 1,554). Smithers was a founder of the Renton Coal Company and filed the first plat for the city of Renton. He died in 1900."

Smith Cove—H. A. Smith

File O-409 shows that H. A. Smith settled a claim of 164.87 acres in Sections 13 and 14 of Township 25 North Range 3 East. Henry A. Smith, for whom Smith (Smith's) Cove is named, stated that he arrived in the territory on October 26, 1852, and settled his claim on September 5, 1853. His claim adjoined the land of Edmund Carr.

The Donation Land Claim files note that Smith was born in 1830 in Ohio. C. B. Bagley's *History of King County* states that Smith died on August 16, 1915. He had one son and seven daughters. (See "Making History? Magnolia's First Pioneer" in *Magnolia: Memories & Milestones*, published by the Magnolia Community Club in 2001 on page 29.)

Smith Cove—Edmund Carr

Edmund Carr arrived in the territory in February 1853 and settled his claim in the summer of 1853. The State of Washington also lists Edmund Carr in several files during the Indian Wars. In record AR82-1-12-1073, he was a second corporal on the October 26, 1855, muster roll of Company H, 1st Regiment. He enlisted in Seattle and was a Seattle resident born in Maine, which concurs with his Donation Land Claim record. Record AR81-1-12-1077 is also for Edmund Carr, a corporal in Company H of the 1st Regiment, whose birthplace is given as Box Port, Maine, and his occupation as farmer. In AR82-1-12-1075, Edmund Carr is now in Company A of the 2nd Regiment, having enlisted on January 29, 1856, according to the muster roll of the same date. And finally, the muster roll dated March 1, 1856, states that 2nd Sergeant Edmund Carr in Company A of the 2nd Regiment Foot Volunteers, was "discharged by order." These records can be obtained from the Washington State Archives by phone or e-mail.