

Footprints Through the Sands of Time

The Proposed "Big Ditch" from 1882

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An article in the May 14, 1882, edition of the *Seattle Daily Post-Intelligencer* provided reports taken by surveyor Robert A. Habersham with the United States Army Corps of Engineers, dated January 26, 1882, surveying the Chehalis River and Grays Harbor. This was the inception of a scheme to excavate a canal connecting Puget Sound to Grays Harbor, to Shoalwater Bay, and continuing on to the Columbia River, ending near Fort Canby. The article suggested that commerce in the North Pacific Coast would benefit from our vast timber, iron, and coal deposits with an inland water route.

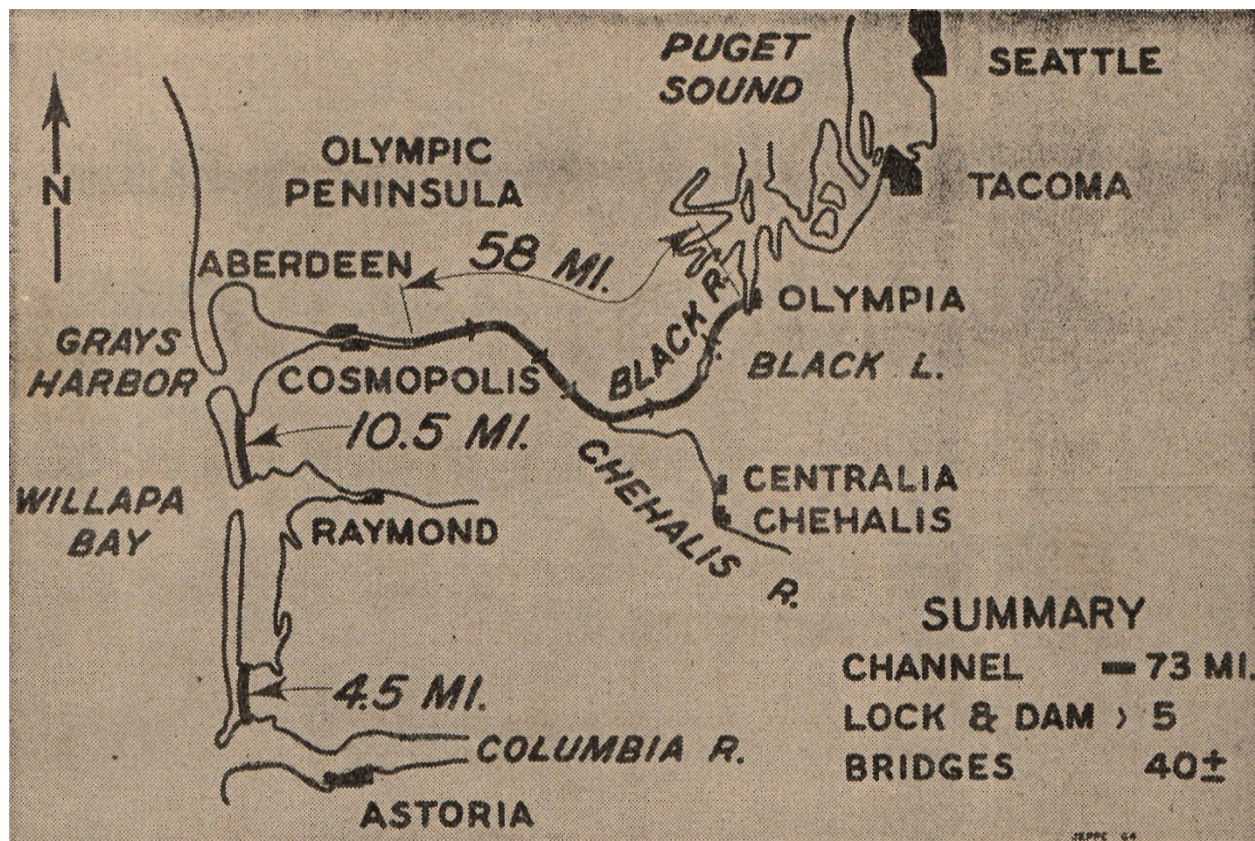
A canal would be dug connecting Puget Sound in Olympia to Black Lake, into the Black River and continuing west down the Chehalis River into Grays Harbor for a total of 58 miles. The next canal would stretch 10.5 miles south from the Harbor to Willapa Bay, with the final canal dug at the south end of the Long Beach peninsula to the Columbia River, with a distance of 4.5 miles. The canal system would include five locks and dams and over forty bridges. It would save a full day's travel from Puget Sound to far-off destinations such as San Francisco, Honolulu, and Japan.

As in most public works programs, there was opposition. The editor and manager of the *Aberdeen Herald*, John J. Carney, published a scathing editorial on February 1, 1900: "*Admitting possible dullness of comprehension, the proposition, from a Grays Harbor standpoint, looks like this: Puget Sound ignored Grays Harbor for years, and if not obstructing our efforts for the improvement of the (harbor) entrance, failed to render any aid. Now that the bar is being improved, and the importance of the Harbor can no longer be concealed, the Sound cities would like to be connected with it, at government expense, in order to make the improved Harbor a short route for their commerce.*" The editorial further alleges, "*From this point of view, the agitation for the canal looks like an attempt to delay, if not prevent, the building of a great commercial city on Grays Harbor.*"

Although the building of a canal was an advantage for Puget Sound commerce, there was another, more ominous reason. At that time, there were tense relations between England and the United States over Venezuela. This inland passage would offer accessibility to the Pacific Ocean in the event the United States went to war with England and the British set up a blockade at the north entrance of Puget Sound.

At the turn of the 20th century, this concept was heavily promoted by the Olympia Chamber of Commerce, asserting that their little city was handicapped by being so far down the sound. The construction of the canal was Olympia's chief dream. This notion was also supported by Seattle, Portland, and the Tacoma Chamber of Commerce. Occasionally named "The Grays Harbor & Puget Sound Canal," "The Big Ditch," and the "Columbia Gateway," this idea has been published numerous times, including the 1930s, 1960s, and as recently as 1979. Before the 1970s, no consideration was made as to the environmental impacts of the canal system.

(one photo ahead)



Map from April 1965 with Permission from the *Aberdeen Daily World*