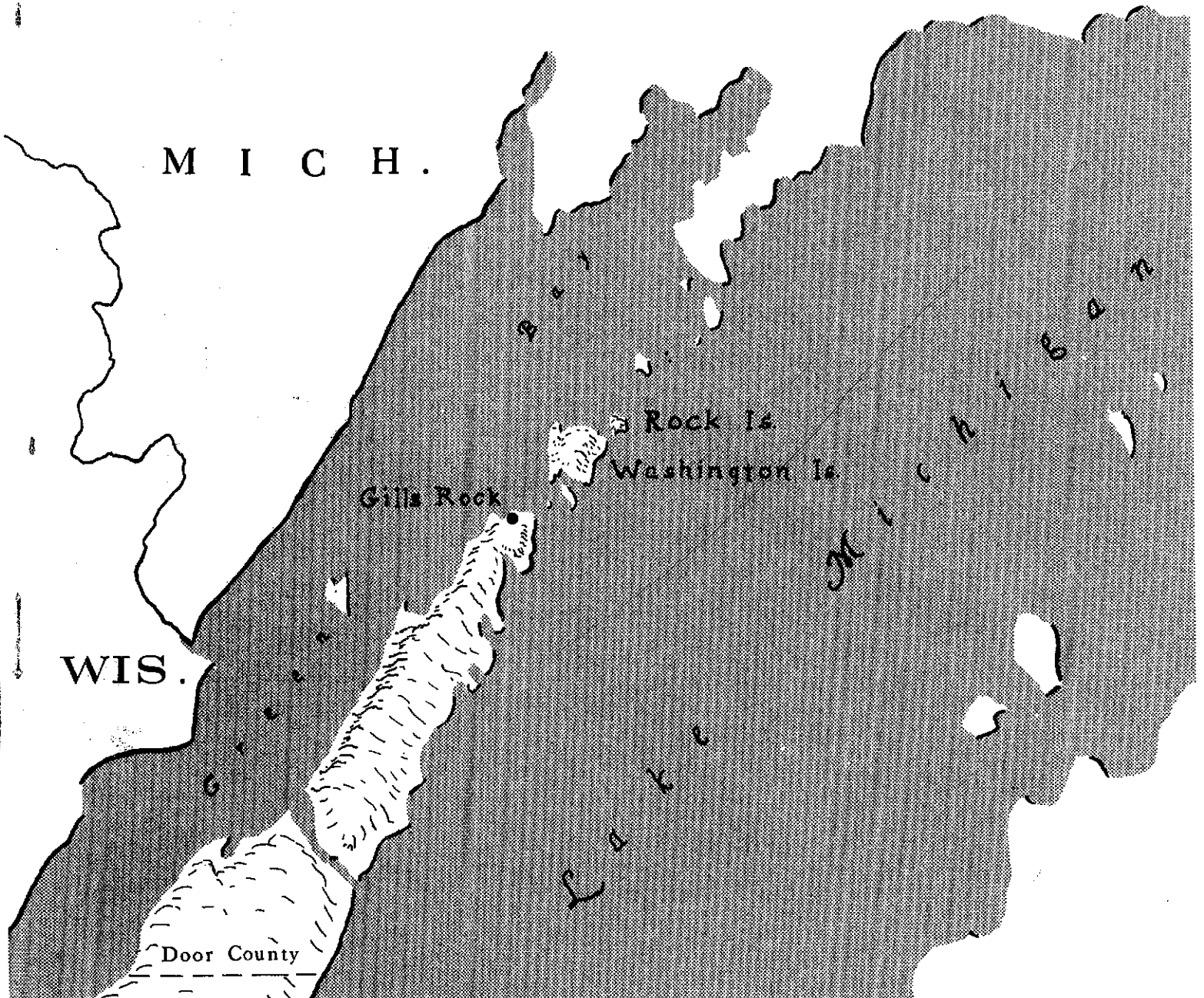


# WASHINGTON ISLAND : Challenge & Opportunity

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Distributed by the Department of Rural Sociology  
College of Agriculture, University of Wisconsin, Madison 6

This study was originally undertaken at the request of the Door County Extension Agent, Norbert Schachtner, and with the cooperation of the Washington Island Town Chairman, Jack Hagan, as a part of the Door County program planning process. The focus was on the unique situation from the physical, economic, and cultural point of view that is found on Washington Island. It was later incorporated as a part of the broader resource development program of the Door County Board of Supervisors.

