

Colonial British Columbia Before the Gold Rush

The area that became the city of Victoria, British Columbia experienced dramatic changes between 1840 and 1860. This area is the traditional home of the Lekwungen people, who are members of the Coast Salish-speaking language group. Up until the 1830's they lived in villages made up of large lodges that held extended families. They hunted for deer and other animals, fished for salmon, and cultivated a root vegetable (like a potato).

Maritime fur traders from Britain, Spain and the Eastern United States purchased sea otter pelts from Nuuchahnulth people on the West Coast of Vancouver Island since the 1780s, and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and North West Company (NWC) had traded for furs on the mainland since the early 1800s. In the 1840's both British and American companies had rights to trade for furs in the Oregon Territory, the area of land that extended from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean and included most of what has become British Columbia, Washington, Oregon and Idaho.



Fort Vancouver, a HBC fort built at the mouth of the Columbia River in the Oregon Territory, was difficult to sail into and out of because of dangerous sandbars. As a result the HBC instructed James Douglas to find a better location. In 1843 he started building Fort Victoria where Victoria sits today.

The Lekwungen people sold wooden stakes to the British government

to build the walls of the fort. In 1843-44, the Lekwungen moved closer to the

new fort. When wood behind the Native village caught fire in 1844, HBC trader Roderick Finlayson used it as an excuse to force the Lekwungen to move across the harbour where they were able to control the trade of other Indigenous people with Fort Victoria.

The HBC relied on the Lekwungen (by this point they had become known as the Songhees) people for their labour. Men helped clear land to grow vegetables and grain, worked as dairymen and sheep shearers, in house construction, and they relayed messages to the mainland by canoe. Lekwungen people provided most of the food for the fort, including salmon, potatoes, clams and oysters.

Conflict between Britain and the United States over control of the Oregon Territory increased as more and more Americans moved west to settle in the area. Rather than go to war, Britain and the United States signed the Treaty of Washington in 1846, where they agreed to divide the Oregon Territory in half at the 49th parallel. Vancouver Island remained under British control despite the fact that its southern tip sits below the 49th parallel. Neither government were concerned about the rights of Indigenous people to govern these territories, despite the fact that they were the majority population in the area, and had lived there for thousands of years.

The HBC hoped to gain exclusive trading rights on Vancouver Island. In 1849, the British government created the Crown Colony of Vancouver Island to maintain control over the Pacific Northwest. The HBC was given the exclusive rights to trade with Indigenous people if they agreed to colonize the island with British settlers, and the British government retained the right to appoint the governor.

The first governor, Richard Blanshard, was not very successful since the HBC, headed by James Douglas, controlled the settlers, most of whom worked for the company. After Blanshard resigned and left in 1851, the Colonial Office appointed James Douglas as the new governor of Vancouver Island.

The British Colonial Office directed Douglas to sign treaties with local Indigenous people that would extinguish their title [remove any claim] to the land. Between 1850 and 1854, Douglas negotiated 14 treaties on Vancouver Island. In the treaties, Indigenous people agreed to give up all land except for their village sites and gardens in exchange for blankets, and the right to hunt and

fish in unoccupied areas. These treaties were arranged through interpreters, so neither party may have fully understood the other.

As part of their agreement with the British government, the HBC advertised for settlers in Britain and brought out several hundred colonists on sailing vessels in the 1850s. In a census taken in 1854, the total European population of Vancouver Island was 774 (including 562 in Victoria). Many of these settlers worked at farms owned by the Puget's Sound Agricultural Company. One of their farms, Craigflower, grew wheat, milled it, and baked it into long-lasting biscuits for the British navy, which had ships stationed at Esquimalt Harbour beginning in 1846.

Gold was discovered on the Queen Charlotte Islands in the early 1850s, but the Haida rejected attempts by outsiders to mine it. Around the same time, Nlaka'pamux people were mining for gold on the Thompson and Fraser rivers and selling it to the HBC. Miners moving north from the California gold rush of 1849 found out about the Fraser Canyon gold by 1857. In April 1858, a boat carrying four hundred miners arrived in Victoria, and the rush was on.

The British government worried that the influx of American miners into their territory would lead the American government to take control of it. To maintain its control, the British government created the Crown Colony of British Columbia in the fall of 1858. This time the HBC was not allowed to run the mainland colony. Britain appointed Douglas as governor of British Columbia in addition to his position as governor of Vancouver Island, but he was forced to resign from the HBC.

The Fraser River gold rush brought changes to the Colony of Vancouver Island. Because Douglas required miners to purchase a licence in Victoria, thousands of men travelled from the western United States to Victoria before heading to the gold fields on the mainland. Victoria experienced a building boom as shopkeepers hoping to profit from the miners set up stores. Shortly after the gold rush "boom" in the summer of 1858, miners who had not found enough gold or who could not afford to wait out the winter, left, and Victoria's booming economy declined sharply.