



The City of Seattle

Landmarks Preservation Board

Mailing Address: PO Box 94649, Seattle WA 98124-4649

Street Address: 600 4th Avenue, 4th Floor

LPB 280/21

REPORT ON DESIGNATION

Name and Address of Property: **Wagner Floating Home**
2770 Westlake Avenue N – Unit 10

Legal Description: The Wagner Floating Home is described as follows, according to King County property records recorded in 2017: Unit 10, The Old Boathouse Condominium, formerly known as Hulls Moorings, a condominium, according to the declaration thereof recorded under King County Recording No. 9508010450, and any amendments thereto; said unit is located on survey map and plans filed in Volume 126 of Condominium Plats, page(s) 25 through 7, amended by instrument recorded under Volume 159 of Condominium Plats, page(s) 75 and 76, in King County, Washington; except any floating home which may be located thereon.

At the public meeting held on June 2, 2021 the City of Seattle's Landmarks Preservation Board voted to approve designation of the Wagner Floating Home at 2770 Westlake Avenue N – Unit 10 as a Seattle Landmark based upon satisfaction of the following standard for designation of SMC 25.12.350:

- B. *It is associated in a significant way with the life of a person important in the history of the City, state, or nation.*
- C. *It is associated in a significant way with a significant aspect of the cultural, political, or economic heritage of the community, City, state or nation.*
- D. *It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or a method of construction.*

Administered by The Historic Preservation Program
The Seattle Department of Neighborhoods

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DESCRIPTION

Introduction

Homes on the water take many forms, including live-aboard boats, house barges, and floating homes, and all are distinct in their construction and design. Collectively and commonly referred to as houseboats, it is the floating home type that is the subject of this application. A floating home is a house built on a float that is semi-permanently moored to a dock that is often shared with other homes. It has no means of independent mobility and therefore is connected to land only by its sewer and utility hookups. The term floating home has been used in Seattle since the late 1950s and early 1960s when the City began regulating houseboats and the community formed the Floating Homes Association.

Summary

The Wagner Floating Home is a rare example of an intact early twentieth century Seattle houseboat, built prior to 1912. Since the late 1930s, it has remained at its location at the foot of the Aurora Bridge at the northwest end of Lake Union. Its prime lakefront orientation at the end of its dock, with open water to the rear that once served as the first home of the Center for Wooden Boats, is unchanged since the mid-1960s. The dimensions and basic construction materials of the floating platform and cabin are in place, as are the overall cabin massing and roof configurations, with deck overhangs on all four sides. On the exterior, the original siding, doors, and most windows are extant. The arrangement of interior spaces remains unchanged, and floor, wall, and ceiling finishes are largely intact. A ship's ladder accesses two small bedrooms on the second floor. All of these features are important to the history of the property, and help to document the physical lineage of Seattle houseboats.

Setting & Site

Since its relocation from Lake Washington in what is believed to be 1938, the Wagner Floating Home has been moored along the shore at the northwest end of Lake Union, in the heart of Seattle. By then, a prominent industrial landscape that persists today was already in place. To the northwest, the Fremont Cut of the Lake Washington Ship Canal (completed 1917) funnels the lake into a narrow shipping canal connecting Puget Sound and Lake Washington. Then as now, all commercial and recreational vessels pass through this waterway via locks, in order to navigate the elevation change between sea level and the inland lakes. The Fremont Bridge, a bascule drawbridge and Seattle Historic Landmark visible from the Wagner houseboat, was completed that same year to span the cut. In 1932, the high-level George Washington Memorial Bridge (Aurora Bridge) on State Route 99, a trestle and cantilever bridge and also a Seattle Historic Landmark, opened for traffic across the embayment leading into the canal. The Wagner houseboat is moored at the south base of this massive bridge, along with others of its period. All views from the floating home neighborhood toward the northwest are framed by the bridge's massive piers of steel and concrete.

The Wagner Floating Home is accessed from Westlake Avenue North. A linear parking lot drive fronting waterfront businesses all along the western bank continues to the base of the Aurora Bridge. At its northernmost end, the drive passes by the houseboat community nestled along the shore. Houseboat residents can park vehicles along this lane, pulling up to remnants of the Northern Pacific railroad tracks that now serve as a sidewalk. Some of the old wooden railroad ties are extant, and others have been removed and infilled with gravel between the steel rails. A popular pedestrian pathway continues under the Aurora Bridge, on to the Fremont Bridge, and along the south side of the ship canal.

Isolated as it is below Queen Anne Hill and Westlake Avenue North, and tucked around the base of the Aurora Bridge, the neighborhood has the feel of 1930s-1940s Seattle. This houseboat colony dates from that era. The floating homes are still relatively low in scale, accessed by modest gated entrances, wooden staircases, and floating boardwalks, with lush container landscaping on and around the floats. The neighborhood exudes an unexpectedly quiet, off-the-beaten-track ambience.

The nominated property is part of the Old Boathouse Condominium, the most recent name for a dock formerly known as Hulls Mooring. The communal street address is 2770 Westlake Avenue North. The property lies in the northwest quarter of Section 19, Township 25, Range 4. The entire parcel (#635195-0000) is zoned for single-family use at SF-5000. The size of the parcel is 18,397 square feet, or just a little under one-half acre. The average size of the ten houseboats at this dock is 1,286 square feet.

The Old Boathouse group is a long-lived colony of houseboats, and several are of the early to mid-twentieth century vintage. The gate marking the entrance today consists of a narrow canopy at street level, sheltering ten mailboxes and extending over the walkway. The little structure has unpainted timber framing, a gabled roof clad with shakes, and a prominent wood-plank sign along the ridgeline reading "The Old Boathouse." A set of thirteen wood stairs drops to water level and continue as a floating boardwalk that accesses the residences. The boardwalk has a cable railing along one side and utility poles that carry cables and to which pendant lights are mounted, reinforcing the colony's vintage appearance.