This analysis is based on a two-day trip to Washington Island in April, 1961, a three-day trip to Washington Island and to Rock Island in June, 1962, a study of available secondary materials dealing with "the tip of the thumb" area of Door County, and consultation with a number of people who were at least somewhat familiar with the situation. We traveled by car and by jeep on both Washington and Rock Island, and completely around Washington Island to Rock Island by Boat. There was opportunity to explore most of the recreation features of both islands.

This report is being made available both for its subject matter content and as an illustration of a stage in the program planning process. Both as individuals and as representatives of the University of Wisconsin, we are seeking to be of such help as we can to the people of Washington Island. We can interpret the situation as we see it through the eyes of experienced observers and analysts, and we can make suggestions. But we cannot solve the problems of Washington Island. This will be done only by the people themselves, working together in some concerted effort.

A. F. Wileden  
H. Clifton Hutchins

July, 1962

WASHINGTON ISLAND: CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

by

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Physical Characteristics  
Social Characteristics  
Some Generalizations  
    The Island as a Dwelling Place  
    Exploiting Scandinavian Backgrounds  
    Agricultural Enterprises  
    Small Business Opportunities  
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Proposals and Conclusions

A major purpose in visiting and analyzing the situation on Washington Island was to look at its economic possibilities with reference to recreation. In using the term "recreation" it should be clear that the concern was with whatever brings re-creation or renewal or refreshment to people. In other words, the concern was with the possibilities of Washington Island as a vacation-recreation center. Beyond this, there has necessarily been concern with the possibilities for a balanced all-year economy for the people on the Island.

Physical Characteristics

Washington Island is located in the northeastern section of Wisconsin some seven miles off the tip of the Door County peninsula. It is part of a rocky chain of islands that extends from Door County across the western part of Lake Michigan to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The

Island itself is some 23 square miles in size extending approximately five and one-half miles one way by six miles the other. Washington Island Town also includes Rock Island (one and one-half square miles), Detroit Island (one and one-fourth square miles) and two smaller islands, each being sparsely settled or uninhabited. Elevations range from low, swampy land, little above the level of Lake Michigan (mean low water 578.5 feet above sea level) to some 140 feet above the lake level at Boyer's Bluff at the northwest corner of Washington Island.\* The shoreline is low in the southern and eastern portions of the Island and ranges gradually upward to high limestone cliffs on much of the northern shore. Four harbors indent the shoreline of which Detroit Harbor is most highly developed. Much of the Island was once heavily wooded but has now been lumbered off with the result that there is little lumbering today except occasional cutting of hard woods.

Geologically, Washington Island is part of the extensive Niagara Escarpment which extends into Wisconsin from the eastern United States. This escarpment slopes to the south and is characterized by limestone outcroppings at or near the surface such as that which shows up on the north and west shorelines of Washington Island. The soils of the Island are dominantly derived from shallow glacial deposits over Niagara dolomite. \*\*

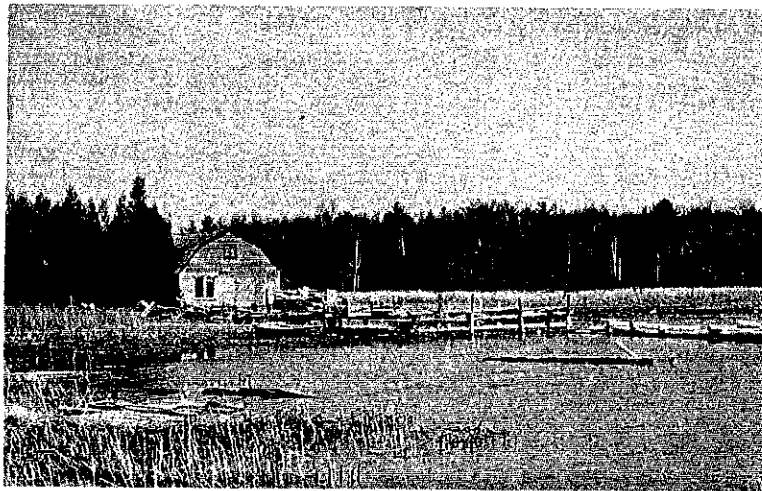
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\* Shrock, Robert R. Geology of Washington Island and Its Neighbors, Door County, Wisconsin. Reprinted from the Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, Vol. 32, pp. 199-227. 1940

\*\* Geib, W. J. et al Soil Survey of Door County, Wisconsin, Washington, U. S. Government Printing Office, 1918, 44 pp. plus map, as interpreted by Marvin Beatty, Soils Department, University of Wisconsin.



