The Granary: Washington Cooperative Egg and Poultry Association Building

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The granary building on Bellingham’s waterfront symbolizes the shared past of the community. This building is evidence of a cooperative community in which egg and poultry farmers united to insure survival in a competitive market, a symbol of people working toward a common goal of economic progress and prosperity.

Bellingham’s Industrial Economy

Bellingham, for most of its life as a city, has been economically dependant on an industrial center along the waterfront. The Waterfront Futures website puts it plainly: “The industrial and resource-based development of Bellingham's waterfront in the early 1900's significantly shaped our community.”¹ The cooperative movement was part of this industrial past. The area of the waterfront where the granary building now sits has gone through many economic changes in the city’s history. The city that we now call Bellingham was created in 1903 from the towns of Sehome, Whatcom, Bellingham, and Fairhaven. These towns consolidated to insure their collective survival, in a way mirroring what the cooperative movement would do a few short years later.

The waterfront has undergone several major physical changes in order to suit the industrial needs of the Port. Bellingham Bay was dredged in 1912 by the Army Core of Engineers in order to allow larger ships to enter the bay for trade. In addition, the area now known as the Georgia-Pacific site next to the granary was filled in to expand the shoreline for industrial use.
Whatcom County’s economy was primarily dependent on the lumber industry and the jobs that it provided in the saw mills. As a direct result of cutting massive numbers of trees, the mills were left with wood waste that was later used to make pulp and paper products. This “waste” turned into a thriving industry with the organization of the Pacific Paper Mills Corporation, created by John James Herb in 1920. Financed by Bellingham businessmen, his paper mill went up in the space where Georgia-Pacific would eventually be located. In addition to this mill, in 1926 San Juan Pulp Manufacturers set up shop adjacent to the paper mill.

**Early Days of Poultry Farming**

Prior to 1915, Whatcom County poultry and egg farmers lacked a viable market because of the expense of shipping. Poultry farming was originally a cottage industry. Small family farms, composed of a single family and several hundred chickens, were common in the early days of Washington egg and poultry farming. On these farms, the wife generally took care of the eggs, a product she sold in the market. When eggs became a source of major income for small farmers and demand increased, recognition was given to the men for the increased size of their farms. Farmers struggled with a competitive market not designed for individuals each to sell their own eggs and poultry. The agricultural community of Washington had already been flooded with out-of-state produce, leaving egg producers in Whatcom County without a market for their produce.

Washington merchants imported eggs from other states and from China. With a market overflowing with eggs and poultry from outside the state, local poultry farmers had a difficult time breaking even. Whatcom County poultry farmers constantly found themselves at the mercy of local merchants who had little need for eggs from local farmers when they could purchase them in bulk, out of state, more cheaply. Poultrymen who believed in community and innovation banded together to market their product more efficiently. The poultry farmers
knew that they stood a better chance as a community, with one common product, rather than a large number of separate poultry farms selling eggs and chickens themselves. A single marketing campaign for their combined eggs and poultry was the most efficient way to survive in a fickle market obsessed with out-of-state trade.

Washington was known for its White Leghorn chicken breed, a select breed that was engineered and cultivated only in the state, which produced healthier and whiter eggs than anywhere else in the country. A source of pride for Bellingham and Whatcom county communities, the breed was supported and celebrated annually at festivals. The community’s sense of pride for its collective achievement is obvious in the multitude of pictures showing Bellingham parades with chicken floats and competitions. In order to encourage and educate youth on the process of poultry farming, 4H groups taught the standards of the Washington Cooperative Egg and Poultry Association (WCEPA) for growing chickens and hatching eggs.

The standardization of the Washington poultry and egg production enabled the farmers to operate larger hatcheries than ever before, giving them a more effective system for the care and maintenance of the chickens. As the demand for eggs grew, local farmers and members of the Washington co-op “were required to hatch chicks in larger quantities usually in batches of a thousand instead of several hundred.” This increase in hatchery size would eventually lead to 10,000 hatcheries in the 1930s, now reduced to under a thousand.