The houseboats are situated on either side of the dock, with the Wagner Floating Home at the far northeast corner. There is a cove on the south side of the Wagner houseboat that was occupied by two floating homes prior to the mid-1960s and was later filled with small wooden craft for sale and rent. This area was the heart of the Wagners' boat livery from 1968 to 1980. Despite some notable alterations, most of the houseboats at this and the adjacent dock are of compatible period design. Those most similar to the Wagner houseboat are also of an early 1900s cottage style, with low-pitched, gabled cabin roofs, lapped cedar siding, and simple plank-framed windows and doors. One of this era features a curved sprung-roofed cabin common in the 1920s. Several appear to have originated in that period but have been altered with second stories that have boxy massing, large dormers, or asymmetrical shed roof additions. Telltale early siding as well as window and door configurations do persist, however,

along with later twentieth century examples of plywood or stained shingle siding and window updates. One houseboat is known to have been stripped down to the logs and rebuilt.

Situated at the far end of the communal dock, with an unobstructed view of the lake, the Wagner Floating Home faces north-northwest. Besides its predominate views of the Aurora Bridge and the busy ship canal entrance to the northwest, the Wagner houseboat looks out toward waterfront cottages, low-scale marine commerce, and industry along the north shore of the lake. These neighborhood businesses front Northlake Way in the Wallingford neighborhood. They include the Lake Washington Rowing Club, Fremont Tugboat, Alexander Marine Service, Tillicum Marina, Affinity Marina, Divers Institute of Technology, Candere Cruising, Northlake Shipyard, and the Seattle Police Department Harbor Patrol. The grassy peninsula of Gas Works Park, a former gas refinery completed in 1906, blocks views to the northeast toward Portage Bay. The far shoreline in the Eastlake neighborhood is partially visible from the Wagner houseboat, and this is where several houseboat communities are moored at the foot of Edgar and Roanoke streets and along Fairview Avenue. Union Harbor Condominium, a five-story 1968 apartment built out over the lake at Lynn Street is just beyond the southernmost vista.

Beyond the vista at the lake's southern end is the former armory and Seattle Historic Landmark that now serves as the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) and several historic vessels owned and managed by Northwest Seaport. Landmarked vessels moored at MOHAI include the Virginia V, Lightship Relief/Swiftsure, Tugboat Arthur Foss, and Fireboat Duwamish. (Other landmarked vessels moored nearby at the southeast portio of Lake Union include the MV Malibu and MV Thea Foss.) Occupying the adjacent Waterway 4 is the Center for Wooden Boats, the organization that began as a boat livery at the Wagner houseboat in 1968.

Structure & Cabin Exterior

The Wagner Floating Home design is of balanced scale and proportions. The home rests on a rectangular floating platform of roughly 1,776 square feet. It is moored to two pilings along the west side, including an older dolphin at the north end of the dock. The main cabin roof is a shallow gable with broad overhangs on both the eaves and gable ends. These overhangs cover the platform deck on all sides creating deep exterior "porch" spaces. A partial second story with a gabled roof runs perpendicular to the axis of the main cabin roof. This upper story is narrow and inset. The size, scale, and massing of the houseboat have not changed since 1912, when the earliest known photographs were taken on Lake Washington.

Like others of its era, the houseboat floats on a bundle of large cedar logs assembled in an upside-down pyramid. During the Wagner era, the log flotation system has been bolstered as needed by the addition of plastic 55-gallon barrels that are secured to the logs. Stringers rest in a perpendicular fashion on the log float above the water line, supporting the platform deck and cabin above. By the mid-1990s, these stringers had deteriorated and required complete replacement.

The deck and cabin are entirely of dimensioned wood-framed construction. The deck measures approximately 61.5' north to south and 32.5' east to west. Its surface is new and consists of cedar lumber running east-west, as it did before replacement. The depth of the deck around each side of the cabin varies, with the north gable-end deck facing Lake Union being nearly 11' deep, and the south gable-end deck fronting the livery cove and shoreline being 8' deep. Both lateral decks below the eaves of the cabin roof are about 4' deep.

Some features were added incrementally around the perimeter of the deck during the Wagner era. To the south, just outside the kitchen door in the corner of the livery cove, are the remnants of a small framed "swimming pool" for the Wagner boys. It was once a submerged pen of chicken wire with a wood floor, making a safe place to swim. To the north, facing the open lake, is a platform float with a wood deck, repurposed from the boat livery days and recently given a new deck. It currently accommodates a few family kayaks and potted plants. Around the perimeter of the deck, the flotation logs hydroponically grow a veritable garden of trees and ferns, especially abundant along the west side. Around the deck are container plants, and the tools and gear of waterside living.

The cabin's main gable roof and second-story cross gable are clad with new composition shingles, applied in October 2020. Prior to that it was most recently covered with asphalt shingles, before that with roll roofing, and even earlier with wood shingles. There is a plain chimney of buff-colored brick situated centrally on the roof. It replaced an earlier chimney in the 1980s, using brick matching the existing fireplace. The open roof soffits under the eaves and gables are finished with a V-joint tongue-and-groove paneling.

Simple 4" by 4" posts off the deck support the eave overhangs along the west and east sides. At the north and south ends, the deep gable overhangs are supported by rafters, purlins, and posts. According to the 1912 photos of the houseboat in its former location on Lake Washington, the configuration and number of these posts have changed slightly. The apex of the originally-open north gable, fronting the lake, is also now half closed with flush boards and a trim piece from which hung the Wagner's "Boats for Rent" sign in the 1960s and 1970s. Today there is a small sign that reads "Colleen Wagner".

All four exterior walls of the houseboat cabin at its first-floor level are sheathed in a lapped cedar siding. The second story has tiers of contrasting siding, with the base and gable ends of cedar shingles, and a middle tier of lapped siding. The exterior was newly painted in September 2020. The claddings are painted light green, and roof features, trim, and corner boards are painted a contrasting pale beige.

The cabin's doors and windows vary slightly in their arrangement on each side, reflecting the home's rather novel circulation pattern and its established interior functions. Some changes occurred prior to the Wagner era, and some during, but most of the doors and fenestration are original. All openings are framed by simple plank surrounds.

