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British Columbia 1858

Nearly 150 years ago, the land that would become the province of British Columbia was transformed. The year – 1858 – saw the creation of a new colony and the sparking of a gold rush that dramatically increased the local population. Some of the future province’s most famous and notorious early citizens arrived during that year. As historian Jean Barman wrote: in 1858, “the status quo was irrevocably shattered.”

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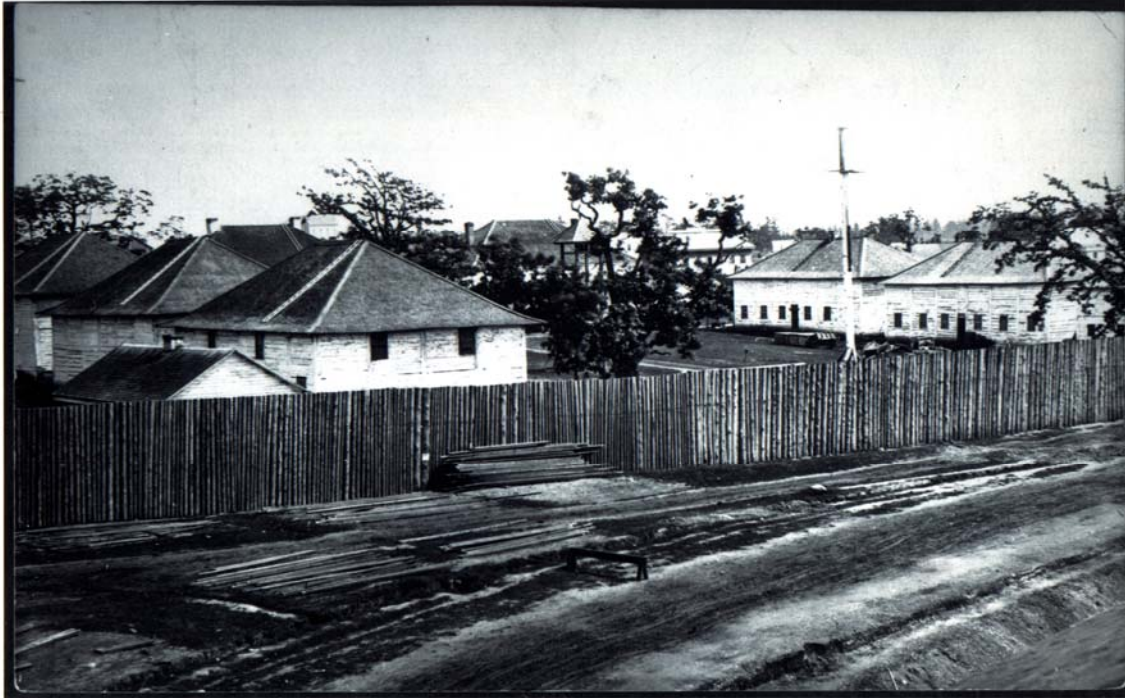
Nearly 150 years ago, the land that would become the province of British Columbia was transformed. The year – 1858 – saw the creation of a new colony and the sparking of a gold rush that dramatically increased the local population. Some of the future province’s most famous and notorious early citizens arrived during that year. As historian Jean Barman wrote: in 1858, “the status quo was irrevocably shattered.”¹

BEFORE 1858

It is believed that the B.C. northwest coast was once home to one of the largest concentrations of First Nations people in the land that became Canada.² Estimates of the pre-contact aboriginal population vary. In her history of Canada’s First Nations, Olive Patricia Dickason suggested the “Northwest Coast could have counted as many as 200,000 souls” before contact.³ The first meetings between aboriginals and Europeans in the area took place during the eighteenth century. European diseases would in time decimate the aboriginal population.

A British colony was set up on Vancouver Island in 1849 and the Hudson’s Bay Company was given proprietary rights on the island. Between 1850 and 1854, the colony’s governor, James Douglas, made 14 land purchases on Vancouver Island from aboriginal people who were paid with blankets and other goods. Across the water, the mainland of present-day British Columbia was known to Europeans as New Caledonia. The area was not yet a British colony, although the Hudson’s Bay Company had exclusive rights to trade on the mainland.