Ferry loading at Gill's Rock for Washington Island. This ferry makes twelve round trips daily in July and August but only one December through March.



View of a flat shoreline on the south side of Washington Island. On the southwest and north sides of the Island are four natural harbors, of which Detroit Harbor is the most developed.



This beautiful and peaceful inland lake nestles among the trees of Washington Island. This Island also affords three township parks and one county park.



In the southern, southwestern, and east-central parts of the Island, the soils are somewhat sandy, while in the northern and west-central parts they are mostly loamy. Very sandy soils derived from beach sands are common near the harbor areas. Throughout most of the Island the soils are stony, and limestone bedrock may occur at depths of one to three feet below the ground surface. Four or five small peat deposits occur on the Island.

As indicated elsewhere in this report, most of the soils presently being farmed are used for production of potatoes or for production of forage for dairy cows. The stones in and on these soils is a hindrance to efficient production of all of these crops. In areas where dolomite is less than two and one-half to three feet below the ground surface, the soils will tend to be drouthy and production of deep rooted crops such as alfalfa and corn will be limited by lack of moisture storage capacity in the subsoil. In most parts of the Island soils and topography would be as well adapted to production of fruit and vegetable crops as are the soils on the mainland peninsula.

Soils and topography in certain sections of the Island would be well adapted to recreational uses. Nearly all soils are well drained and water moves through them quite readily. This would make possible their use for recreation sites, hiking trails, and for housing if so desired. However, careful local investigation should be made where bedrock is shallow before installing septic tanks or seepage fields. Effluent from these tanks and fields can move readily through cracks in the bedrock and contaminate local water supplies.

The weather on the Island is quite typical of the eastern Wisconsin lake shore area, the monthly mean temperatures (at Sturgeon Bay) during June, July and August being 63, 69 and 67. Each of these months averages

approximately three inches of rainfall or a tenth of the normal annual precipitation. Prevailing winds usually range from northwest to southwest except in early spring when northeast winds dominate. There is an average of 60 percent of sunshine from late spring to early fall according to the climatological summary of the U. S. Department of Commerce Weather Bureau. The high relative humidity varies from an average maximum of 80 percent and minimum of 70 percent in winter to an average maximum of 85 percent and minimum of 60 percent in summer.\*

### Social Characteristics

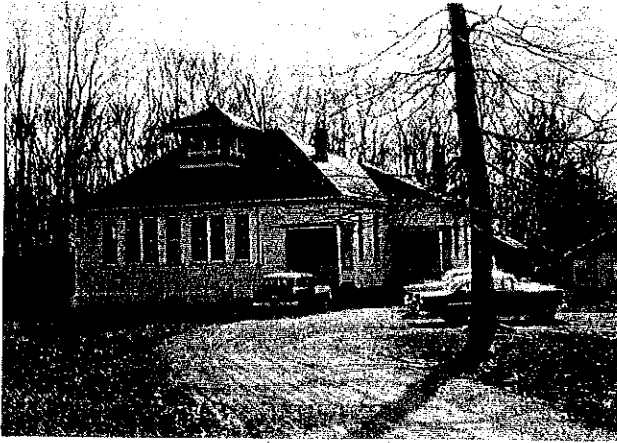
Historically, Washington Island is reported to be the first Icelandic settlement in America, and 60 percent of the present residents were reported to be of Icelandic background. There is still barely in existence the Icelandic Castle which reputedly housed the first four families to settle on the Island. Rock Island, immediately to the northeast of Washington Island, contains the estate of C. H. Thordarson, reputedly the inventor of the rheostat and the transformer, who had accumulated considerable wealth and indigulous momentos of the Icelandic culture. Some of these are of such nature as to be of possible interest to the Wisconsin State Historical Society.