On the north or primary façade fronting the lake are a double door and a bay window. The doors each feature a dominant upper light with a decorative narrow sill and a recessed wood panel below. The configuration of the adjacent bay window was rather thoroughly altered in the 1930s or 1940s, perhaps in connection with the houseboat's move to Lake Union, or with its conversion from canoe club to residence. The original bay window, partially visible in the 1912 photographs, was a well-trimmed box-like projection inset with three multi-pane sashes. The re-design retained the original opening through the cabin wall, but it replaced the boxy bay window with two large 16-light sashes glazed from top to bottom. These were stood up adjacent to one another forming a bay window triangular in plan.

The south side of the Wagner houseboat has an original kitchen door that fronts the communal boardwalk and the shore. The door has a single upper light with three recessed panels below. Next to it is projecting bay window, this one framed as a simple rustic box with a wood sill. According to her sons, Colleen Wagner re-made an existing window into this bay to expand the light and view from the kitchen, inserting the large 6-light fixed sash that is in place today. To the left is a small hinged, 2-light awning window from the corner bedroom.

The west side of the houseboat includes three sets of original paired windows with 3-over-2 light fixed sash, a configuration typical of the period. One nearest the southwest corner provides light to the kitchen sink area. Next to it is a smaller 2-light awning window that helps brighten the pantry shelving and ship's ladder to the upstairs. Two other paired-window sets open to the dining room and to the living room at the northwest corner of the cabin.

East side fenestration is similar to that on the west, with two paired fixed window sets, one leading to the back bedroom and the other to the living room. A single awning window, with 3-over-2-light sash, illuminates the bathroom. Changes appear to have been made, perhaps also in the 1930s or 1940s, to a large window that now illuminates the master bedroom. It consists of a single, floor-to-ceiling fixed sash with 16 lights that are identical to those used in the triangular bay on the north façade, providing maximum light and heat through its southeasterly exposure. Next to it is a single operable sash for air circulation.

At the second-story level is some even more distinctive period fenestration. On both the east and west gable ends are two operable casement windows, extending almost to the floor of each upstairs bedroom. Each casement has multiple decorative panes surrounding a single light, typical of the era. Both open inwardly to provide good air circulation on a warm day. To either side of the casements are smaller fixed sashes lined with multiple decorative panes. On each of the longer north and south sides are two horizontal windows, operable as sliders, for air circulation. All the second-story windows are surrounded by simple board trim.

Documented and observed exterior changes over time include the following:

- Early in its history, the residence had wood shingle roofing, which was later replaced with roll roofing and most recently composition shingles.

- The open, north-facing gable was built with partially infilled with horizontal siding by mid-century.
- The north-facing bay window was converted from a box bay to a triangular bay by 1946.
- The north deck posts were repositioned at an unknown date.
- The perimeter deck railings that appear in the 1912 photographs were removed at an unknown date. The decking was replaced in-kind with cedar lumber in October 2020.
- A stove pipe appears in the earliest photos. It was replaced with a larger metal chimney at an unknown date and remained in place into the 1980s. It now has a brick chimney.
- The east primary-bedroom window was enlarged from an unknown design, likely in the 1930s or 1940s.
- The south-facing kitchen window was remodeled to a bay window by Colleen Wagner by the early 1970s.
- Plastic flotation barrels have been added as needed to reinforce the home's floating base.
- The foundation stringers were replaced in the mid-1990s.
- In recent years, a repurposed floating deck from the days of the boat livery was added to the north side of the residence.
- The residence was originally painted a dark color with white trim. The color scheme was reversed by 1946 to be white with a dark trim. Today, it is light green with beige trim.

Cabin Interior

The interior of the Wagner Floating Home remains true to its original rustic character. The floor plan is compact and reminiscent of a working boat. There have been no known changes to the plan, which includes a kitchen, dining room, living room, two bedrooms, and a bathroom on the first floor. Two bedrooms upstairs are accessed by a ship's ladder that is centrally located in the kitchen.

From room to room there are varying ceiling heights that provide interest and variety. Interior wood finishes throughout differ in cut, arrangement, and surface treatment, but together convey a sense of continuity and age. The flooring is primarily of painted fir with a patina that speaks to more than a century of use. The walls are of a vertical cedar paneling 5-1/2" wide, stained a natural wood finish in prominent areas like the dining and living room and painted in others. There is nearly an equal amount of standard narrow-gauge, tongue-and-groove paneling and plywood, all painted, on the walls in the less formal, secondary rooms. The various ceilings are clad with tongue-and-groove paneling, both narrow and wide-gauge, and feature exposed painted rafters.

From the shore and communal dock, the houseboat is entered through the kitchen. The visible wood flooring in the kitchen appears to be newer. Photographs from 1946 depict linoleum, which likely covered an original fir floor. The kitchen has been conservatively

updated with modern appliances over the years, but the original tongue-and-groove cabinets, built-in cupboards and drawers still visually predominate. The kitchen counters have been updated. The walls have a full range of the wood finishes seen throughout the cabin, now all painted. The ceilings are a narrow-gauge tongue-and-groove paneling.

A single-leaf opening connects the kitchen to a modest dining room that is illuminated by a pair of windows on the west wall. The dining room flows into the living room, which extends the full width of the cabin and overlooks Lake Union. The living room ceiling rises upward to the gable roof and is open to the rafters. The altered bay window on the north wall has that distinctive vestigial opening from the canoe-club era, giving access into the glazed, triangular bay. A brick fireplace along the inside south wall was replaced in-kind because it was collapsing through the floor. Colleen Wagner insisted upon an exact replication of the original, re-using a textured buff-colored brick and a stained wood mantelpiece of cedar, according to her family. The brick fireplace quite likely replaced a wood stove from the canoe club era – a simple stove pipe shows in the 1912 photos.