There were few Europeans in the area before 1858. An 1855 census, wrote Barman, found about 200 non-aboriginal residents in the fort and village at Victoria and about 350 people lived on nearby farms. “As well as the 150 settlers in Nanaimo, handfuls were scattered from Fort Rupert in the north through New Caledonia, at interior posts such as Fort Langley, and on the HBC’s large sheep farm just east of Victoria on San Juan Island.”⁴



Hudson's Bay Company warehouses and stockade on Wharf Street, Fort Victoria, 1858. Image A-04100 courtesy of British Columbia Archives.

GOLD RUSH!

*“Victoria had at last been discovered, everybody was bound for Victoria, nobody could stop anywhere else, for there, and there alone, were fortunes, and large fortunes to be made.” – Alfred Penderill Waddington, *The Fraser Mines Vindicated*⁵*

Gold fever struck California in 1848, luring west some 300,000 people before the end of the rush in the mid-1850s. Further north, the Hudson's Bay Company and First Nations were mining gold in New Caledonia. In February 1858, word leaked out that the company had shipped 800 ounces of New Caledonia gold to San Francisco. A small group of prospectors set out in March. A March 5 report in a Washington territory newspaper called New Caledonia the “new El Dorado.”⁶ The newspaper report was quoted in E.O.S. Scholefield and W. Howay's history of British Columbia:

“We learn from Captain Jones of the schooner Wild Pigeon ... that much excitement exists on Vancouver Island in consequence of the alleged discovery of rich gold deposits to the northward in the British possessions. The precise locality of these reported gold discoveries Captain Jones is unable to designate, but, according to representations, they are located between Fort Hope and Thompson River, and not to exceed four or five days' journey removed from the mouth of the Fraser River.”⁷

The first gold rush ship, the *Commodore*, arrived in Victoria on April 25 carrying several hundred miners.⁸ Two others arrived the same month. Three more came in May and there was a steady stream of ships in the months following. The highest number of

people to depart San Francisco for Victoria was apparently 1,732 on July 3, according to Scholefield and Howay.⁹ In a letter dated July 1, Governor James Douglas estimated that “this country and Fraser’s River have gained an increase of 10,000 inhabitants within the last six weeks, and the tide of immigration continues to roll onward without any prospect of abatement.”¹⁰

Newcomer Alfred Penderill Waddington described his first impressions of Victoria in a book published in 1858, the year of his arrival. He wrote: “On landing in Victoria we found a quiet village of about 800 inhabitants. No noise, no bustle, no gamblers, no speculators or interested parties to preach up this or underrate that.”¹¹

But the community rapidly expanded. Waddington said the immigration was so sudden that people were forced to sleep on the street or in bushes because there were no hotels to take them. The sound of construction was constant. Waddington wrote:

*“Shops, stores, and wooden shanties of every description, and in every direction, were now seen going up, and nothing was to be heard but the stroke of the chisel or hammer. In six weeks 223 buildings, of which nearly 200 were stores, and of these 39 belonging to jobbers or importers, had been added to a village of 800 inhabitants; and people seemed to think the number insufficient, for others were on foot. Besides which the whole country around the town was covered with tents, resembling the encampments of an army.”*¹²

Although the miners went first to Victoria, many quickly moved on to the mainland. Governor Douglas arranged for steamships to transport goods and people across. In a May 19 letter, Douglas said the ships were to carry across only those who paid for a gold mining licence and permit from the government of Vancouver Island.¹³

Douglas himself visited mainland in June to assess the situation. He heard from miners who were making anywhere from \$2 to \$25 a day.¹⁴ He wrote later that month to British officials, telling them that “the stream of immigration is setting so powerfully towards Fraser’s River that is impossible to arrest its course, and that the population thus formed will occupy the land as squatters, if they cannot obtain a title by legal means.” He recommended the “whole country be immediately thrown open for settlement” and that the land be sold at no more than 20 shillings an acre.¹⁵

While there, he also appointed a revenue officer for the district of Fort Yale and a justice of the peace for the Hill’s Bar district. He also appointed “Indian magistrates, who [were] to bring forward, when required any man of their several tribes who may be charged with offences against the laws of the country...”¹⁶