Washington Island is a town in Door County and is governed by a town board. It had a population of 610 in 1960, down from 776 in 1950 and from still higher figures in previous censuses. The people at one time were clustered in several settlements adjacent to the harbors which carried

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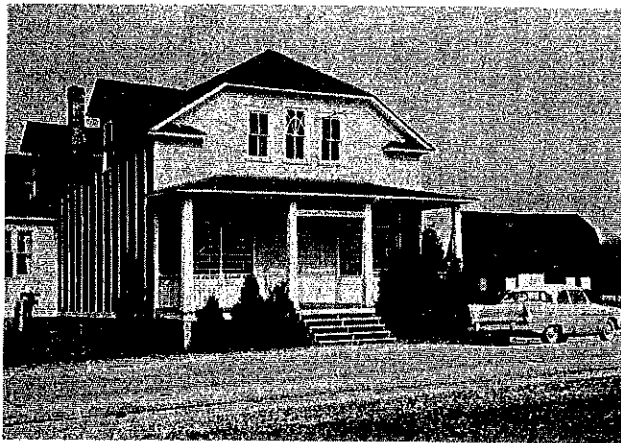
\* Data from Climatological Summary for Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin station, prepared by Marvin W. Burley, Weather Bureau State Climatologist (Science Hall, University of Wisconsin) Madison, and published by U.S. Department of Commerce, Weather Bureau.





High School on Washington Island, which has a graduation class of eight or nine pupils each year.

Evangelical Free Church, one of the two churches on Washington Island.



Community Hall on Washington Island, a center for public and social affairs.

Stage for the Outdoor Theater on Washington Island, where folk dances and plays are presented.





most of the commerce of the area. Today the population is scattered and there is no single village within the Island although the largest concentration seems to be in the southwestern section around the periphery of Detroit Harbor where the ferry dock, several small businesses, motels, post office, inn and library are located.

The Island has a forty-pupil high school, two churches, and the services of a doctor who originally came there to retire. They also have a rather well kept community hall and outdoor theatre which serve as the center of social activities for the Islanders and visitors to the Island. However, information provided by the pastor of one of the churches and the principal of the high school, rather dramatically reflect the population situation when they tell us that in one church a year ago there were 21 recorded deaths and 12 recorded births, and that eight of the nine graduates from the high school left the Island.

On the other hand, there is a modest influx of retired people to the Island, some even of a national and international reputation, such as Thorstein Veblen. This has all tended to raise the average age of the population, and, although it provides a valuable resource in human experience, at the same time it brings about some degree of conservatism and an absence of the needed vigor and aggressive action to restore the dwindling economy of the Island.

The Island was formerly a center of commercial fishing with some thirty-five boats daily leaving the Island. Now there are only three or four boats belonging to one operator. The major industry is the growing of potatoes which is under the aegis of a native of the Island now living in Chicago, who owns some land, leases much more and controls, in all, some 1,300 acres or nearly three-fourths of the approximately 2,000 acres of arable land on the Island. There are 18 dairy farms, almost all of them

inefficient operations. There are two or three orchards and there is some cutting of hardwoods, one or two truck loads a day going to the saw mills on the mainland. Also, there is some business activity generated by tourists that helps to maintain several gift shops, lodging places and supportive services such as grocery and hardware stores, construction services and the like.

#### Some Generalizations

Some general statements may be appropriate. First, the present transportation arrangement for reaching Washington Island by ferry at \$1.10 per person each way, plus \$5.00 round trip for a car, may be a liability, or it may be an asset. The trip is expensive to people going to and returning from the Island, and it undoubtedly increases the cost of goods provided by or to vendors on the Island. At the same time, the isolation of the Island is an advantage. Many of those who have come, have done it to escape some of the pressures of civilization that are not found there.

Second, economic problems of Washington Island are likely to be solved only in relation to the rest of Door County. The county has been designated as a distressed area from an economic standpoint and is thus eligible for certain types of Federal assistance. This prospect has stimulated preparation of a county-wide plan of economic development; and whatever is done on Washington Island should become an integral part of that county plan. The relationship of Washington Island's economy to the rest of Door County is illustrated by the fact that the Island can be reached, in practical terms, only through Door County.