The home's largest primary bedroom is centered along the east wall of home, accessed through a wood, slatted folding door at the southeast corner of the living room. A large 16-light window on the east wall illuminates the spacious bedroom. The room features beadboard walls and an exposed-rafter ceiling, with a closet and a paneled door to the home's one shared bathroom along the south wall. A second bedroom occupies the southeast corner of the first floor and is accessed through a paneled door off the kitchen. It has beadboard walls and ceiling, a newly carpeted floor, and windows on the south and east walls. A doorway on the north wall of the bedroom has been converted into a small area for a stacked washer-dryer set.

The two bedrooms upstairs, accessed via the ship's ladder, are of special interest for their rustic simplicity. Plywood walls, with single-plank wooden bookshelves, bracketed below, remain intact. Until recently, the east bedroom had the two built-in beds out of at least six from the canoe club era. The beds were a simple box-like frame with two built-in drawers below.

Documented and observed interior changes over time include the following:

- The living room bay window was converted from a box bay to a triangular bay by 1946.
- A brick fireplace replaced a wood stove, probably in the 1930s or 1940s. Colleen Wagner had the brick fireplace was reconstructed in-kind, at an unknown date.
- A large 16-light window on the east wall of the primary bedroom replaced a window of an unknown design. The date of the change is unknown, but it dates to at least the 1940s.
- The kitchen floor was resurfaced with wood, replacing the earlier linoleum.
- The original south-facing kitchen window was rebuilt by Colleen Wanger as a bay window.

- The kitchen counter tops have been updated over the years. What had been unpainted kitchen walls and cabinets in 1946 are now painted.
- The bedrooms once had six built-in beds dating from the canoe club era, but none remain.
- The one bathroom has some newer features, including the sink and tile countertop and linoleum flooring.
- The Wagners hooked up the home to the City's sewer system in the mid-1960s.
- Blown-in insulation was added in 2020.

SIGNIFICANCE

Lake Union & Neighborhood Context

Seattle's lakes and hilly topography are the result of glacial activity during the last ice age some ten to thirty thousand years ago. The retreating glaciers left behind what we know today as Lake Union and Queen Anne hill to the west. Prior to non-Native settlement in the mid-nineteenth century, the central Puget Sound region and the Lake Union area were home to Native peoples, namely the Duwamish, which is an Anglicized name for du-AHBSH or People of the Inside Place. They established seasonal and permanent settlements along the area's bodies of water, including Lake Union, and a network of transportation routes connecting them. In their primary language Lushootseed, they called Lake Union Ha-AH-Chu, meaning littlest lake.

The rich natural resources of the lakes and forests attracted settlers and entrepreneurs to the Pacific Northwest in the mid-nineteenth century. Early European-American settlement concentrated near Elliott Bay, and abundant forests drew those with logging and mining interests inland, pushing out Native dwellers. David Denny and Thomas Mercer staked land claims in what is today's South Lake Union and lower Queen Anne neighborhoods. Small farms and mills developed along and around the freshwater Lake Washington and Lake Union as the foothills were cleared.

Historians credit Mercer with naming Lake Union at a celebratory gathering on July 4, 1854, at which he suggested the body of water would one day unite Lake Washington with Puget Sound. At the time, a natural dam near present-day Montlake separated Lake Union from the higher-elevation Lake Washington to the east. A small stream drained Lake Union into Salmon Bay on the west. Mercer's vision of uniting the lakes with Puget Sound would not be realized for more than sixty years.

The city's first lumber mill outside the Elliott Bay area developed along the south shore of Lake Union. It began in 1882 as the Lake Union Lumber and Manufacturing Company and became the Western Mill Company, owned by David Denny. A group of lakeside property owners – a who's who of early Seattle developers including Corliss P. Stone, Thomas Burke, Benjamin F. Day, and Guy C. Phinney, among others – formed the Lake Washington

Improvement Company to promote development. Their improvement company, using Chinese laborers, dug small canals with locks connecting Lake Union with Salmon Bay and Lake Washington through which logs and small boats could pass. The system could handle little more than floating logs, and Lake Union's full economic and industrial potential remained unrealized in the eyes of these businessmen.

Meanwhile, many of these same interests filed residential plats as capitalist Luther H. Griffith developed electric streetcar lines around Lake Union. He hoped to connect downtown to a townsite at the northwest edge of Lake Union that he had named after his hometown Fremont, Nebraska. Griffith's Seattle Electric Railway and Power Company completed the first extension to Lake Union in 1890, marking the beginnings of Westlake Avenue. He built a trestle along the west shore of Lake Union, eventually connecting to the north side, where the Seattle, Lake Shore & Eastern (SLS&E) Railway had a depot. The SLS&E connected Elliott Bay with timber outfits and coalfields north and east of the city, and it included spur that also ran along the west side of Lake Union to the mill at the south shore. In 1892, the Northern Pacific Railroad acquired the SLS&E.

Queen Anne's steep slopes meant that the neighborhood developed over time as transportation improvements allowed. Six large plats were filed on Queen Anne Hill between 1869 and 1879, followed by thirty-five new plats in the following decade. One of these was Benjamin and Frances Day's El Dorado plat, filed in 1889, at the north end of Queen Anne along the Lake Union shore. Queen Anne Hill's east slope was graded to accommodate the aforementioned rail spur and roadbed.

This shoreline is where a community of small, working-class houseboats began to congregate in the early twentieth century, in the midst of a thriving industrial waterfront at the north end of the lake. The area included lumber and shingle mills, a tannery at the base of Stone Way, an iron foundry in Fremont, and the gas plant. Elsewhere on the lake at this time, William Boeing and Lt. Conrad Westervelt built their first airplane, the B&W, at Boeing's seaplane hangar at the foot of Roanoke Street in 1916. Seaplanes have been a fixture of Lake Union ever since.