Not long after returning to Victoria, Douglas was approached by a committee complaining about the miners’ situation on the mainland. They wrote: “It is notorious that the stock of provisions in the mining districts is utterly inadequate for the supply even of the present population, many individuals have been compelled to abandon their labours, and return to this and other ports, to obtain the common necessaries of life.”¹⁷ Douglas apparently told the committee that there was “really no actual distress for want of provisions among the mining population in all the accessible parts of the country, and that care would be taken to provide for all their wants.”¹⁸

Seasonal flooding of the Fraser River made mining difficult, prompting some to give up. On November 30, Douglas wrote of an “exodus” of about 100 people a week.

“The reasons assigned by those person for leaving the country are various, some having families to visit and business to settle in California, others dreading the supposed severity of the climate, others alleging the scarcity and high prices of provisions, none of them assigning as a reason for their departure the want of gold.”¹⁹

About 30,000 people went to the British Columbia mainland in 1858, according to Barman. Those numbers were not repeated the next year.²⁰ Victoria began 1858 with a population of about 300, sheltered about 6,000 people at the height of the rush, but “only retained at most 3,000 over the long term,”²¹ wrote Barman.



Prospectors in Barkerville, the gold rush town named in honour of Billy Barker, who arrived in the colonies in 1858. Photo taken in 1890s. Image B-06314 courtesy of British Columbia Archives.

NEW ARRIVALS

The miners arriving throughout the spring and summer of 1858 were a diverse group. Many came from California, abandoning one gold field for another. On July 1, Douglas wrote: “About two thirds of the emigrants from California are supposed to be English and French; the other third are Germans, and native citizens of the United States.”²² On August 19, Douglas described a crew of men helping to build a road on the mainland. “The men employed in that important enterprise are gold miners, composed of many nations, British subjects, Americans, French, Germans, Danes, Africans, and Chinese, who volunteered their services immediately on our wish to open a practicable route into the interior of the Fraser’s River District being made known to the public.”²³

Chinese migration to Canada began with the gold rush in British Columbia and Victoria’s Chinatown is the oldest in the country.²⁴ The first Chinese people arrived in the late spring of 1858.²⁵ In July, seven Chinese merchants purchased lots on Esquimalt

harbour, wrote David Chuenyan Lai in his history of Canadian Chinatowns. The same month, two Chinese men bought 13 lots on Victoria's Cormorant Street. "Loo Chuck Fan and his brother, Loo Chew Fan, set up the headquarters of their Kwong Lee and Company and built many wooden shacks to house their imported labourers on their properties, where the embryo Chinatown was thus conceived," wrote Lai.²⁶

Several dozen African American men from San Francisco were among the first arrivals on the *Commodore*. At the time, there was considerable unrest among African American people in California, particularly after the arrest of a young man accused of being a fugitive slave.²⁷ The African American community began holding meetings where the possibility of a mass migration was discussed. The British colony was suggested and, in mid-April, the captain of *Commodore* attended to answer questions.²⁸ It has been speculated that he carried with him a letter from Governor James Douglas.²⁹ A group left days later for Victoria and reported back that they were warmly welcomed by both Douglas and the Anglican minister.³⁰ Historian Robin Winks writes that "thereafter, in numbers that were not counted but which may have reached four hundred families, California's Negroes joined the larger throng of emigrants pouring north."³¹

Some of British Columbia's most famous early citizens came to the colonies this year. Future premier Amor de Cosmos landed in Victoria on May 11, according to George Woodcock's biography of the politician.³² Born in Nova Scotia, de Cosmos had been in California since 1853 where he worked as a photographer.³³ He did not go to the mainland to mine after arriving in Victoria; instead, by December, he had begun publishing the *British Colonist* newspaper.³⁴

Sir Matthew Baillie Begbie, the so-called "hanging judge," landed in Victoria in late 1858. Begbie was a young lawyer working in London when he was recommended for the job of judge for the new Colony of British Columbia.³⁵ He left England on September 11, 1858, and arrived in Victoria on November 15, participating days later in the ceremony creating the new colony.³⁶ Begbie was 39 when he began his post and served as a judge until his death, first in the mainland colony, then the united colony, then the new province.³⁷

Famed miner William (Billy) Barker also moved to the colony at some point during 1858. Barker was an English canal worker who left his wife and daughter to try his luck in the California gold fields, then moved on to the colonies in 1858.³⁸ He struck it rich a few years later and the town that sprang up near his claim was named Barkerville. Ironically, Barker died a poor man in 1894.