Third, there are certain positive factors in the picture which must not be overlooked. There are several new homes recently constructed on the

Island or under construction and these are going up continually even though at a slow rate. There are attractive inns and motels on the Island as well as good eating places and gift shops which help in attracting tourists. There is the Icelandic background of the Island, a cultural factor, which offers possibilities for exploitation. There is an abundance of unspoiled area on the Island that is attractive to people who are seeking solitude and surcease from the rigors of civilization for a vacation period or longer. There are agricultural resources which may be great enough to provide for some of the nearby tourist demands. And, although commercial fishing has been seriously affected by the ravages of the lamprey eel, there is still good sports fishing readily available, especially for perch and bass. These things have a great deal of significance for the economy of the Island. Add to these the desire of at least some of the Islanders to attempt new business enterprises and the future becomes reasonably bright.

Finally, among these generalizations, the answer or answers sought by the people of Washington Island seem more likely to be found in a series of small efforts than in any one major enterprise such as the bringing in of an industry which would give employment to many. Many small enterprises will bring diversification, and thereby a safety factor, and will occupy more of the people on a year-round basis than would likely be possible on any narrow or seasonal economic base. During the course of this study many possibilities have been suggested that appear to offer some economic promise for the people of the Island. Some of these and related ideas are grouped here for simplicity of presentation.

The Island as a Dwelling Place - Two kinds of dwelling possibilities, which may be closely related, are immediately apparent, namely, inducing people to build summer cottages on the Island and attracting retired

people to make a home on the Island in comfortable yet relatively inexpensive surroundings. Both of these types of ventures have already been undertaken on a small scale. Within the past several years, a dozen or more new summer homes in the \$7,000 to \$14,000 class have been constructed, and several retired couples have established permanent homes. Such additions to the population bring demand for goods and services and, at the same time, bring talents to the community which may be tapped, at least on a part-time and voluntary basis. Efforts in both of these directions would tie in nicely with similar developments on the Door County mainland.

Another possibility to be explored is that of a children's camp. It is understood that there have been one or more children's camps on the Island in the past and that some of the individuals who came to this camp as children have come back to purchase land or to spend their vacations on the Island. This suggests long range as well as immediate economic advantages from camping. The Island has attractiveness for this kind of venture as well as several desirable locations with all the resources that camps desire. Beyond this, the development of a camp with the campers staying for a week or longer is a kind of economic development which minimizes the transportation problem.

Then too, there is the continuing prospect of attracting a greater number of visitors for stays of a day or two to a week or two in length. There are several motels, three small hotels that supply eating and sleeping facilities in the summer, and one all year around, and two or more restaurants now available for serving such visitors. While most of the trade would come during June, July and August, there is the possibility of attracting other customers, through judicious advertising, during the spring

and fall months, by featuring such occasions or periods as hunting and sports fishing seasons. It is assumed that the Islanders will want to focus their efforts on attracting the kind of visitors who come because they seek the quiet and semi-isolation that Washington Island offers.

The development on the Island of an art center or a crafts center is another kind of possibility. Such a colony would desirably complement rather than duplicate the arts centers that have been developed on the Door County Peninsula. It could stress any one or more of the many forms of artistic expression: ceramics, painting, enameling, sculpture, music, drama, creative writing or others. This would require some kind of local organization that is without selfish interest and which might be stimulated and aided by the kind of help attainable through the University of Wisconsin. Such a center might find expression in a physical plant, such as the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, where an artist can find a place to work in quiet isolation for an extended period of time (the same kind of opportunity for individuals that is made possible for groups at "The Clearing" near Ellison Bay). It might find expression in teaching and exhibitions by resident and other artists for the benefit of visitors; and it might find expression in a quasi-commercial organization devoted to fostering the manufacture and sale of handcrafts.

Exploiting Scandinavian Backgrounds - There is opportunity here for the exploitation of Scandinavian crafts, foods, and dances as well as other customs. Examples of this are the emphasis on Icelandic culture which is found in one gift shop and in costuming of some of the young people to serve as guides on the ferry boats in summer; the "fish boils" which are held annually for the whole community under auspices of one of the service clubs and weekly at the local inn during the summer; and the Scandinavian folk dances which are exhibited by a group of young

people of the community, not only on the Island but to other parts of Door County. These should be advertised and identified with the Island. Other possibilities are the preparation and sale of some of the many delicate Scandinavian pastries as well as such long-term ventures as the designing and conversion of buildings, at least in the principal settlement or places of tourist interest, to conform to a Scandinavian motif.