Activity on Lake Union and in north Queen Anne increased and diversified in anticipation of the opening of the Lake Washington Ship Canal, which was completed in 1917. Transportation improvements included the completion of four double-bascule bridges spanning the ship canal – Ballard Bridge, Fremont Bridge, University Bridge, and Montlake Bridge – all of which remain in operation. The changes to the lake itself included nearly two-dozen water access points that were cut into the shoreline to accommodate industrial use of the lake. More marine-related industry appeared on the lake, including the Lake Union Drydock Company (1919), which remains in business today, and an assortment of small boatyards. Over the next decade, several boat building outfits opened that would become known for their craftsmanship and production of exceptional vessels. These included Grandy Boatworks, the Blanchard Boat Company, Prothero Boat Company, and Jensen Motorboat, to name a few.

Lake Union remained decidedly industrial during World War II, with much war-related activity around the U.S. Navy's new armory and the nearby Lake Union Dry Dock. Following the war, seemingly everyone wanted a piece of the lake. By the late 1940s, Lake Union was "one of the busiest and most highly developed industrial areas of the city." Five flying services used the lake while the old boatyards jockeyed for shoreline space with fishing companies, gravel and asphalt plants, and more than 1,000 floating homes.

Significant post-war-era changes were on the horizon, as signaled in 1956 by the closing of the gas plant anchoring the north end of the lake. This was around the time that a young Richard (Dick) Wagner arrived in Seattle and lived in a houseboat on Lake Union. He later recalled of this period: "one thing I noticed about Lake Union was that it wasn't used for recreation purposes, it was used to park boats, and Friday nights or Saturday mornings they would all leave and go through the Locks and come back on Sunday, so Lake Union was a parking spot and a highway for them. That kind of puzzled me." Wagner's observations illustrated a growing interest in the lake as a public recreational space. Indeed, various interest groups participated in the public discussion and planning for Lake Union and its shorelines in the late 1960s and 1970s as the City worked to implement the Seattle Shoreline Management Program. Adopted in 1977, this program ultimately defined how the lake developed and could be used.

Maritime heritage interests gained a foothold on Lake Union beginning in 1964 when a grassroots group led by Kay Bullitt known as Save Our Ships formed to save the Wawona, the largest three-masted sailing schooner ever built in North America. The group later became Northwest Seaport, *a non-profit dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of the maritime heritage of Puget Sound and the Northwest Coast, that today maintains a floating fleet moored at Lake Union Park*. Meanwhile, traditional wooden boat enthusiasts organized in the mid-1970s and formed the Center for Wooden Boats in 1978. The opening of their boat shop and livery at the south end of Lake Union in 1983 began a years-long transformation of that area, from a polluted industrial shoreline to a recreational and educational destination. The Northwest Seaport Maritime Heritage Center and the Museum of Heritage and Industry (MOHAI) completed the transformation of the lake's south shoreline in the early 2010s.

Seattle's Floating Homes

Floating homes are not unique to the Seattle area, and the origins and evolution of houseboat colonies in West Coast cities share common themes. Houseboats near Seattle, Portland, and Vancouver, British Columbia, for example, first appeared as floating logging camps that housed workers in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Colonies also grew around shipyards and other water-based industry in West Coast cities, including San Francisco and nearby Sausalito. Meanwhile, the wealthier sets of the early 1900s built more substantial seasonal houseboats and recreational boathouses along the lakes, rivers, and inlets of West Coast cities. Houseboats in these cities mushroomed during the Great Depression into floating Hoovervilles, only to face backlash from vocal uplanders and public officials wanting them removed. Houseboat dwellers faced increasing regulation and gentrification in the mid- and

late-twentieth century, but many places have maintained at least some semblance of floating home culture.

The history of Seattle's floating homes is as colorful and varied as the structures themselves. The origin of houseboats in Seattle is challenging to pin down given their ad hoc development and the fact that they attracted such little attention. The earliest houseboats of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were associated with logging and industry and were situated along the area's working waterways – first along the shores of Elliott Bay, the Duwamish River, Harbor Island, and Salmon Bay, and then Portage Bay and Lake Union. These small, cheap wood shacks were built on retired barges or floating logs. They were unregulated and not connected to public infrastructure and found clustered amidst waterside industrial plants and fishing boats. They housed struggling and financially-strapped workers who often needed short-term or seasonal residence. Among the earliest newspaper reports involving houseboats are from accounts of crime and tragedy, including tragic drowning deaths of children who lived in extreme poverty in floating shanties along the banks of the Duwamish River.

What is known about these earliest houseboats comes from photographs, recollections, and newspaper accounts. An often-cited early account from the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reported in January 1902 that the city's floating population was nearly a thousand and offered this description of one colony of floating shacks:

Down along the [Elliott Bay] waterfront at this time of year, tied up to the pilings out of the way of the shipping, are to be seen scores of shanty-boats and hundreds almost of small fishing boats floating on the lazy tide. Curls of blue smoke from tiny chimneys denote that they are used as habitations, and such is the case, for here is where the old-time fishermen and many of the dock employees make their homes.

Their growing numbers soon made them a target of industrialists, for occupying limited shoreline space, and reformers, who saw them as a nuisance and unsanitary. These arguments against houseboats, first appearing in the early 1900s, would surface again and again throughout the twentieth century as renewed efforts were made to purge shorelines of houseboats. At the same time, though, the appeal of houseboats spread beyond the working class. Wealthier residents started building houseboats as seasonal homes, especially on Lake Washington. Two “well known young society men of Seattle” – E. Hamilton Geary and Harold Smith – reportedly purchased an existing houseboat on Lake Washington to live in during the summer in early 1900. By June 1901 there were three houseboats on Lake Washington and by 1905 there were 30.

Investors saw an opportunity with houseboats. In 1907, the Washington Legislature authorized the sale of state-owned shorelands along Lake Union and Lake Washington in order to fund the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition. This act extended buildable parcels out into the water. Investors bought these submerged parcels and began renting moorages to houseboat owners. By 1909, there were 36 floating homes from Union Bay to Madison Park,

some of these occupied year-round. At Madison Park, near the popular beachfront park, the estate of the neighborhood's developer Judge John J. McGilvra rented houseboat moorages for \$4 to \$12 a month. These houses ranged from small, one-room cabins to two-story homes with all the modern conveniences of the time. Another similar seasonal houseboat colony developed at Leschi near its beachfront park.