LAW AND POLICING

The year was also notable for its criminal activity. In September, the first duel ever fought in British Columbia, according to Howay and Scholefield, resulted from a "misunderstanding at the cricket ground on Beacon Hill."³⁹ One man was killed and the other apparently fled to the United States. In September, Douglas attended the trial of a man accused of murder on the mainland. Howay and Scholefield called this the first criminal trial in British Columbia.⁴⁰ Most dramatically, "Ned McGowan's War" broke out on the mainland on December 31⁴¹, when a man named McGowan arrested the Fort Yale magistrate on the orders of the neighbouring Hill's Bar magistrate.⁴² McGowan was a former judge from California who gained notoriety there in connection with a murder,

but was later cleared. In the new colony, McGowan eventually paid a fine for an assault related to the “war.”



Edward ("Ned") McGowan.

Portrait of Edward McGowan, whose actions on New Year's Eve, 1858, sparked a "war." Image B-04076 courtesy of British Columbia Archives.

Not surprisingly, 1858 also saw developments in policing and the administration of justice. In July, British Colonial Secretary Edward Bulwer-Lytton wrote to Douglas advising him that he was considering “sending out an experienced Inspector of Police to assist in the formation of a police force.”⁴³ Lytton selected Chartres Brew, a hero of the Crimean War, to fill the post. In October, Douglas wrote to Lytton to say that a police inspector would provide a “great service,” although he noted a force was already organized and that some special police had been sworn in.⁴⁴ Brew arrived in Victoria on November 8.⁴⁵ The roots of the B.C. Provincial Police (which joined with the RCMP in 1950) have traditionally been traced back to the constabulary overseen by Brew.⁴⁶

Prior to 1858, justices of the peace had been appointed, a Supreme Court of Civil Justice for the Colony of Vancouver Island was established and a judge – the brother-in-law of Governor Douglas – was installed.⁴⁷ In July 1858, the first legal advertisement in the colony was apparently published. Joshua Howard, an African American man from Virginia, offered “advice in Law, to the poor, gratis,”⁴⁸ according to Howay and Scholefield. However, George Pearkes is considered the first lawyer to practice on Vancouver Island and, in August, was appointed its first Notary Public.⁴⁹ In November, the rules of practice and procedure for of the Colony of Vancouver Island’s Supreme Court were published.⁵⁰ As noted earlier, Begbie also landed in November, set to take over his role as judge for the new Colony of British Columbia.

THE ROYAL ENGINEERS

New communities sprang up and there was a need for infrastructure. Some 500 miners were recruited to build a road into the Upper Fraser River area.⁵¹ On October 11, Douglas wrote that he had sent a surveyer to lay out towns sites on the Fraser River for Old Fort Langley, Fort Hope and Fort Yale.⁵²



Painting of Royal Engineers on the Cariboo Road by Rex Woods. Image PDP03696 Courtesy of the British Columbia Archives.

It was also around that time that the Columbia detachment of the Royal Engineers came to Victoria. The Royal Engineers provided combat engineering and technical support to the British military. In July, Lytton wrote to Douglas to inform him of the Columbia detachment's duties:

“It will devolve upon them to survey those parts of the country which may be considered most suitable for settlement, to mark out allotments of land for public purposes, to suggest a site for the seat of government, to point out where the roads should be made, and to render you such assistance... This force is sent for scientific and practical purposes, and not solely for military objects... As little display as possible should, therefore, be made of it.”⁵³

The first of the Columbia Detachment reportedly sailed into Victoria on October 29.⁵⁴ They soon traveled to the mainland and set up camp in the area that became New Westminster, the capital of the Colony of British Columbia. Their lasting legacy would include numerous roads, the surveying of town sites, and the construction of public buildings and churches. They were even indirectly responsible for the creation of Stanley Park in Vancouver, where the grounds were initially set aside by the engineers as a

military reserve.⁵⁵ The Royal Engineers also had a peacekeeping role, called upon to assist during the McGowan episode and other incidents.⁵⁶

