

La Conner

People and Place

Location

La Conner is on the southern end of the Swinomish Channel, north of Skagit Bay in the northern region of Puget Sound. Situated in Skagit County, it encompasses 0.4 square miles of land and 0.1 square miles of surface water. The nearest major U.S. city is Seattle, a 70-mile drive south. La Conner's geographic coordinates are lat 48°24'33"N, long 122°31'52"W.

Demographic Profile

According to the 2000 U. S. Census, La Conner's population was 761, an increase of 16% since 1990. The gender composition was 54.8% female and 45.2% male. The median age of 45.5 was higher than the national median of 35.3. The age distribution was almost even, with 51.1% of the population between 21 and 59 years old. Of the population 18 years of age and older, 91.2% had a high school education (including equivalency) or higher, 33.3% had received a bachelor's degree or higher, and 11.4% had attained a graduate or professional degree. These figures are well above the national averages of 79.7%, 22.3%, and 7.8% respectively.

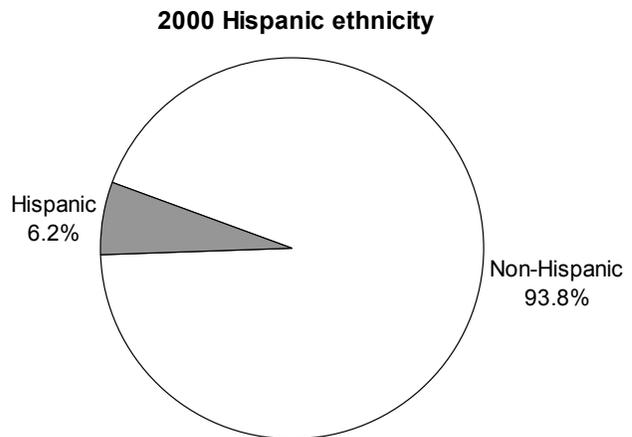
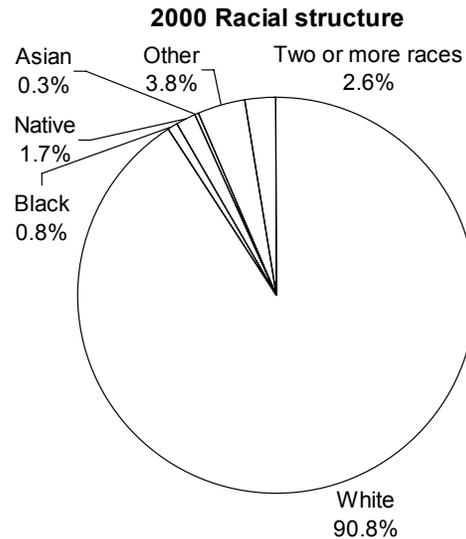
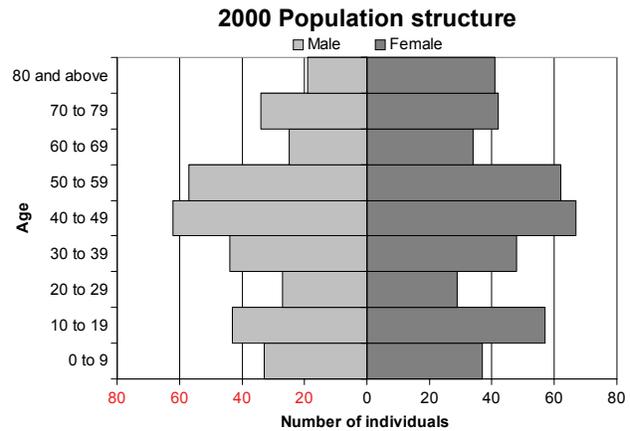
The vast majority of La Conner's racial structure recorded by the 2000 U.S. Census was white (90.8%), followed by people who identified as another race (3.8%), people who identified as two or more races (2.6%), American Indian and Alaska Native (1.7%), black (0.8%), and Asian (0.3%). There were zero Pacific Islanders living in La Conner in 2000. Ethnicity data indicate that 6.2% identified as Hispanic. In 2000 5.9% were foreign-born, with 60.9% from Canada.

In 2000 73.9% of La Conner's population lived in family households.

History

Skagit County was created in 1883 from the southern portion Whatcom County. The same year La Conner lost its status as county seat to Mount Vernon, which is 15 miles northwest. Skagit County derived its name from of the Indian tribe that lived along the river known by the same name. The Skagit River is the largest watershed in the north Cascades.