Lake Union, by contrast, was an industrial waterway, and its few houseboats were like those found along the city's other working shorelines. Among the first to be recorded as living on Lake Union was river pilot and sea captain Rodney Allback. The 1904 Seattle Polk Directory recorded his residence as "boat house, Lake Union," and the 1905 directory listed him at the foot of Minor Avenue North, which is perhaps where the houseboat was located. By 1914, there were a few hundred houseboats – most of them cheap, floating shacks – on Lake Union. However, houseboat activity remained relatively quiet on the lake until after the opening of the Washington Ship Canal in 1917 and the country's entry into the World War I. With industry came jobs and the need for worker housing. Landlords moored small houseboats as close together as possible to maximize rent profits, and tight-knit, blue-collar neighborhoods emerged. Cheaply constructed working-class houseboats made their way onto Lake Washington, bringing a new economic class of residents to the existing community.

The growing houseboat numbers garnered the attention of the city's health commissioner, Dr. H. M. Read, who declared in 1922 that houseboats, whose sewage drained directly into the lakes, were turning it into a "virtual cesspool," and that those on Lake Washington were "a menace to the health of the city." He called for the removal of the 1,100 houseboats on the two lakes, which were home to 5,000 people. The Houseboat and Home Protective League, the city's first organized group of houseboat interests for political purposes, stepped in to defend the lake dwellers. They won the support of Mayor Edwin J. Brown who pointed out that the city should first stop pouring sewage into the lakes, and that "the practice of using the lakes for garbage dumps should be discontinued." Houseboats gained other supporters, as evidenced by a piece in the September 1923 issue of *The Seattle Woman* in which author Ruth E. Swanson promoted them as "one method of solving the high rent problem." She suggested, that "during the crowded conditions of the war when rents took their skyrocket journey from which they forgot to return, house-boats were the salvation of hundreds of families of moderate income. They could be built at relatively small cost. No assessments for sewers or pavements had to be met and no real estate tax had to be paid."

Pressure from uplanders and neighborhood groups to improve the city's shorelines continued, eventually resulting in ordinances condemning most Lake Washington houseboats in 1938. The eviction largely involved the working-class homes, described in the *Argus* as "those untidy denizens of hovels built of packing boxes and driftwood." Following passage of Ordinance No. 73578 in October 1944, the remaining few houseboats were evicted from Lake Washington. These actions set in motion the relocation or outright destruction of many floating homes and boathouses in Seattle, and many ended up on Lake Union. Efforts to remove houseboat colonies at Portage Bay and Union Bay were ongoing throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

In response to these threats, lakeshore property owners and houseboat owners again organized, this time forming the Waterfront Improvement Club in December 1938. Led by president Abbott E. Stafford, the club aimed for fairer representation and aided in “promoting a beautification program on Lake Washington and Lake Union.” They organized just as the Works Projects Administration’s survey of real property in Seattle in 1939 found that 64.7 percent of the 946 houseboats counted (probably well below the actual number) were in need of major repair, despite most of them being of recent construction. What the survey highlighted was the low standard of living on the lake, which is some of what the Waterfront Improvement Club had hoped to address. By this time the Duwamish houseboat colony had mostly disappeared, although one houseboater, Fred Strom, managed to remain in his houseboat through the late 1970s.

As the U.S. entered World War II, Seattle experienced an influx of people as local industry, including Boeing and the Lake Union Dry Dock, took on major government contracts and increased output. The housing crunch spilled onto Lake Union, where houseboats became home to families and businessmen as well as skilled and unskilled laborers. Perhaps hoping to avoid rent increases similar those experienced during World War I, the Office of Price Administration applied rent controls capping moorages at ten dollars a month. After the war, on-the-water living attracted various types of people, including writers, artists, students, and others whose “common denominator was an encompassing love of life and a tolerance for poverty.” Although houseboats continued to rile those who saw them as an eyesore, the off-beat lifestyle of living in a floating home attracted the attention of visitors, even catching the attention of *Life* magazine in 1946. The piece called lake-dwelling a “cheap handy way to live in the center of Seattle,” and featured the young family of Charles Barnes who lived in what is now the Wagner Floating Home.

The number of moorages on Lake Union grew in the 1950s, and by 1953 the number reached about 1,100 floating homes. Another round of threats to the survival of houseboats, particularly those on Portage Bay, took place in the early 1950s, prompting the formation of yet another group – the Houseboat Owners association – in 1952. They used a defense similar to that of earlier houseboat advocates, suggesting the real eyesores were the businesses lining the shores. Nevertheless, the City passed ordinances in 1953 and 1957 regulating things like water-line access, electrical wiring, space between houseboats, and setbacks from street ends. They also zoned much of Lake Union for manufacturing uses, further squeezing lake dwellers.

Moorage spaces steadily declined, to about 700 spaces in 1961, which proved to be a particularly costly year for houseboat dwellers. Two Portage Bay colonies were removed to make way for highway development and private developments on Lake Union brought the total displacement to about 150 houseboats. Adding to the frustration was the difficulty in obtaining permits for new moorages. All of this brought together the Floating Homes Association in 1962, to advocate on behalf of houseboat owners. Led by George Neale and Terry Pettus, the Floating Homes Association (FHA) focused more broadly on the entire lake, which wisely aligned them with other groups interested in park development and public

access to the waterways. They also advocated for equity and fairness as the city implemented a five-year program of requiring all houseboats to connect to the City's sewage system. The well-organized FHA, with representatives from all parts of the lake, would see the community through major transitions of the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1964, the King County Assessor's office assigned permanent registration numbers for all floating homes to keep them on the tax rolls. Some houseboat dwellers felt squeezed by increasing moorage fees, prompting the formation of the first cooperatively owned moorage, the Flo-Villa Corporation, in 1967. The construction of the over-water, five-story Union Harbor Condominium on the east side of the lake in 1968 caused alarm among FHA members, who advocated for a moratorium on over-water construction. Meanwhile, a new city ordinance addressing new construction, major remodels, and requiring sewer hookups went into effect.