Such an enterprise as the development of Scandinavian woodcrafts could turn into a year-round occupation for a few people. There is probably enough lumber on the Island of the right kinds to be felled and cut to the desired proportions for making not only the woodcrafts that are desired but also cash income for several skilled craftsmen in building construction for the summer tourist trade during the winter months. Possibly several persons might have to be trained or re-trained in woodworking skills. The same might be true with respect to the decorative skills, such as rosemaling, which are a trademark of Scandinavian crafts.

Agricultural Enterprises - Despite the generally low standing of dairying on the Island and the almost complete dedication to raising potatoes on the arable land, there appear to be some reasonable possibilities for other agricultural development. Since some of the soils on the Island are adapted to fruit growing and to truck farming, there would appear to be some prospect that enough land could be diverted away from other uses to supply at least some of the fruits and garden produce needed by hungry tourists during the tourist season and as well as by local residents. Similarly, there is continual need for dairy products which might be provided by diversifying the present dairy operations or specializing in a certain type of cheese manufacturing. \* The preparation and selling of soil

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\* See the report on The Future of Dairying on Washington Island by Don Wilkinson, James Crowley, and George Reznicek, August, 1962.



for potted plants such as African violets, could provide a supplementary income for someone using readily available sawdust, sand, leaves, straw, and manure to make compost. There appears to be a number of such possibilities.

Small Business Opportunities - Some possible types of business opportunities that seem to have possibilities on the Island are the operation of frozen food lockers for fish or other perishable foods; the development of riding stables for summer visitors, possibly with Icelandic ponies, as suggested by one of the local residents; construction of a small golf course which might in the beginning include as few as three holes but which would help to attract some people and give them diversity of opportunity for recreation expression when they come to the Island.

There are opportunities for exploiting some of the natural resources of the region such as the limestone which exists in great abundance and might be possible of quarrying, or the gravel deposits which also occur in abundance on the Island. These, however, are extractive enterprises which probably should be undertaken with caution inasmuch as they are not replenishable resources and the process of severance often irreparably blemishes the landscape.

The virtual necessity of using boats to reach the Island and to enjoy some of its attractions, suggests the possibility of establishing a marine or small boat harbor with servicing and mooring facilities, and possibly boat repair, food services and lodging as well, at one or possibly two of the harbors.\* A related possibility is the construction of a small boat

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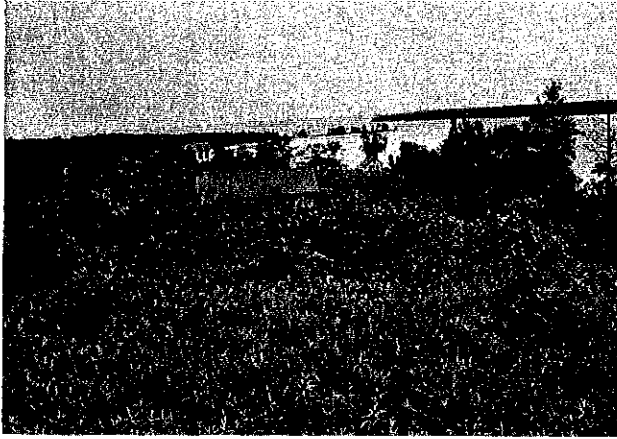
\* More adequate data on the waters adjacent to Washington Island are to be found in U. S. Department of the Army, Corps of Engineers U. S. Lake Survey and supplements, Bulletin #57, April 1948 Washington, U.S.G.P.O. 516 pp.

haven for temporary shelter during storms such as has been suggested by one local resident for Washington Harbor. And there is the possibility of developing a helicopter service to provide transportation back and forth to the mainland.

The possibilities of part-time employment cannot be overstressed in this situation inasmuch as many of the individuals who are involved and who would need to be involved would be housewives or older people who wish to have additional income to supplement their present sources of income, but who also want something stimulative for their own minds and something to do that will be of help to the community so that they may have a part in its regeneration.

