

## THE WALK

Walk from the parking lot at the Graham Visitors Center over a bridge to Foster Island and from Marsh Island to the parking lot at the MOHAI, leaving a car at both ends, or walking both ways.

Begin by dropping down to the Union Bay lakeshore as traffic thunders by you. Walk the path along the edge of Union Bay. Notice five species of willows, flourishing because their roots are in water. Native Americans used willow shoots for the same purposes we use aspirin, also derived from willow.

Various uses of native plants by Native Americans have been largely forgotten. Salmonberries and thimbleberries collected here were preserved in fruit leather.

They burned underbrush to create local prairies such as one at Sand Point, where they grew camas, which provided them with starch. Big leaf maple leaves were used to wrap food; cedar branches provided canoe ribs; pounded cedar bark provided underwear and baby diapers; and Nootka rose hips were eaten for their Vitamin C content.

Follow the path by dropping from the site of the cemetery, passing beneath the freeway in a tunnel. Step down to the peat bog along the path and find yourself among reeds and cattails. The bubbles in the water are escaping methane gas from naturally decaying vegetation.

Hummocks of spagnum moss have formed here. The woody shrub with summer pink flowers is spiraea, used by natives for arrows and clubs because it is like ironwood.

At the first viewing platform, look for former landmarks around the lakeshore. At the Edgewater Apartments there was once a 150-foot long potlatch house. Another one stood at the site of the University of Washington steam plant smokestack. At University Village, Ravenna Creek, now flowing underground in the North Trunk Sewer, emptied into the lake, attracting spawning salmon. At Sand Point there was another Native American burial ground.

Today kayaks and canoes wind through marshy channels, pleasure craft travel the waterway, swimmers and sunbathers enjoy the bays, divers jump from the edges of unused freeway ramps, and hopeful fishermen drop their lines into murky water. Look for eagles, buffleheads, wood ducks, fleets of black coots, and western pond turtles warming themselves on logs. Beavers have been seen here, re-colonizing an old lodge.

Continue across the marsh and over Foster Island on a series of bridges, piers and viewing platforms to smaller Marsh Island, and the MOHAI parking lot.

©2007 Joan Burton  
[joan@joanburton.org](mailto:joan@joanburton.org)  
[www.joanburton.org](http://www.joanburton.org)

# Foster Island Urban Walk

An In-city Family Adventure with  
**Joan Burton**



START YOUR WALK HERE





## A REED-FILLED MARSH EDGING THE LAKE

This wetland island in a reed-filled urban marsh along Lake Washington makes a fine loop trip. For access to the island, the Seattle Parks Department has built floating spans, docks, bridges and viewing platforms anchored through the peat bog to bed rock eighty feet down. The walk lies along the western edge of Union Bay where the lake empties into the Montlake Cut. The paradox is vistas of the natural world next to the thundering SR 520 freeway. Bird and animal residents don't notice. And after a few steps, you won't either. The short walk over and along Lake Washington is easy enough for young children, who love walking along the level marsh trail built on piers and the boardwalks, viewing platforms, and little bridges, and peering over the edges at passing traffic. Close-up vistas of boats crossing the Montlake Cut are there to see as well as flocks and convoys of ducks, geese, gulls and great blue herons.

## REED PASSAGE PEOPLE

Lake Washington's marshland has been building since glacial times, 12,000 years ago. The build-up of a floating mat called Marsh Island is an example. Native Americans considered Union Bay a beautiful and valuable resource, camping along its shores, and calling themselves the Reed Passage people. They used the island's high point as a burial place, placing their dead in decorated boxes raised into the trees.

Today we can see the same vistas, but Husky Stadium, University Village, Broadmoor and Laurelhurst homes have replaced forests that once stood here. Unlike their sites, Foster Island remains in its natural state, surrounded by reeds and cattails, along with exotic introduced plants such as water lilies and purple loosestrife. Waterways make ideal passageways for canoe exploration. Thanks to the Seattle Audubon Society the island has been preserved as a bird sanctuary.



## GETTING THERE

To reach the trailhead from the south, from Lake Washington Boulevard turn right at Madison into the Arboretum, then turn right again to the Graham Visitors Center. Park just outside the Broadmoor Golf Club. From the north or from SR 520, get off at the Montlake exit, turn left and drive east, turning sharply left on East Foster Island Road to reach the Graham Visitors Center, where parking is available. Take Metro bus #43 to the intersection of Montlake Blvd East and East Hamlin St. Walk three blocks east to the Graham Visitors Center or to the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) parking lot.

## MORE HISTORY

Before Lake Washington was lowered in 1916 this area was under water. Lake Washington itself was a part of Puget Sound until 15,000 years ago when the Osceola mudflow from Mount Rainier dammed it and made it into a freshwater lake. Native Americans were living here 10,000 years ago and some of their living sites still exist on Lake Washington. In 1855 Thomas Mercer christened it Lake Union, saying that someday it would connect Lake Washington and Puget Sound. In the 1860's there were about 700 Native Americans living near here.

About that time, homesteader Harvey Pike dug a short canal with shovel and pick across what became the Montlake Cut. Judge Thomas Burke dug a shallow ditch in 1883 to provide passage for logs to move between Union Bay and Portage Bay.