The La Conner area was home to the Swinomish Indians for many years. The Swinomish are descendants of the Kikiallus, Samish, and Lower Skagit tribes.¹ The Swinomish and three additional tribes—Samish, Sauk-Suiattle, and Upper Skagit—lived in the area now known



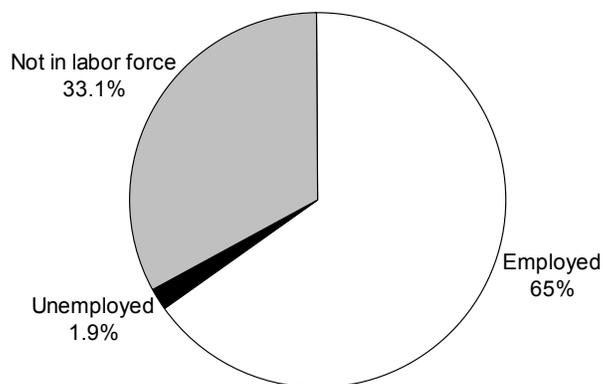
as Skagit County and were signatories to the 1855 Point Elliot Treaty. The treaty gave Western Washington tribes the right to self-governance and set aside several reservations, including one for the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community on Fidalgo Island, across the Swinomish Channel from the Town of La Conner. The Swinomish reservation was expanded to 7,448 acres in 1873 and tribal members in the area were forced to move onto the Lummi, Tulalip, or Swinomish reservations.

Skagit County is now home to two reservations, the Swinomish and the Upper Skagit, located near Sedro-Woolley. Swinomish tribal services include medical and dental health facilities, a senior center, library, youth services, adult education programs, and the Swinomish AmeriCorps. The tribe also continues to practice its native religion in the 200-foot long smokehouse (1,200 seats).² According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 2,664 tribal members lived on the Swinomish Reservation.

In the 1700s the Spanish, British, and Russian explorers and fur traders were the first non-Indians to enter the Skagit region. The first white settlers were primarily homesteaders, who arrived in the area in the mid-1850s. It was not until after the first dike was built on the La Conner flats in 1863 that farming took hold. Settlers in La Conner successfully planted and harvested a modest barley crop.³ Alonzo Low established the first Swinomish post office in 1867 on the land that would become La Conner. Low's family was among the original party that landed on Alki Point near Seattle, when Alonzo was 2 years old, and went on to found Seattle.⁴ Two years later J. S. Conner bought the existing trading post, established by John Hayes, another early settler. It was around the trading post that the Town of La Conner developed. At the time the local post office was called Swinomish. In 1869 the entire town and an additional 70 acres was deeded to John Conner for \$500. To honor his wife, Louise Ann (Siegfreid) Conner, he had the town's name changed to La Conner in 1870.⁵

Natural resource-related industries such as agriculture and fishing have been important segments in La Conner's historic and contemporary economies. In its early years the town became a popular farming community and hub for steamers carrying passengers and freight from Seattle.⁶ In the 1870s the commercial salmon and cod fishing industries began in Skagit County, primarily around the communities of Anacortes and La Conner. The associated industries of canning and packing were established shortly thereafter. La Conner was a successful town with its growing port and protected harbor, but in 1880 when the log jam that blocked the Skagit River at Mount Vernon was cleared, Mount Vernon was in a position to become a major city in the region.⁷

2000 Employment structure



La Conner prospered during the depression largely due to the logging and fishing industries. The dredging of the 11-mile long Swinomish Channel was completed in 1937 and turned La Conner into a working waterfront. Companies such as Dunlap Towing, specializing in a variety of ocean-towing markets, have been based in La Conner since 1925. But the town was not merely an industrial haven. The quiet and peaceful town, amplified by the decision of the railroad to bypass La Conner in favor of Burlington in 1889, became a popular destination for artists seeking inspiration from nature for their works. Famous artists and writers such as Morris Graves, Mark Tobey, Guy Anderson, Tom Robbins, and others have lived in and worked in the La Conner area during the past century.

Today La Conner blends together three different cultures: tourism, the arts, and fishing. La Conner is on the National Registry of Historic Places. The Civic Garden Club, located within the town, was the first courthouse north of Seattle. The famous Skagit Valley tulips are grown on floodplains that surround La Conner. The Swinomish Tribe maintains a successful partnership with La Conner and the town has declared the fourth Monday of September Native American Day. The day is recognized by tribes all across the country; however La Conner is unique in that it may be the only local, nontribal government that formally recognizes it as a holiday.

