



Your Guide to Totem Bight State Historical Park



Interpreting The Poles

A Tlingit myth relays that people were inspired to carve totem poles after finding a carved log washed up on the beach. The Haida tell of a master carver who created a house front and several poles overnight, and then taught the villagers how to carve.

Totem poles are more than decorations: they evoke stories and events for their creators. Stories associated with totem poles can be complicated, and are sometimes interpreted differently by different clans and communities. To understand totem poles, a deeper, more thorough knowledge of Native people and their history is necessary.

Tlingit and Haida Indians are each divided into two matrilineal groups called moieties or phratries. These divisions are represented by the Raven and Eagle in totem art. Within these moieties are smaller clans, whose members are more closely related. These clans are further subdivided into lineages or house groups, which is the fundamental social unit, tracing the matrilineal descent to a common ancestor.



Kadjuk Pole



Raven at the Head of Nass Pole

Early Tlingit and Haida poles are often distinguishable by their layout. Haida figures interconnect and overlap more than Tlingit figures, which are isolated from each other and present a more rounded and sculptured appearance. While Totem Bight is generally considered Tlingit country, you will find both Tlingit and Haida myths and legends enshrined here.

Park History

In the early 1900s, Native villages in Southeast Alaska were on the decline. People migrated to towns to work, and the villages and totem poles they left behind were soon eroded by weather. In 1938, the U.S. Forest Service began a program aimed at salvaging these monuments. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) hired skilled carvers from among the older Natives, and young artisans to learn the art of carving totem poles.

Alaskan architect Linn Forrest supervised construction of model Native village for this site, then called Mud Bight. Fragments of old poles were laid beside new cedar logs, and every effort was made to copy them faithfully. Traditional tools for carving were made by hand, and paints were created from local natural materials. These nature-based colors were then duplicated with modern paints.

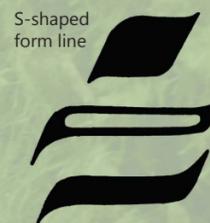
By the end of World War II, the community house and 15 poles had been made, and the name of the site was changed to Totem Bight. In 1970, the site was added to the National Register of Historic Places. This historical park is steward to its resources.



Split u-shaped form line



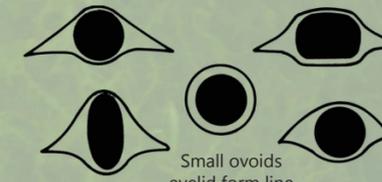
U-shaped form line



S-shaped form line



Ovoid form line



Small ovoids eyelid form line

A People's Art

Rich resources of this area enabled inhabitants enough leisure time to develop their art. The unique art of the Northwest people reflected the images in their stories. The art style is based on form line that establishes principal shapes and design units within a piece of art. The appearance of a third dimension emerges where a two-dimensional form line design is wrapped around a half cylinder. Form line proportions run from thick to thin in a curvilinear pattern, and connect and outline basic shapes used throughout this style of art.

An ovoid or rounded rectangle is the most characteristic shape used, and may represent a variety of things including the head of a human or other creature, eye sockets, or major joints. They may help form the shape of a wing, tail, fluke, or fin. Small ovoids may contain faces or indicate eyes, ears, noses, the blow hole of a whale, or simply fill empty spaces and corners. S-forms and U-forms are used for connecting, filling and contouring.

Color is one of the great unifying characteristics of the art. Colors were limited to a few natural pigments made from salmon eggs, hematite, clam shells, lichen, graphite, and copper. European trade did little to change the choice of colors. Black remains the primary color; red is for secondary elements; and blue-green is for tertiary highlighting.

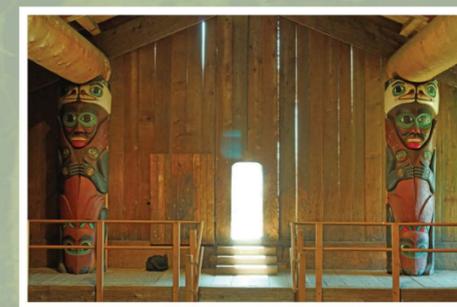
The Clan House

A community house or clan house, like the one at Totem Bight, could house 30 to 50 people. Its design is representative of Tlingit and Haida villages built in the early 19th century.