It should be noted that a group of Royal Engineers had already visited the colony by the time the Columbia detachment arrived. A group of engineers was sent to Victoria, arriving in July, to assist the British Boundary Commission in laying out the border between the United States and the colonies.⁵⁷

RELIGION

The year 1858 saw the arrival of the first four Catholic sisters, the Sisters of Saint Ann, in Victoria. The women left Montreal on April 14 and sailed into Victoria on June 5.⁵⁸ They were expected to begin teaching classes two days later.⁵⁹ Upon their arrival, the sisters were taken to the log cabin where they would both live and teach.⁶⁰ One nun's description of the cabin was included in history published by the Sisters of Saint Ann:

*"Then... we were escorted by his Lordship, the clergy and the Catholics who had been at Benediction to a little dwelling on the outskirts of Beacon Hill, that was to be our convent home. Apologizing for its unkempt appearance, the Bishop opened the door of the log cabin and said, "May the Blessed Virgin, Saint Joseph and the Holy Angels be your protection." On leaving he suggested that the saintly guardians should watch over the broken windows and the unlocked doors."*⁶¹

A new Anglican diocese for Vancouver Island and the mainland was created after the church received a donation in late 1858.⁶² In October, Lytton wrote to Douglas to inform him of a "munificent endowment offered by Miss Burdett-Coutts for the foundation of a See in British Columbia."⁶³ The donor, Angela Burdett-Coutts, was at one time the richest heiress in England and a friend of Charles Dickens.⁶⁴ Rev. George Hills was selected as the first bishop, but did not arrive in Victoria until 1860.⁶⁵

The Anglican reverend in Victoria helped to start a hospital in Victoria that year after a sick person was left on a mattress in his garden. A cottage was loaned rent free at the corner of Yates and Broad Streets until "the necessity for larger quarters became urgent."⁶⁶ It was called the Royal Hospital – a predecessor of today's Royal Jubilee Hospital. A wooden hospital building was later constructed on a First Nations reserve to replace the cottage.⁶⁷

Also in 1858, the controversial Anglican missionary William Duncan established a school teaching Tsimshian children and adults outside Fort Simpson on the north coast of the mainland.⁶⁸ Duncan would later move with a group of his followers to Metlakatla near present-day Prince Rupert, where he attempted to create a model Christian community.

Jewish High Holy Day services were held in a private home in Victoria in the fall of 1858.⁶⁹ The first recorded Jewish arrivals in the colony were Frank Sylvester and Alexander Phillips, wrote amateur historian Cyril Edel Leonoff in 1983. Both arrived on July 17, 1858.⁷⁰ Sylvester first went to the gold fields and later established the Sylvester Feed Co.⁷¹ Phillips became the first baker of matzos in the city.⁷²

PUBLISHING

The year of the gold rush also saw a frenzy of publishing activity. The first newspapers included the *Victoria Gazette* newspaper, launched on June 25, and the *Vancouver Island Gazette*.⁷³ A French newspaper, *Le Courier de la Nouvelle Caledonie*, also appeared.⁷⁴ Perhaps most significantly, Amor de Cosmos, the future premier of British Columbia, put out the first issue of his *British Colonist* newspaper on December 11.⁷⁵ His paper was the forerunner of today's *Times-Colonist* newspaper.

The first books published on Vancouver Island were also printed in 1858. The rules of practice for the Colony of Vancouver Island's Supreme Court were printed that year, according to Douglas C. McMurtrie's history of printing in B.C.⁷⁶ Alfred Waddington's *Fraser Mines Vindicated* appeared in early December. "To the bibliographer [Waddington's book] is an item of the greatest interest for, official government publications excepted, it was the first book printed in what is now British Columbia," wrote librarian and archivist W. Kaye Lamb.⁷⁷

A NEW COLONY

The end of the year saw what was arguably the most significant change of all: the creation of a new colony on the mainland. The Americans were aggressive in their expansion south of New Caledonia and Britain recognized the need to solidify its hold on the area.⁷⁸ In England, a bill creating the new Colony of British Columbia received Royal Assent on August 2. However, the colony did not officially come into being until a November 19 ceremony on the mainland. Douglas resigned his post with the Hudson's Bay Company and took up the dual role of governing both colonies. As historian Jean Barman observed, "the transfer of authority from the Hudson's Bay Company ended a distinct period in British Columbia's history."⁷⁹ The coming years would see continued expansion on the mainland, the union of the two colonies, and the new province's admission to Canada.