Infrastructure

Current Economy

At the time of 2000 U.S. Census, 65% of La Conner's potential labor force 16 years of age and older were employed, 1.9% were unemployed, and the unemployment rate was 2.8% (calculated by dividing the unemployed population by the labor force). In addition,

33.1% were not in the labor force, slightly lower than the national average of 36.1%. The top employment sectors were management, professional, and related occupations (38%), local, state, and federal governments (24.5%), and sales and office occupations (22.6%).

Today the town's economy has diversified to include tourism, health care, education, construction, and the arts. La Conner's current economy relies less on fishing and logging than it did throughout the early 1900s. However fishing remains an important part of the area's culture, particularly for the Swinomish community, which continues to fish for salmon, crab, clams, and sea urchins in the surrounding bays and waterways. Natural resource jobs, including agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting, employed only 3.1% of the population in 2000, but this percentage may be artificially low given that many fishermen are self-employed and are underrepresented in these data. Some local companies have felt pressure due to decreasing Puget Sound salmon fisheries. Moore-Clark, a hatchery fish-food processing plant and longtime industrial employer, closed in 1992.

In 2000 91 Skagit County residents identified themselves as commercial fishermen.⁸ Despite employing the lowest number of workers, industries dependent upon natural resources, particularly commercial fishing, have paid some of the area's highest salaries. Commercial fishermen in the county earned \$57,810 in annual average wages in 2000.⁹ Finfish was the major fishery, employing 53 workers making \$83,016 annual average pay.¹⁰

The per capita income in 1999 was \$24,308 and the median household income was \$42,344. In 1999 11.8% lived below the poverty level, slightly lower than the national average of 12.4%. In 2000 there were 434 housing units in La Conner, with 55.1% owner occupied and 44.9% renter occupied. The housing vacancy rate was 14.3%, with 22.6% vacant due to seasonal, recreational, or occasional use.

Governance

La Conner is classified as a town by Washington law because it has less than 1,500 residents. It has a mayor-council form of government. The mayor hires and oversees the town administrator and the town's six departments. Five La Conner residents serve on the town council. Skagit County levies an 8.0% sales tax and a 2% lodging tax. See the Governance subsection (page 43) in the Overview section for a more detailed discussion of taxes affecting fisherman and processors in Washington.

The nearest National Marine Fisheries Service Regional Office and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office are in Seattle. Meetings of

the Pacific Fishery Management and North Pacific Fishery Management councils are routinely held in the Seattle-Tacoma area. The nearest Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Regional Office is 50 miles south in Mill Creek. La Conner is in the U.S. Coast Guard Station Bellingham's area of responsibility, which includes the San Juan Islands north to the Canada border and south to Admiralty Inlet. The station was established in 1947 and has six vessels.

Facilities

La Conner is accessible by ground, water, and air. Interstate 5 (north-south) is 15 miles southwest. U.S. Highway 20, located 4 miles north of La Conner, runs east-west through Skagit County, connecting most of the county's major cities. Mount Vernon, 12 miles northeast, is the nearest Greyhound bus terminal. Skagit Transit provides public transportation between La Conner and Mount Vernon, Burlington, Sedro-Woolley, Anacortes, and upriver through Concrete. The Washington State Ferries runs from Anacortes, 11 miles northwest, to the San Juan Islands and Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Amtrak's Cascade Corridor Service, which stops in Mount Vernon, provides national and international rail transport. Three public-use airports are within 15 miles of La Conner, but the nearest airport certified for commercial carriers is 40 miles north in Bellingham. The nearest major airport facilities are the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport and Vancouver International Airport in British Columbia, 87 miles north.

The La Conner School District has three public schools (one elementary, one middle school, and one high school). Skagit Valley College in Mount Vernon is the closest college, with an enrollment of more than 3,400 students. Puget Sound Energy administers electricity services. La Conner's water comes from the Skagit River near Avon and is purchased from the City of Anacortes. Cascade Natural Gas offers natural gas service. Water and Wastewater Services LLC operates La Conner's wastewater facilities, which serve the Swinomish Tribal Community, the Port of Skagit County, and the Skagit County Sewer District No. 1 (Hope Island Area). The Skagit County Sheriff's Office and the La Conner Fire Department administer public safety. The La Conner Medical Center is located in town and Island Hospital is 10 miles north in Anacortes.