**Washington Cooperative Egg and Poultry Association Formed**

In 1915 local Whatcom County poultry farmers decided to form a cooperative to pool their resources, enabling them to sell in bulk to larger suppliers. Individually each farmer did not produce the number of eggs required for a producer to ship east, but as a group they could collectively cover the costs of shipping. Thus, a golden age of poultry farming for Whatcom County and Washington as a whole came about in 1915. A meeting was called to organize the thirteen top producing local poultry farmers into the Whatcom County Egg Producers.
The three top producers--R.T Hawley, B.C. Young, and G.E. Van Horn--were pioneers in the movement in Whatcom County and in what would soon become a statewide movement to unify and organize cooperatives of local farmers. As an organized association, these farmers were able to find a buyer in Alaska who paid premium prices for high-quality Washington eggs.

The cooperative movement flourished throughout Washington in 1915. A number of co-ops formed in other counties, such as the Whidbey Island Cooperative Egg Farms and the Silverdale Poultry Association. The result was an overall grouping together of Washington’s poultry farmers by 1917. In February of that year, a meeting in Seattle called for the local Washington egg and poultry farmers to decide their collective future. Using the California cooperatives as a model, they drafted preliminary rules and regulations.

The next week, on February 24, 1917, a second meeting was held in which a constitution was drafted, along with by-laws and regulations. The official title of this association was the Washington Cooperative Egg and Poultry Association; it would become, in the following years, one of the leading egg producers in the United States. Local members such as Harry Beernik and L.T. Griffith served as trustees for the state wide co-op. Whatcom County poultry farmers undertook a large responsibility for the success of the co-op. As one of the larger counties, Whatcom had a great number of members, and therefore more eggs and more jobs. The overall purpose of the statewide co-op was to market goods as a collective, thus reducing costs and increasing supply to buyers. Early the next month, members found their first products marketed under the Washington co-op brand. This was a very exciting time for Washington egg and poultry farmers--and even more so for the residents of Whatcom County--because of the jobs it provided. Bellingham would see this cooperative movement as a sign of what lay ahead in their prosperous future as a poultry powerhouse.

**Early Years of the Movement**
With the early successes of the WCEPA also came a need for a more efficient way of distributing eggs. Whatcom County residents found themselves with not one but two new branch stations of the state wide co-op located in Lynden and Bellingham. The building we know as the granary was built to provide a lager distribution center for northwestern Washington. In August of 1920, the cooperative egg movement responded to a call for expansion; local members worked tirelessly to collect enough eggs to keep up with the high demands of the statewide co-op. To do so they researched new techniques for raising chickens and harvesting eggs. With a large number of new members, Whatcom County found itself a prime producer within the cooperative and the country. In 1921, for example, “Whatcom County had two receiving stations and was supplying nearly half the eggs marketed by the association.”

Association with the co-op also brought pride in community and business to the people of Bellingham. In the post-World War II years, the Whatcom County branches of the association were systematized to enable maximum efficiency, requiring 30 trucks a day to transport several tons of eggs and poultry to marketing and shipping plants.

Through the first two decades of the twentieth century, the co-op’s members were the primary source backing its financial success. The cooperative was a physical representation of community and every member had stock in the association, providing ownership and ensuring responsibility for the cooperative’s success. Members relied on each other; every egg and poultryman in the state who was a member looked out for his investment. Before the co-op had formed there were no similar opportunities for small farmers to own a piece of something capable of so much economic success.

The state economy flourished in the 1920s only to rapidly descend in the 1930s during the Great Depression. However, the business of eggs and poultry had spread internationally as well as countrywide, providing a stable market for the co-op. Thus, it was not as adversely
affected as many other markets were by the Great Depression. Shipments to the East Coast were common with the aid of cross-country railways, and the high quality of eggs was widely known and sought after despite the 3,000 mile distance the eggs traveled between coasts. The numbers of members continued to grow exponentially throughout the 1940s and 1950s, creating more collective funding and swelling to 25,000 families, twenty-eight years into the cooperative’s life. These families of egg producers would collectively produce record numbers of eggs for the co-op.

Whatcom County farmers were well known for the care they put into the breeding of chickens as well as for the quality and whiteness of their eggs. With the collective skill and cooperation of a great number of farmers, a standard of quality was established for Washington eggs and poultry. Shipments during the 1920s would be transported to the east as well as the north--going all the way to Alaska from Whatcom County’s ports. The high demand for these quality products put Bellingham on the map as the top producer in Washington, while simultaneously holding the title of second greatest producers of eggs in the country, just behind California.