APPENDIX: A TIMELINE OF EVENTS IN 1858

FEBRUARY

News spreads abroad this month that the Hudson's Bay Company has shipped 800 ounces of gold from the area known as New Caledonia to San Francisco.

MARCH

March 5 – A newspaper in Washington territory reports that “much excitement exists on Vancouver Island in consequence of the alleged discovery of rich gold deposits to the northward of the British possessions.”

APRIL

April 25 – The first gold rush ship, the *Commodore*, arrives in Victoria carrying several hundred prospectors. The travelers include several dozen African American passengers leaving San Francisco due to frustration over their treatment there. Two other ships arrive this month.

MAY

May 11 – Future B.C. premier Amor de Cosmos arrives in Victoria on this day, according to his biographer.

JUNE

June 5 – The first four Catholic sisters arrive in Victoria. They were expected to begin teaching classes two days later.

June 10 – Governor Douglas writes to British officials that immigration to Fraser River is so heavy that “the whole country should be immediately thrown open for settlement.”

June 25 – The *Victoria Gazette* newspaper publishes its first issue.

June 28 – The controversial Anglican missionary William Duncan establishes a school teaching Tsimshian children and adults outside Fort Simpson on the north coast of the mainland.

Also in June, Douglas visits the gold fields on the mainland, speaking with miners working along the Fraser River and appointing officials.

A newspaper report published in June refers to the arrival of Chinese people in the Colony of Vancouver Island. Victoria's Chinatown begins to form this year.

JULY

July 3 – The highest number of people (1,732) to depart in one day from San Francisco to Victoria leave on this day.

July 17 – The first recorded Jewish arrivals to the colony sail into Victoria on this day.

July 30 – Colonial Secretary Edward Bulwer Lytton writes to Governor Douglas that he will send Royal Engineers to assist with public works on the mainland. They are to lay out town sites, make surveys and help with road construction.

Also this month, a group of Royal Engineers sent to assist the British Boundary Commission with drawing the border between the colonies and the United States arrives in Victoria.

The first legal advertisement is published in July.

AUGUST

August 2 – *An Act to Provide for the Government of British Columbia* receives Royal Assent in England.

George Pearkes, the first lawyer to practice on Vancouver Island, is appointed notary public this month.

Miners help to build a road into the interior of the Fraser River district this month.

SEPTEMBER

The first duel in British Columbia is fought over “a misunderstanding at the cricket ground on Beacon Hill”, according to historians Howay and Scholefield.

OCTOBER

October 11 – Governor Douglas writes to Lytton that he has sent a surveyor to lay out town sites on the Fraser River for Old Fort Langley, Fort Hope and Fort Yale.

October 19 – Lytton pens a letter to Douglas informing him of a “munificent” donation to be used for the creation of a new Anglican diocese.

October 29 – The first of the Columbia detachment of the Royal Engineers, sent to assist with infrastructure projects in the new colony, arrives in Victoria.

NOVEMBER

November 8 – Chartres Brew, the new police inspector, arrives in Victoria.

November 15 – Matthew Baillie Begbie, the newly appointed judge for the Colony of British Columbia, arrives in Victoria.

November 19 – The Colony of British Columbia is officially born on this day at a ceremony in Fort Langley. Proclamations are read revoking the exclusive privilege of the Hudson’s Bay Company and declaring English law to be the law of the colony.

DECEMBER

December 11 – The *British Colonist* newspaper is launched by future premier Amor de Cosmos.

December 31 – “Ned McGowan’s war” breaks out on the mainland after McGowan, a miner with a notorious past, arrests the Fort Yale magistrate.

Also this month, Alfred Penderill Waddington publishes *The Fraser Mines Vindicated*, believed to be the first non-government book printed in the Colony of Vancouver Island.

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