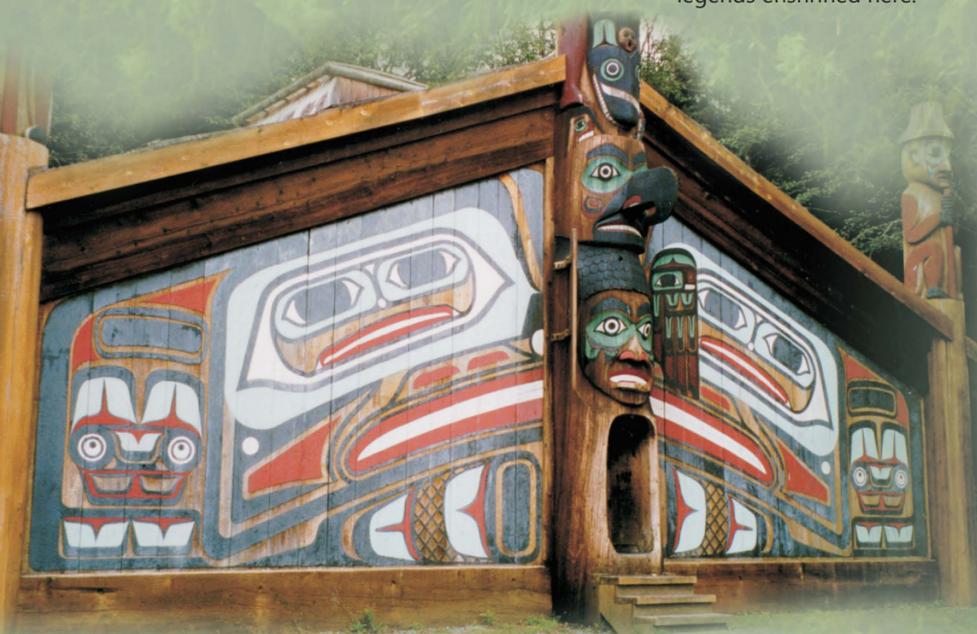
The interior contains a central fireplace surrounded by a planked platform. The walls and floors were hand-adzed to smooth the surface and remove splinters.

The dwelling would serve as living quarters for several families of a particular lineage. Each family was allotted its own space but shared a common fire. Housewares, treasured items, and blankets were stored under removable floor boards, and food items were hung from the beams and rafters. Members belonging to the house would be led by a house chief of the same lineage.

Carved house posts supporting the beams inside symbolize the exploits of Duk-toothl. He was a man of Raven moiety who wore a weasel skin hat and showed his strength by tearing a sea lion in two. The painting on the house front was designed by Charles Brown. Within each eye of the stylized Raven was a painted face. Designs on the house fronts were rare, and often signified great wealth.



Inside the Clan House



Totem Poles

1. Thunderbird and Whale
This Haida mortuary pole was originally from the old village of Klinkwan on Prince of Wales Island. The carving represents the mythological Thunderbird. Its prey, the killer whale, hangs lifeless in its talons. The pole was first copied for Totem Bight by John Wallace in the 1930s. In 1990, Nathan Jackson was commissioned to carve a second replica. Wallace's original carving can be viewed at the Visitor's Information Center.

2. Eagle Grave Marker
The original stood in the old Haida village of Howkan and was copied by John Wallace. Wallace took some artistic license with his rendition by adding the Chilkat blanket design on the eagle's breast, making it unique.

3. Man Wearing Bear Hat
This Tlingit grave marker was copied from Cat Island by Tlingit carver Charles Brown. In 1995, Israel Shotridge carved a second replica. It depicts a man of the Bear clan wearing a large, carved wooden hat surmounted by a bear's head and surrounded on the brim by painted whales.

4. Wandering Raven House Entrance Pole
This Tlingit pole was designed and carved for Totem Bight by Charles Brown. The low oval entrance through the pole was a good means of protection during times of war and typical prior to the adoption of western-style homes. The pole represents several important stories in Tlingit lore. At the top of the pole is Raven clutching a box of daylight that he stole to bring light to the world.

5. Pole on the Point
Standing at sixty-eight feet tall, this pole was an original design by Charles Brown. At the top is the shaman, dressed in ceremonial garb. He is wearing a headdress of bear claws and a fringed leather apron. A carved club in his hands symbolizes one of his spirit powers. The figures below him represent several Tlingit legends.

6. Blackfish Pole
This Tlingit pole symbolizes the story of the origin of the blackfish (Killer Whale), as also told on the Wandering Raven house pole. The original was copied from Tongass Island, where it had stood in front of Forested Island Clan House.

7. Land Otter Pole
This Haida pole was designed and carved in 1947 by John Wallace from Hydaburg. In 1996, Nathan Jackson carved a replica which now stands here. The pole tells the story of a man captured by the Land Otter People. The hero is depicted at the top of the pole wearing a dog-skin headdress.