The Town of La Conner has several community services and organizations including the Quilt Museum in Gaches Mansion, the La Conner Civic Garden Club, the Museum of Northwest Art, and Sylvan Pioneer Park. The tourism industry in La Conner is well developed with more than 110 lodging rooms in the town's 3 hotels, 2 inns, 2 bed and breakfasts, and 4 guest homes.

In the late 1960s the Port of Skagit County, 13 miles northwest in Burlington, purchased land in La Conner and began construction on the La Conner Marina. Completed in the 1970s, the 500-boat marina offers dry storage space and a boat launcher. There are no fish processors located at the marina. The marina is home primarily to recreational vessels, with only seven or eight commercial seiners (50–55-feet) that fish in Alaska during the summer months.¹¹ There are no tribal vessels moored in the La Conner Marina. The town provides boat moorage at three sites: Benton Street, Calhoun Street, and Washington Street end floats. There is a public boat ramp at Sherman Street end under the Rainbow Bridge. The Port of Anacortes is the primary public cargo port in Skagit County. There are at least 11 boat repair and service companies located in La Conner and three boat builders. There are at least five charter boat companies in the La Conner area offering fishing, whale watching, and ecotourism excursions.

The Skagit County Marine Resource Committee (MRC), a Northwest Straits Marine Conservation Initiative, alternates monthly meetings between Anacortes and Mount Vernon. The purpose of the MRC is to bring a scientific and grassroots approach to protecting and restoring marine resources in the area. Serving on the MRC are representatives from the scientific community, local and tribal governments, and economic, recreational, and conservation interests.

Involvement in West Coast Fisheries

Commercial Fishing

Of the 224 unique vessels that delivered landings to La Conner in 2000, 137 were tribal commercial vessels, 39 were commercial vessels, and 48 were personal use. Landings in the community were in the following West Coast fisheries (data shown represent landings in metric tons/value of said landings/number of vessels landing): crab 190 t/\$971,526/94; groundfish confidential/confidential/1; salmon 182 t/\$253,799/101; shellfish 15 t/\$138,042/10; shrimp confidential/confidential/2; and other species 52 t/\$95,583/9.

La Conner residents owned five vessels in 2000 that participated in West Coast fisheries, including three that participated in the federally managed groundfish fishery. The number of vessels owned by La Conner residents in 2000 that participated in each said fishery by state (WA/OR/CA) was: groundfish 0/0/NA, highly migratory species NA/0/NA, salmon 2/0/0, shellfish NA/0/NA, shrimp NA/0/0, and other species 2/0/0.¹²

The number of La Conner residents holding permits in each said fishery by state (WA/OR/CA) was: coastal

pelagic 0/0/2, crab 1/0/0, groundfish 1/0/0, highly migratory species NA/0/0, salmon 5/0/0, shellfish 0/0/NA, and other species 1/0/0.¹³

La Conner residents held 14 state permits in 2000. The number of permits held by community members in each said fishery by state (WA/OR/CA) was: coastal pelagic 0/0/4, crab 1/0/0, groundfish 3/0/0, highly migratory species NA/0/0, salmon 5/0/0, shellfish 0/0/NA, and other species 1/0/0.¹⁴

Several seafood processors are located in the La Conner area. Lone Tree Point Seafoods Inc., located on the Swinomish Reservation, began operations as a wholesale processor in 1996. The company is currently the leading cannery packer for 4-pound canned wild salmon and exports to Australia and Europe. It purchases treaty (Upper Skagit, Swinomish, Suquamish) and nontreaty fish, and imports salmon from Alaska. The company employs 45 permanent and 60 seasonal personnel and generates \$3 million annually in sales.¹⁵ Fieldwork indicates that the Wabi Fishing Company, specializing in smoked sockeye salmon, king salmon, coho salmon, and Alaskan black cod packed in glass jars, is in the process of relocating to nearby Bellingham. The Olympic Fish Company relocated to Pier 91 in Seattle.

The tribal commercial fishery plays a significant role in the La Conner commercial fishing industry. In 2004 there were 64 tribal commercial vessels listed with members fishing primarily for salmon, crab, and shrimp.¹⁶ Tribal members also were engaged in beach seining for species such as pink salmon and some tribal members smoke and sell salmon to the community.

According to the Boldt Decision,¹⁷ the usual and accustomed fishing areas of the Swinomish tribal community include the Skagit River and its tributaries, the Samish River and its tributaries, and the marine areas of northern Puget Sound from the Fraser River in British Columbia south to and including Whidbey, Camano, Fidalgo, Guemes, Samish, Cypress, and the San Juan islands, and including La Conner Bay and Hale Passage adjacent to Lummi Island.