Although the long-held stereotype of lake dwellers as transient, working-class, and bohemian was still very much in play, a transition in the make-up of the community was underway. The regulation and cleaner lake played a role in saving the houseboat lifestyle from going extinct, but the improvements changed the economic dynamic of some colonies, and even resulted in new, modern-style floating homes like those at the new moorage Portage-at-Bay, the city's first planned houseboat development. The moorage included eight architect-designed houseboats unlike any others on the lake. Completed in 1969, they reflected contemporary styles and sold for an average of \$25,000. Additional evidence of gentrifying houseboat neighborhoods was the upgrading, expansion, and renewal of older houseboats to meet the higher living standards of the evolving demographic. To protect their investments, some floating home colonies cooperatively bought their moorages, often with the guidance and encouragement of the FHA. While serving as FHA president in 1974, Dick Wagner said, "The whole houseboat scene has changed in the last five years. The people now are interesting but rich. They used to be interesting but poor."

Washington voters approved the Shoreline Management Act in 1972, with the overarching goal "to prevent the inherent harm in an uncoordinated and piecemeal development of the state's shorelines." The act required municipalities with shorelines to develop and implement Shoreline Master Programs. The city adopted the Seattle Shoreline Management Program (SSMP) in 1977, outlining goals and use regulations for Lake Union to ensure a diverse shoreline. Importantly, it recognized houseboats as one of the lake's preferred uses, banned new or renovated two-story houseboats, and restricted the number of new houseboat moorages. The program was ground zero for issues of water-dependent uses vs. non-water-dependent uses, shipyards vs. marinas, and recreation vs. industry.

Lake Union as an industrial landscape was evolving to include a diversity of uses. Former industrial sites, such as the gas works at the lake's north end, and the former mill site and city asphalt plant at the south end, transitioned to parks and community spaces that emphasized and embraced the water. Recreational boaters and canoers began accessing the lake via public waterway access points, like Waterway 4 at today's Center for Wooden Boats, that business and industry had used for generations.

In 1993, Hollywood introduced the world to Seattle's floating home lifestyle with the blockbuster movie *Sleepless in Seattle*, starring Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan. By this time, Lake Union had diversified to include tourism and recreation in addition to the mainstays of industry and floating residential colonies. Today, evidence that Lake Union is *the* place to be is found in the newest floating home development – Wards Cove, a gated luxury community in the Eastlake neighborhood.

Floating Home Architecture

In their 1977 book *Houseboat*, authors Ben Dennis and Betsy Case perfectly summarized the architecture of the floating home: “Houseboat architecture encompasses ideas that range from the height of elegance to the ultimate in funk. The end goal, however, is the same – a tight ship where every corner counts.”

Although Seattle's floating homes have garnered the attention of historians, geographers, and storytellers for decades, houseboats are largely absent from traditional historic resource surveys that document the city's older neighborhoods. There has been no comprehensive documentation or inventory of houseboats that would aid in developing property types, identifying building and architectural trends, or placing them in the greater context of Seattle's built environment. What follows is a general summary of common features among Seattle's older floating homes.

Seattle's floating homes of the early- and mid-twentieth century were typically clustered along commonly shared docks extending out into the lake – several houses deep in some spots. These clusters were found along the east and west sides of Lake Union and at Portage Bay, where remnants of these colonies remain. Houseboats were one- or one-and-a-half-story, wood-frame houses of varying shapes and that typically occupied both sides of the shared dock. Poles tied to the docks carried utility wires and hand railings that framed the walkways. Houseboats were usually clad in board-and-batten, horizontal weatherboard, or wood shingles or shakes. Most featured a low-pitched gable or hipped roof, often with a dormer or two, and a stovepipe chimney. The small sprung-roof houseboats dotting that still dot the shorelines reflect the craftsmanship of boatbuilders and woodworkers of the 1920s. A narrow deck around part or all of the houseboat allowed for an extension of home life for things like clothes lines, tool storage, etc.

Those floating homes built before the mid-twentieth century were built on wood-log flotations, which allowed for a home to be moved to a new location if needed or desired. Cedar logs were considered the best for flotation since they waterlog more slowly than spruce or fir. They were strapped together in an inverted pyramid formation. Stringers were secured to the top row of floating lots upon which the floor joists were built. It is the stringers that are most often in need of replacement, along with the occasional addition of supplemental flotation. Starting in the 1950s, when large cedar logs grew scarce, steel drums filled with air and styrofoam were used to stabilize foundations.

While some houseboats of this earlier era reflected popular architectural styles from when they were built (e.g. Craftsman), style was secondary to the need for functional design that maximized the use of space and the use of cheap, abundant materials. This changed with the new floating homes built in the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly at the new moorage Portage-at-Bay, the city's first planned houseboat development. Brothers Grant and Gerry Copeland designed and built the floating community in 1968. There were eight homes, and most were built in the modern Shed style. The asymmetrical, multi-story homes had distinctive angular shed roofs, were finished in naturally stained native wood, and built on styrofoam-filled cement floats. Another excellent example of an architect-designed floating home of this era was that of architect Fred Bassetti, at 3146 Portage Bay Place E. Although moorage space has long been at a premium, architect-designed floating homes have remained a fixture among new floating construction.

Today's Wagner Floating Home and its cooperatively owned dock very much reflect the houseboat colonies of the early- and mid-twentieth century. The one- and two-story wood-frame residences of The Old Boathouse moorage are small and typical of an earlier era. Only one has been rebuilt to reflect a modern boxy appearance – at the northwest corner of the moorage. The average size of the ten houseboats at this dock is 1,286 square feet, and they vary in size, shape, and appearance, which is the charm of this colony. This dock and the neighboring small colonies of houseboats are among the fewer than 500 floating homes that remain on Lake Union.