**Economic Success**

Since its early years Bellingham had many saw and pulp mills along its waterfront. A booming logging industry in the northwest provided jobs for many people in the community. The egg and poultry cooperative was yet another commercial endeavor that put Bellingham on the economic map, along with lumber, coal, and fisheries. Beyond creating jobs for Bellingham residents, the egg co-op provided job security and gave the local members a piece of the company. The share that these men had in the company gave them a sense of pride for what they had accomplished.

Cooperative members assured the best quality of eggs and chickens for transport and sale to the east through specialized breeding. The association prided itself in having three master
breeding farms in 1949 which specialized in the hybridization of a large variety of chicken species. This new innovation was celebrated in a Bellingham Herald article marking the cooperative’s twenty-fifth year anniversary on August 8th, 1949. Members of the cooperative themselves contributed money for extensive research and development to make a better product. This enabled the cooperative to spend a larger amount of money than would have been possible in prior decades when there were only forty members, as in the early 1920s. By the years following World War II, the association was operating under a streamlined plan emphasizing quality and quantity, maintaining a consistent amount of business and number of customers.

**Changing Landscape and Community**

The granary symbolizes a time when Bellingham residents took pride in their collective work, and this pride was the driving force behind the economic power of cooperatives. Throughout the years that the granary building has been a part of Bellingham’s community, many changes have occurred to the landscape surrounding it. To suit Bellingham’s economic needs, the waterfront developed around the granary, giving the community resources that provided Bellingham residents with jobs. The cooperative association of Washington built its branch station in the area of Bellingham that was most alive with trade and progress, including saw mills, pulp mills, maritime trade, shipping, and a variety of other trades.

Not far from the granary building, in what is known as the Old Town district, are the Roeder Chicken Cannery and the Poultrymen’s Hatchery, two other sites where cooperative members employed Bellingham residents. These buildings are still part of the community and have been adaptively reused for a variety of purposes. Some of the few left standing are dedicated for public use, while others such as the Roeder Chicken House are used for storage, boarded up and forgotten.
The willingness of the Whatcom county farmers to unify under one association was an important part of Bellingham’s history as a progressive community. After World War II the cooperative had many years of prosperity into the 1950s, only to be scaled back in the atmosphere of a postwar capitalism that didn’t believe in collectives. The idea of a collective would become, with the threat of communism in the Cold War years, a dangerous idea.

**A New Owner: Georgia-Pacific**

The granary came to have a diminished use until it was finally shut down shortly before its purchase by Georgia-Pacific. They used it for storage, then later just boarded it up and left it unused for years. The downscaling of the cooperative’s influence in Bellingham was not without its lasting effects. *Partners in Progress*, published in 1956 by the cooperative, explains that although the egg and chicken industry had changed, the cooperative evolved along with it. The accomplishments of WCEPA in its years as a prominent member of the community are stressed by the book’s authors: the cooperative had a large influence over improvements in feed and fertilizers; packaging and product shipping also improved. The cooperative movement died because after World War II, and on into the Cold War era, only the largest hatcheries were kept. This streamlining of the chicken and egg business cut the labor that was previously needed, and 10,000 hatcheries shrank down to a paltry thousand by 1988. Bellingham’s industrialized waterfront found a new owner in 1963 when Georgia-Pacific bought out Puget Sound Pulp & Timber Company’s land alongside the granary building. Georgia-Pacific would further develop the waterfront by creating a new chlorine plant for its pulp and paper mill. This use of potentially dangerous chemicals, prior to implementation of environmental standards and restrictions, caused the mercury level of the waterfront to become hazardous. The runoff from these buildings and the chemicals used to create bleached white toilet paper contaminated the bay for decades. The Port and the City of
Bellingham have been left to deal with the effects of this industrialization on the waterfront and on the community. The Georgia-Pacific buildings also had an impact on the waterfront landscape. For the majority of Bellingham’s existence, the view of the waterfront from downtown was that of an industrial operation, which only intensified during the Georgia-Pacific era. The pulp mill created a drastic change in landscape for the city of Bellingham and the waterfront. Until that point, the sense of heritage associated with the waterfront was related to the granary; this changed after Georgia-Pacific’s ownership.