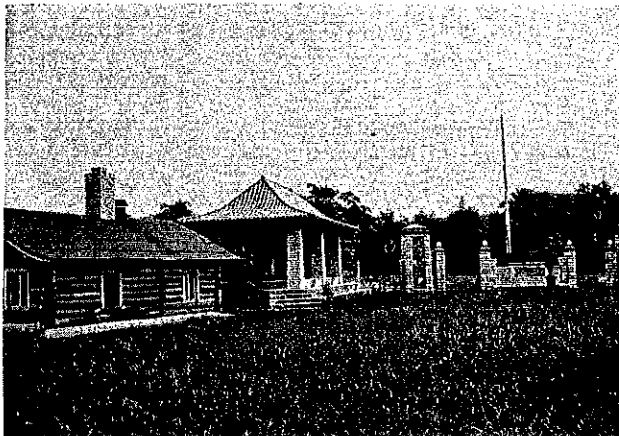
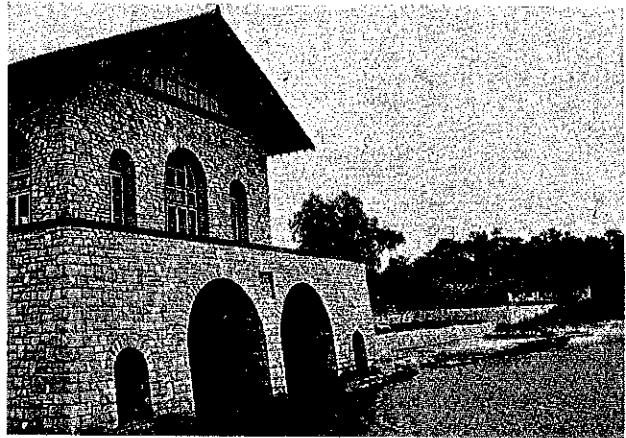
Development of Rock Island as a State Park - There is a distinct possibility of the acquisition and development of Rock Island off the north-eastern corner of Washington Island as a state park. This is a rocky island of some 900 or more acres of which 775 or so belong to the heirs of C. H. Thordarson and approximately 130 belong to the Federal government and provide the location for a now abandoned light house. Most of this island once belonged to an inventor-industrialist of Icelandic background who used some of his wealth to develop several buildings of extensive and beautiful architecture characterized by native stone. There is a boat house that was built from native stone at a cost, many years ago, of nearly a quarter million dollars. Despite some deterioration of peripheral features, this building is still sound and contains some treasures which should be of real interest to the Wisconsin State Historical Society. This building, with a large main hall and numerous smaller rooms, might even become a museum of Icelandic or Scandinavian culture in the state park, if such park were to be established.

All but a hundred or less of the 900-some acres on the Island are



A view of the clearing and housing development on Rock Island from Overlook Point.

This unusual boathouse on Rock Island with its great hall and Icelandic furnishings is built of native stone that is found in abundance on the island shores.



One corner of the clearing on Rock Island -- Patio, cabin, and stone wall.

In some places the Rock Island shoreline is quite flat, and in others it is quite precipitous.





completely forested with hard woods, some of which have trunks that are two feet in diameter. The white pine was reported as having been logged off some years ago. These magnificent woods should be preserved for all of the people of the state. There is also a readily accessible and beautiful sand beach on the south shore of the Island. The remainder of the shoreline is rocky and in some places precipitous. There are already several other attractive buildings and developments on the Island that can lend themselves in unusual degree to the purposes of a state park. These include a domestic water supply, concrete mooring dock, buildings such as the boat house, main lodge, dwellings, greenhouse and other structures some of which could be used for administration purposes and others which might be managed as a hostelry for overnight guests. There is also open space that could be used for a camp site.

Among the other notable features is the existence of a shoal some 18 inches under the water surface that extends from Washington Island all the way to Rock Island except for a channel that has been cut in the shoal for navigation purposes. This shoal is considered to be broad enough for the construction of a causeway, with a bridge over the narrow channel, from Washington Island to Rock Island thus making it more easily accessible.

The acquisition and development of this island by the state for park purposes would have a very important economic effect on Washington Island and would stimulate the economy of one of the most depressed areas in the State of Wisconsin. The principal reason for its development, however, would be to preserve one of the unique and still primitive areas of scenic, historic and even scientific interest in the State of Wisconsin. The Island lends itself to camping, picnicking, swimming, boating, hiking, nature study, sight-seeing, and even tobogganing in winter.

It is understood that the owners would prefer to sell the land to the State and have made an offer of some \$200,000 for the approximately 775 acres that are privately owned. The land is also being sought by private operators who reportedly want it for lumbering purposes and possible real estate development.

