

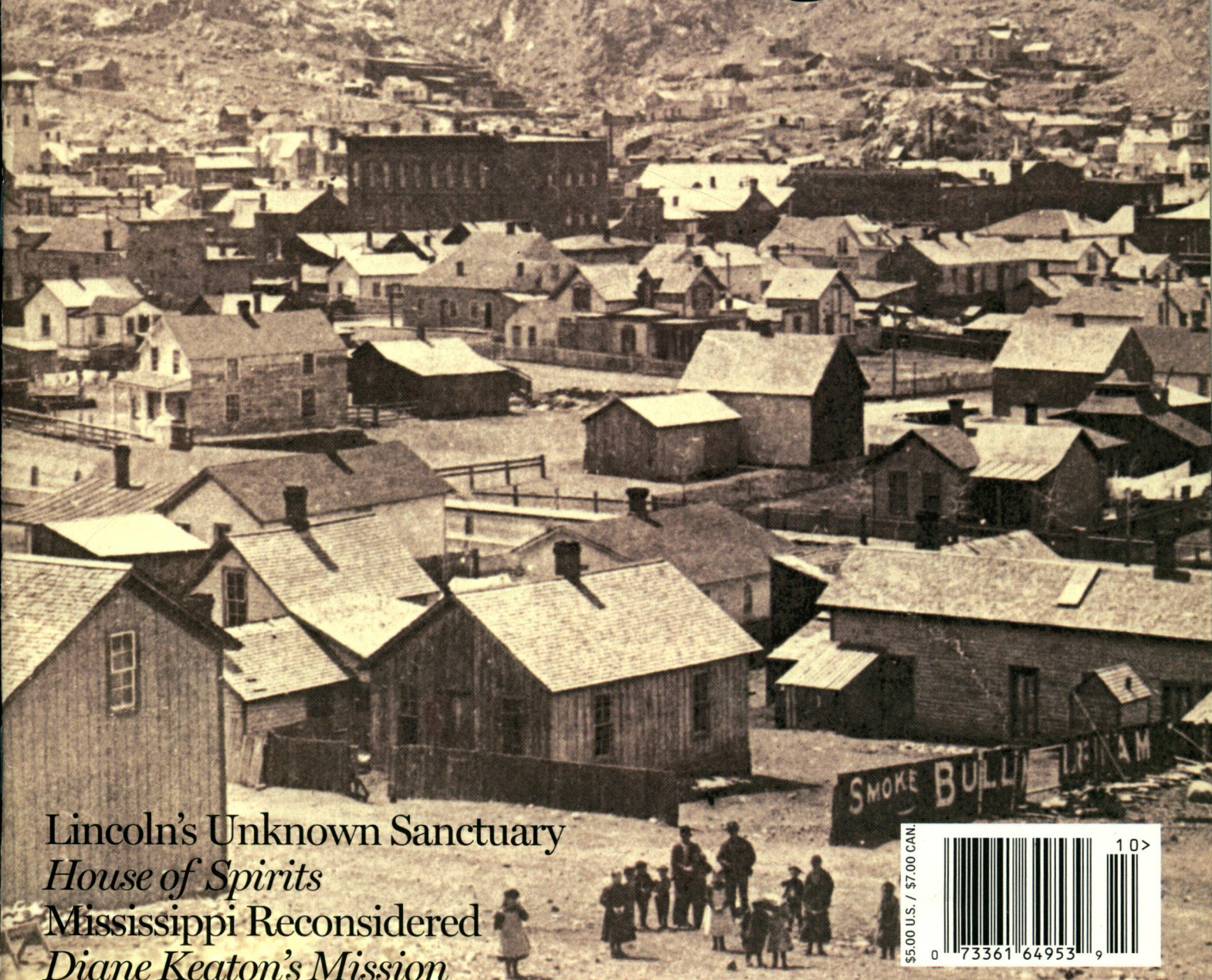
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# Worn to Perfection

Northwest boat businesses try to hang on to affordable workplaces. || BY STEPHEN S. HOWIE

## PORT TOWNSEND, WASH.—

This little seaport nestled between the Olympic mountain range and Puget Sound offers, on a clear day, a view of snow-topped Mount Baker and the Cascade Mountains across the Strait of Juan de Fuca. In the late 1800s, speculators thought this would be the largest harbor on the West Coast, and residents built ornate houses and stately brick commercial buildings. But Tacoma became the western terminus of the Northern Pacific Railroad, and Port Townsend languished.