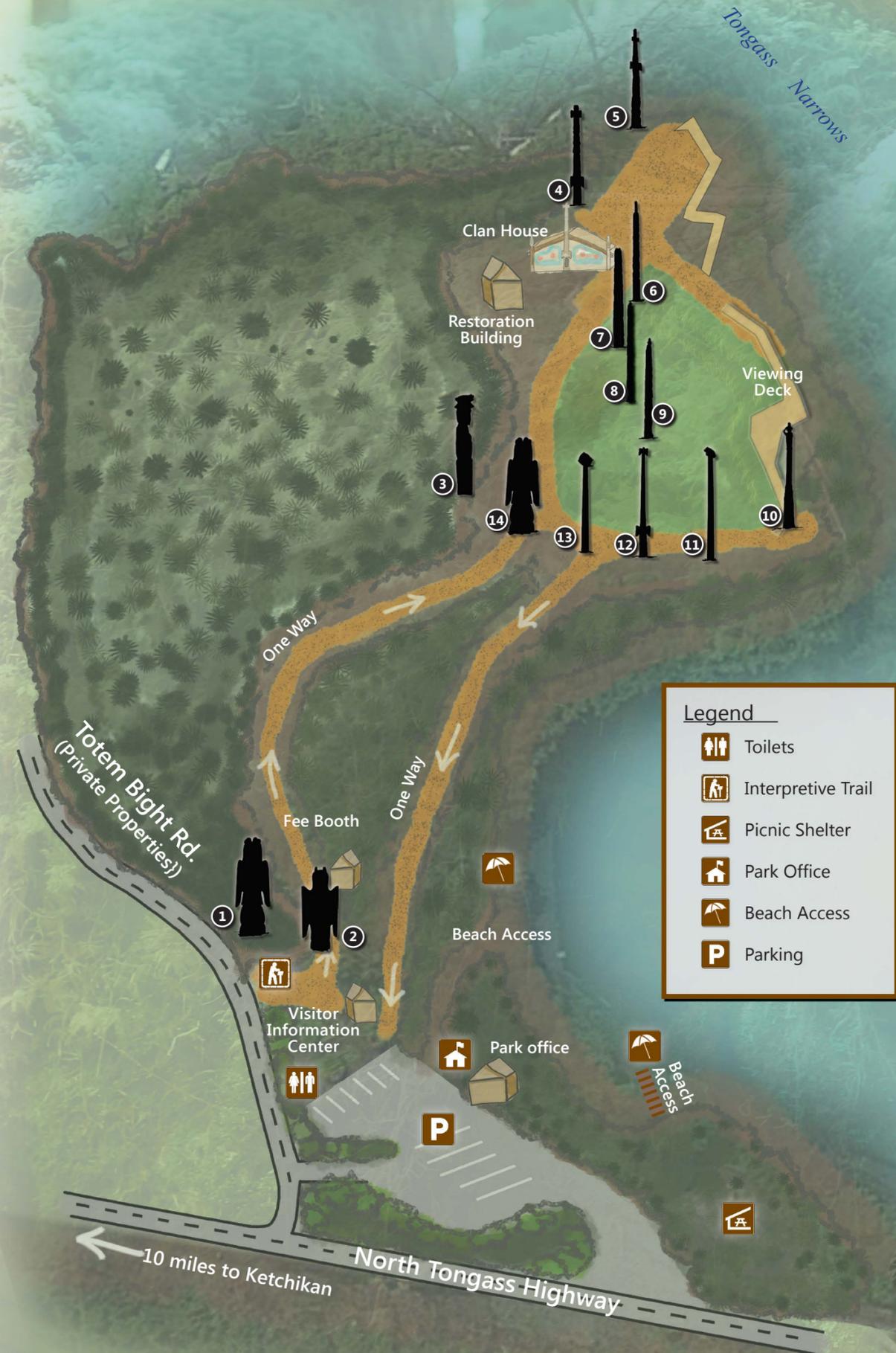
8. Master Carver Pole
This pole was also designed and carved by John Wallace. It was set up in 1941. This pole represents the story of a master carver who, in Haida legend, taught woodworking to the Haida people.

More information about Totem Bight can be found at:

www.alaskastateparks.org

You can donate on-site or go to:

dnr.alaska.gov/parks/donations



9. Sea Monster Pole
Carved by John Wallace, this pole resembles an original pole from the deserted Haida village of Klinkwan. A village watchman stands guard at the top with two eagle crests, but the rest of the pole depicts the undersea world.

10. Raven at the Head of Nass
Copied from a Tlingit pole on Tongass Island, a chief in a spruce root hat tops the pole. At the base is the chief, Raven at the Head of Nass, from whom Raven stole daylight to bring to the world.

11. Kaats' Bear Wife
This pole, copied from Tongass Island, depicts a bear and tracks, symbolizing Kaats' Bear Wife. Kaat was a character out of Tlingit mythology known throughout the region and claimed by many as an ancestor. In 1985, carver Israel Shotridge replaced the bear portion of the pole.

12. Kadjuk Bird Pole
This Tlingit pole was copied from Cat Island. The Chief Johnson pole, which is similar, has stood in Ketchikan since 1901. The fabled Kadjuk bird sits on top of the pole. The undecorated portion of the pole symbolizes the lofty habitat of the bird and the high esteem in which the crest is held. Frog Woman, who created the first salmon, is at the bottom of the pole.

13. Halibut Pole
This Tlingit pole honors the Halibut House people of the Nexadi clan. The original pole stood in the park from the Civilian Conservation Corps era of the late 1930s until 1970, when it was replaced by carver Nathan Jackson. The square pole is a characteristic style of the people of Tuxekan, where the pole originated from.

14. Thunderers' Pole
The original totem pole stood at Tongass Island. It symbolizes Thunder and belongs to the Thunder House people. Four brothers of this clan were changed into Thunderers. Like the Thunderbird, they create thunder and lightning, and live in the sky on mountain tops.

Tlingit carvers Felix Young, Peter Jones, Walter Young and James Peele work on a pole, Kasaan, Alaska, ca. 1938. University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, NA 3505