The use of this 900 acre island as a state park has been given formal approval by the Door County Board of Supervisors as required by Wisconsin's Outdoor Recreation Act Program. A park of this character and geographic location would nicely supplement existing parks in Door County and within the State, being well within travel range of one of the major urban concentrations in America and having the combination of water and woodland and scenery that make a park attractive. Unless action is taken very soon, the acquisition and development of this Island may be lost to the public.

#### Proposals and Conclusions

The authors realize the hazards in drawing conclusions and in making suggestions based on limited facts and observations. However, most of the suggestions and proposals herewith indicated were suggested in consultation with residents of Washington Island. As a matter of fact, one of the strongly positive factors in the picture is the desire and readiness of many of the residents to improve their economic and social well-being. But the task will not be easy nor will it be accomplished quickly, and they need help from the outside. There are several moves that deserve careful consideration, some of which have been implied above.

1. There is need for some form of organization of the people of the Island to carry on the promotion of new enterprises; to gather more information as to who comes to the Island, when, why, and for how long; and to relate the efforts of the many people who presumably would be involved

in such an effort. Such an organization might grow out of some existing committee of government, or of the island community apart from government, or it might be a wholly new organization. It might involve an officially appointed body, it might be a council of existing organizations, or it might be of the nature of a Chamber of Commerce, but under any circumstances, the kinds of functions that need to be undertaken are coordinative, stimulative and promotional in character. Here is opportunity for individuals who have the necessary background to give leadership to an effort of this kind which could mean so much to the people of the Island.

2. There is need for developing a land use plan and zoning controls which will limit specific types of improvement to designated areas and will control building development on the Island so that the most desirable features are retained and enhanced and the undesirable features, such as billboards and garish advertising, are kept out. There is need, for example, for one or more residential zones, possibly separating summer cottages from permanent dwellings so as to avoid expensive winter services. There is the need for one or more commercial zones that would have the effect of concentrating business activity; for public use zones that might include waterfront areas, public parks and places of distinctive scenic, scientific or historical interest; for one or more agriculture zones; possibly separate zones for forestry; and for others that may not be immediately apparent. This seems to be desired by the people on the Island as a protective measure. It can be done by amending the town zoning ordinance which is already in effect. Expert assistance can be obtained for development of an effective land use planning and zoning program upon request to the County Extension Office.

3. It is important that the people of the Island "make visible" what they have to sell by means of advertising, not only within Door County

but well beyond the confines of the peninsula. Such use of advertising media might have several effects. If the idea that visitors to Door County should make a trip to Washington Island during their stay in Door County could be developed this would bring added visitors and thereby economic income to the island. Some of these visitors and new residents will have ideas as well as the skills and experience and energy to do some of the needed professional, semi-professional, mechanical and service tasks. Possibly some kind of advertising trade-mark distinctively identified with Washington Island would be desirable. Such possibilities as a profile view of the limestone cliffs or a figure in Icelandic costume are suggested. Such a trademark might well appear wherever the name Washington Island is used.

4. It appears that Rock Island has tremendous potential for a state park. Its very attractive and unusual setting in the midst of many of our still primitive, natural resources, sets it aside as being something distinctive. It might at any time be sold to a private concern and that would be a tragedy, as far as the recreation future of the State is concerned. The State of Wisconsin should give serious consideration to its purchase for a future state park.

5. The Icelandic furnishings and attractive boat house on Rock Island might well be taken over by the Wisconsin State Historical Society. This is a distinctively different type of historical development which might well be preserved, and would tie in very well with a state park development on the Island.

There are also several spots on Washington Island that might well be recognized and indicated by suitable markers by the Wisconsin State Historical Society. Maybe the old Icelandic castle could be preserved.

6. Much of the future of Washington Island and the surrounding



areas appears to lie in the further development of its recreation resources. The relatively primitive nature of the area (if it can be kept that way), its Icelandic background, its water resources, and the trip across from the mainland, can all add to the uniqueness and attractiveness of the area. Such a development can substantially add to the total economy of the area and to its assets as a place for "adding life to years" in retirement. It would be on the way to a state park on Rock Island if that should develop, but even without that development, it has many recreation resources of its own on which it can and should capitalize.