Property History

Little is known of the early history of the Wagner Floating Home, such as who built it, first owned it, or when it was moved to Lake Union. The earliest documentation of the houseboat comes from two photographs taken by James P. Lee in 1912, which are now archived at the University of Washington Special Collections. The photos depict the houseboat on Lake Washington “probably north of Madison Street,” in a recreational setting with young women and men canoeing. If these clues are accurate, the houseboat may have been part of the group depicted as part of the Madison Park shoreline known as the McGilvra Colony. It probably functioned as a seasonal boathouse that served a recreational club.

Contextual history and later secondary sources suggest the houseboat probably left Lake Washington around 1938 when regulatory actions by the City of Seattle essentially drove houseboats off the lake. Not all houseboats were moved and repurposed, but the Wagner Floating Home was certainly big enough to function as a residence. Once on Lake Union, it transitioned to use as a residence and was probably updated to accommodate year-round living.

The earliest evidence uncovered of houseboats at 2770 Westlake Avenue North is a 1923 advertisement for a three-room furnished houseboat for rent. Soon regular advertisements for houseboat rentals at this mooring appeared in *The Seattle Times*, with rents starting at ten

dollars. Polk directories and newspapers provide some detail about those who lived at this mooring over the years. In the 1920s and 1930s, residents included a young couple with a child, a single man who worked as a diver, and a laborer and his wife. In the 1940s, several women lived at the mooring, including two widowed office workers, a waitress, and a public-school librarian. At least three couples lived there in the 1940s.

In 1946, the houseboat was the subject of a *Life* magazine feature showcasing it as the home of Charles Barnes and his young family. Unpublished photos from this feature, in the Wagner family collection, provide wonderful documentation of the home not long after its move to Lake Union. It is not clear if the Barnes owned or rented the residence, but city directory research suggests they did not live there long.

In 1948, Abbott E. Stafford, a retired fireman and a Portage Bay houseboat resident, purchased the mooring at 2770 Westlake Avenue, where the Wagner houseboat resided. He had other property along Westlake Avenue North, including a waterfront shop at 2500 Westlake that he constructed in 1937. Stafford had long been a fixture of the houseboat community, having organized and served as president of the Waterfront Improvement Club, in 1938, which formed in response to threats to houseboat removals. One wonders if he or the Waterfront Improvement Club had any role in the relocation of the Wagner houseboat or others from Lake Washington to Lake Union. Stafford died in 1951.

Claude Hull purchased the mooring in 1956, and during this period the houseboat functioned as a rental home. A group of young women, including recent college graduate and art teacher Colleen Luebke, moved into the houseboat in the early 1960s. Colleen met a houseboat neighbor, Dick Wagner, around the time he purchased his first boat – a 24-foot schooner designed by the skilled shipwright Bill Garden. Dick and Colleen married in 1965 and made her rented houseboat their permanent family home. They soon purchased it for \$500, but continued to rent the moorage. As boat repair shops closed and wooden marine vessels rotted around them, the Wagners began collecting small boats. In 1968, they started a traditional boat rental business at their houseboat, and within a decade they owned a few dozen small boats. It was called The Old Boathouse, and Dick described it as “the kindergarten of hands-on maritime heritage museums...We not only taught our visitors how to row, paddle and sail traditional boats, but we also had Saturday regattas at our floating home”.

The Old Boathouse became a gathering place for wooden boat enthusiasts and anyone interested in history, boats, and woodworking. In 1976 they started hosting monthly educational meetings, drawing as many as forty people. It was during these meetings that “the group was told of the long-nurtured fantasy of a small craft museum where people can play with the boats and handle the tools.” The idea was well-received, and over time, this group would turn fantasy into reality. In 1978, six individuals organized and incorporated the Center for Wooden Boats and began the long process of finding a permanent home for the organization.

Throughout the 1970s, Wagner and the Center's board studied and drafted plans for four different unused publicly owned sites on Lake Union. By late 1979, the organization was running several programs out of the Wagners' houseboat, and it needed a bigger space to accommodate its mission. The Center settled on Waterway 4 and presented its plan to the City in April 1980. Within weeks, The Old Boathouse was forced to close shop at 2770 Westlake Avenue N "due to a lease problem." In June, an emotional and upset Wagner delivered in his sailboat *Sindbad* the Center's twenty wooden boats to the waterfront homes of friends who promised to take care of them while work to secure Waterway 4 continued. The permit process would take another three years to complete.

Soon after their home-based boat livery closed, the Wagners sought and received National Register of Historic Places designation for their floating home in 1982. It was added to the National Register for its significance in the areas of community development and architecture. The Wagners lived the rest of their lives at the houseboat, where they raised their two sons, Michael and David. Dick died in 2017 and Colleen in 2020.

The Center for Wooden Boats was the Wagners' life work, and they are considered the organization's co-founders and visionaries. Fellow founding member and lifelong wooden boat enthusiast, Marty Loken, recently said that today's Center is "pretty much what Dick and Colleen imagined and doodled on the backs of envelopes in the 1970s. They had a surprisingly clear vision of what it could be." Loken also said that it was Colleen who encouraged her husband to start the wooden sailboat livery at their houseboat, and her inspiration and creativity resulted in the museum that we know today. Another early Center volunteer recently recalled to their sons Michael and David that Dick was the spark plug and Colleen was the battery, which goes a long way in explaining their success together.

To honor their legacy, the Center for Wooden Boats dedicated its newest building the Wagner Education Center. Most recently, the Center honored Colleen's memory with a Sail Past the Old Boathouse on September 26, 2020.

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The features of the Landmark to be preserved include: *the exterior of the house, and the floating log foundation/platform that supports it.*

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Sarah Sodt
City Historic Preservation Officer

Cc: David Wagner and Michael Wagner, on behalf of the Estate of Richard & Colleen Wagner; owner
Sarah Martin, SJM Cultural Resource Services
Jeff Murdock, Historic Seattle
Jordan Kiel, Chair, LPB
Nathan Torgelson, SDCI
Katrina Nygaard, SDCI
Ken Mar, SDCI