In stark contrast to Georgia-Pacific’s corporate culture, the Washington Cooperative Egg and Poultry Association and the granary that housed it exemplified a shared community. Since 1963 the waterfront has been dominated by a declining industrial center focused on Georgia-Pacific. The products of Georgia-Pacific could be seen piled high all along the waterfront, with the familiar pungent smell of pulp processing. The negative environmental impact of Georgia-Pacific on Bellingham’s waterfront is arguably more of a lasting legacy than the jobs they provided in the past. Unlike the Georgia-Pacific legacy, the procedures and purposes of the agriculture and cooperative movement in Washington left a positive impression on Bellingham.

The Georgia-Pacific complex and the granary came to be associated through the company’s ownership of the buildings on the waterfront once owned by Puget Sound Pulp & Timber. The granary, however, should not be considered as part of the Georgia-Pacific site, but rather as part of the historic district of Old Town since many of those buildings belong to the same era. The granary is architecturally and socially connected to the cooperative movement which is part of Old Town. It should not be forgotten that three other cooperative buildings are located in Old Town as well, buildings that were associated with the WCEPA organization. Located in relatively close proximity are the Poultrymen’s Hatchery building, the Roeder Chicken Canning building, and the Washington Chick and Poultry building.
These buildings, constructed in 1913 and 1928, represent a distinct era of Bellingham’s economic history and a piece of Bellingham’s historical landscape. The granary has been a visible landmark of the Bellingham skyline since 1928, making it part of the historical landscape of the area. Through adaptive reuse, the granary could be part of Bellingham’s economic future as well. Glassberg explains, “Preservation strategies for a landscape must consider ways to maintain not only the historical integrity of its component elements, but also their continuing economic viability.”

The due diligence report compiled for the Port in 2004 identified the granary with the Georgia-Pacific era. However, the granary predates the red brick mill buildings on the waterfront. Therefore, the granary should not be viewed as part of the derelict buildings on the land previously owned by Georgia-Pacific. They did not use the granary for anything more than storage so its classification as a Georgia-Pacific building is dubious.

**De-industrialization**

Bellingham is currently in the final stages of a de-industrialization on its waterfront. The areas left affected are the environment and the landscape of the waterfront itself. The water has high levels of mercury sitting under a layer of sediment on the bottom of the bay. Another effect of the industrialization is that the original shoreline is two hundred feet back from where it is now because fill was used to extend the original shoreline. In order to meet the standards of new construction and cleanup, it will have to be pushed back. The Port and the City currently have a variety of concerns about potential use of the waterfront. The due diligence report states that many of the Georgia-Pacific buildings require some form of significant development and reconstruction. The report identifies the granary as having some wear because it was built in 1928, but also as having re-use potential. In its description of the construction of the building, the report demonstrates the potential of its remaining structure. The potential is that the building can, with some seismic upgrades, be used for residential and
commercial use, saving the energy put into the original construction and sparing the cost of totally new construction.

In addition to the benefits of older construction, the granary building is fully capable of being listed on either the State’s or the City’s historic registry. The granary might also be placed on the National Historic Registry. When Washington’s most endangered historic buildings list for 2008 was released, the granary was counted among the top ten. An important piece of Bellingham’s economic and social heritage, the granary is a prime prospect for the historic registry. A historic building placed on the national or local historic registry qualifies for tax cuts. The amount of money spent on repairs could be made up, in part, by these tax cuts. Murtagh explains the value of this kind of incentive, “Such action will ensure that the building’s character-defining feature and materials are preserved in the process of producing a contemporary use that is not only efficient but economically sound.”