Swinomish tribal officials also are involved in local environmental issues, such as the presence of Seattle City Light's hydroelectric dam on the upper Skagit River; Swinomish tribal fisheries depend upon salmon runs that utilize spawning grounds in the Upper Skagit River.¹⁸ The tribe has no aquaculture or hatchery facilities.

Sportfishing

There is at least one licensed agent selling fishing permits in La Conner. In La Conner in 2003 there were 1,234 sportfishing license transactions valued at \$14,868. In Catch Record Card Area 8-1 (Deception Pass, Hope

Island, and Skagit Bay), the 2000 sport catch, based on catch record cards, was 2,105 fish, including 969 Chinook salmon and 1,136 coho salmon. In 2000 marine anglers made 7,772 trips in the sport salmon fishery. Boat-based anglers caught 1,449 bottomfish in the Puget Sound within Catch Record Card areas 8-1 and 8-2 (Ports Susan and Gardner). The recreational harvest of clams (pounds) and oysters (numbers) for Area 8-1 in 2000 was estimated to be 113,325 and 0 respectively; harvest occurred over an estimated 18,847 user trips.

Subsistence

Subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering activities are fundamental to the way of life of some coastal community members. Tribal and nontribal individuals participate in subsistence fishing. Today members of the Swinomish Tribe and other nontribal subsistence fishermen obtain fishery resources from the waters surrounding La Conner. Subsistence fishing is not discussed in great detail in this community profile due to the lack of available data.

Involvement in North Pacific Fisheries

Commercial Fishing

In 2000 La Conner residents owned 15 vessels that were involved in North Pacific fisheries. Community members landed fish in the following North Pacific fisheries (data shown represent landings in metric tons/value of said landings/number of vessels landing): other finfish confidential/confidential/1; herring confidential/confidential/1; and salmon 781 t/\$578,750/11.

La Conner residents held 11 state commercial permits (note: it is possible for individuals to hold more than one permit at a time). Residents held 1 herring and 10 salmon Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission permits.

La Conner residents held 26 crew member licenses for North Pacific fisheries in 2000.

Sportfishing

La Conner residents purchased 64 Alaska sportfishing licenses in 2000.

Notes

1. N. Zaferatos. 1999. Tribal planning as strategic political action: A case study of the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community. Conference proceedings. American Planning Association National Conference. Online at <http://www.design.asu.edu/apa/proceedings99/ZAFERA/ZAFERA.HTM> [accessed 31 January 2007].

2. Skagit Pages. 2004. Skagit pages. Online at <http://www.skagitpages.com/B2C> [accessed 31 January 2007].

3. Skagit County Profile. 2002. Labor Market and Economic Analysis Branch, Employment Security Department. Online at <http://www.wa.gov/esd/lmea/pubs/profiles/skagit.pdf> [accessed 31 January 2007].

4. HistoryLink. 2004. La Conner: Thumbnail history. Online at http://www.historylink.org/essays/output.cfm?file_id=5655 [accessed 31 January 2007].

5. WA GenWeb. 1999. Welcome to Skagit County. Online at <http://www.rootsweb.com/~waskagit/placenames.html> [accessed 31 January 2007].

6. La Conner. 2004. La Conner, Washington: The town. Online at <http://www.laconner.net/thetown.cfm> [accessed 31 January 2007].

7. See note 4.

8. See note 3.

9. See note 3.

10. See note 3.

11. Field notes, marina personnel, La Conner, WA, 29 September 2004.

12. NA refers to data that were available, for example, due to few or no recorded permit numbers, or the partially permitted nature of a fishery in 2000.

13. See note 12.

14. See note 12.

15. Swinomish Tribal Community. No date. Community development: Lone Tree Point Seafoods Inc. Online at http://www.swinomish.org/planning/economic_development/businesses/lonetreeseafood.html [accessed 31 January 2007].

16. Field notes, Swinomish Tribe, La Conner, WA, 30 September 2004.

17. U. S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. 2000. Muckleshoot Indian Tribe v. Lummi Indian Nation. Online at <http://www.ce9.uscourts.gov/web/newopinions.nsf/0/9909aaf534e2be87882569b40066c5ec?OpenDocument> [accessed 31 January 2007].

18. L. Kamb. 2004. Seattle, tribes sign accord on government -to-government relations. Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 21 July 2004. Online at http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/182983_citytribes21.html?searchpagefrom=1&searchdiff=196 [accessed 31 January 2007].