Its flagging economy was boosted in recent years by tourists drawn by the scenery, renovation of downtown, and a wood boat renaissance. On Water Street visitors browse for jewelry by local artists in The Green Eyeshade and slurp Italian ices in Elevated Ice Cream. Just around a corner, in the run-down marina district of Point Hudson, is the 70-year-old former Coast Guard quarantine station, internationally known

as a prime spot for buying boats, ordering custom sails, and having wood vessels of all shapes and sizes made seaworthy.

Despite Point Hudson's popularity, the local port authority last December applied for permits to demolish 10 of the station's 13 buildings. Port commissioners want to replace structures lacking architectural significance with new buildings that will draw commercial tenants willing to pay higher rents. But the city, which controls the zoning, wants to preserve the point as a working port and has tried to persuade port officials to restore all the buildings with a combi-



A kayaker, above, and strollers, opposite, take in the utilitarian if run-down assets of Point Hudson.

nation of public and private money.

Either way, rent increases will probably force out some boat-related businesses. Carol Hasse, one of the first wood boat enthusiasts to set up shop in Point Hudson, in the mid-1970s, was recently voted the world's number-one maker of custom cruising sails. She says that moving out of the station's former Armory, known today as the Sail Loft, would bankrupt her. The port is too focused on the bottom line and not committed to preserving the area's identity, say Hasse and other Point Hudson business owners. "The port's going to run into a tremendous

amount of resistance" to demolishing buildings, she adds. "Once they're gone, they can't be replaced." Because of the continuing threat, Point Hudson made this year's list of Washington State's 10 most-endangered properties, a designation port officials say is premature.

The buildings also include the Cupola House, originally the Coast Guard headquarters; an infirmary; a pavilion built as a group shower for delousing immigrants; a commissary; officers' quarters; and a combination mess hall, galley, and barracks. The Coast Guard's high standards remain evident in top-quality lumber, oak floors, and brass chains and fittings in the windows.

Outside, the buildings reflect what local business owners term "benign neglect" by the Rowley Corp., a private company that managed the property from 1970 until last year, collecting modest rents and keeping the build-

ings upright. This laissez-faire attitude helped spark one of the biggest wood boat revivals on the West Coast as riggers, sail makers, kayak builders, and shipwrights put up with aging electrical systems, poor insulation, and the smell of creosote for a chance to ply their crafts.

Now management has reverted to the port authority, which brings a different aesthetic and business plan. Some long-overdue upgrades were done: The road that runs along the water was paved; the Sail Loft got a bathroom with hot water. Tenants were thankful but wary, and then during the last Christmas

holidays the port applied for the demolition permits.

The city attempted to impose a six-month demolition moratorium and failed, but the crisis effected a temporary truce. The port retreated to a committee, which has drawn up a comprehensive scheme with alternatives ranging from restoring the current buildings to getting rid of those on the seaward side of the marina, which have creosote odors and asbestos-insulated pipes.

"So many people are so emotionally involved," says Larry Crockett, the port's executive director, "it's hard to discuss what we may or may not do." He says only three buildings deemed architecturally significant by an engineering firm—the Cupola House, the Sail Loft, and the former Commander's House, now a bed-and-breakfast—will definitely be saved.

In the Cupola House, the Wooden

Boat Foundation sponsors experiential education programs in maritime history, seamanship, small-boat sailing, and marine science.

The foundation also hosts the three-day Wooden Boat Festival, which in 27 years has grown into Port Townsend's biggest event, drawing 30,000 visitors annually to a town of 8,400. A nonprofit organization is raising money to build a \$10 million North-

west Maritime Center to serve as the festival's new home and highlight the area's maritime history year-round. Some locals fear that the port's improvements will lead to the demise of the boat revival. The potential for Point Hudson to be more "is a double-edged sword," in the view of Dave Robison,



who is heading fund-raising efforts to build the maritime center. "It could become a great cultural center, or it could become something glitzy and overdeveloped. We're at the crossroads."

Stephen S. Howie is a journalist who lives in Bellingham, Wash.

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