There are, however, certain standards that need to be followed for historic buildings placed on the register. A large majority of the original structure must still be intact, and the overall look of the building must remain true to the original. As the Port decides what it will do with the granary and the other historic buildings on the Georgia-Pacific site, it will require funds. Bellingham should follow the example of the co-op’s history: the granary was built to support a community’s survival in an economy that couldn’t support farmers individually, and poultry farmers utilized every tool at their disposal in their cooperative activities. There is no reason why Bellingham residents can’t embrace that same spirit and utilize their own imaginations for the preservation of the granary. The building deserves much more than to be boarded up and left to slowly decay, full of rat feces and pigeon guano. The 2004 due diligence report described its potential for residential and/or commercial use, and possibly parking on its lower level. Concerns have been arising in the community that the Port sees these buildings as a liability rather than acknowledging their historical significance.
The WCEPA building on the corner of Chestnut and Central symbolizes the Cooperative Movement’s place in Bellingham history. It would be a disservice to the memory of that movement to demolish the building as has happened with other local commercial structures that ceased to be used for their original purpose. The Citizens’ Dock, for example, located just to the side of the granary, was a Bellingham landmark for years, the source of trade and commerce. However, in the mid-1980s the dock was deemed too costly to maintain and eventually was demolished. The now-absent Citizens’ Dock and the still-standing granary are symbols of community for Bellingham residents. The granary represents the cooperative ideal of growing local foods and marketing them for the benefit of the community. What better way to tell Bellingham’s waterfront history than to restore the granary as a symbol of our sense of community? The Port wants to involve Western Washington University in the redeveloped waterfront, bringing what is now a large part of the job market down into the Port. As the industry has shifted out of Bellingham, Western has taken a larger role in providing jobs for residents.

**Adaptive Re-use**

The Port’s plans for the waterfront are multi-purposed, with an emphasis on money-making endeavors. In order for the Port and the City to re-develop the waterfront they need to construct buildings that have income potential, such as residential and commercial spaces along the waterfront. Condominiums and commercial space for offices and shops are considered as important facets of a growing waterfront community. The changeover from an industrial waterfront, capable of providing labor union jobs, to that of a real estate and tourist industry, is difficult and costly. The end result appears to be that the Port wants a return to economic prosperity, but instead of doing so at the helm of the industrial market, they will do so with smaller, individually-owned businesses. The Port can and should incorporate and adaptively re-use the granary, an existing structure.
The Port should contact a construction firm much like Mcminimums, which focuses on adaptively using older industrial and some residential buildings for new purposes and services. A growing chain of pubs, restaurants, and hotels, Mcminimums is a testament to the possibilities infused in adaptive reuse. A company of this sort could buy the granary from the Port and adapt it to modern standards, while simultaneously keeping its community heritage intact. This would “actively preserve” the granary, a practice that Glassberg advocates, “Heritage landscapes can be “restored,” with modern elements that supplement original ones to approximate the look and feel of a period.” This does not imply a Disney Land-style renovation, creating the unauthentic aura of a theme-park attraction; this would not be fitting for the granary.

Bellingham should embrace its cooperative past. The waterfront redevelopment will require cooperative efforts, including those of Western Washington University, the City of Bellingham, the Port, private investors, and the overall community. The problem that arises with such a large challenge as the waterfront re-development is that they have $85 million worth of cleanup to complete before the City and the Port can build on the site. The granary building is a testament to the power of cooperatives and their positive effects on communities, a lesson the Port and City would do well to heed.

**Conclusion**

Today Northwest natives pride themselves on supporting “grow local” movements and advocate the idea of going “green.” There is nothing more environmentally responsible than the adaptive reuse of an already existing structure. Although it has years since it was used for its original function, the granary stands as a monument to the idea of locally grown products and community. Whether it is the unifying of the several towns around Bellingham Bay in 1903 or the agricultural cooperative movement, Bellingham has a history of focusing on the community first to insure its survival and efficiency. In the same vein, the re-
development of the waterfront is a testament to the community’s willingness to do whatever it takes to survive economically, even a return to their shared cooperative past. McDaniel explains the benefit of continuity in the preservation of historic buildings, providing “a stronger appreciation for history . . . a stronger sense of community with those who came before us, those who are with us now, and those who will come after.”¹⁶ The Port, the City, and the very people of the Bellingham community have an opportunity to utilize their imaginations, and their various resources, to preserve the granary. A restored granary could repay monetary investment through residential and commercial use--as well as providing a symbol of the cooperative abilities of Bellingham’s community.
Notes


3 Ibid.


5 Ibid., 17.

6 Lottie Roeder Roth, History of Whatcom County (Chicago: Pioneer Historical Club, 1926), 766.

7 R.C. Bell and W.D. Buchanan, 34.


9 R.C. Bell and W.D. Buchanan, 45.

10 Watt Poultry.


14 Glassberg, 26.


Bibliography


