FORT VICTORIA

from Fur Trading Post to Capital City of

BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

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For further study we recommend the following literature:

Early History of the Province of British Columbia, by B. A. McKelvie.
The Founding of Fort Victoria, by W. Kaye Lamb.
Some Reminiscences of Old Victoria, by E. C. Fawcett.
The Makers of Canada, by Rev. George Bryce, D.D.
A Brief History of the Hudson’s Bay Company, published by the Hudson’s Bay Company.
The Story of the Canadian Fur Trade, by W. A. McKay in The Beaver, Magazine of the North, published by the Hudson’s Bay Company.
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Vancouver's Island

Vancouver Island was first brought to the attention of the British government in 1784 through the journals of Captain James Cook. On his voyage to explore the Pacific Coast the British navigator had landed at Nootka, on the west coast of Vancouver Island.

Captain Cook found the native Indians at Nootka eager to trade nails, buttons, and pieces of iron and tin for their sea-otter robes. Each of these robes was worth a year's wages to a British sailor.

Soon the Russians, British and Americans were competing for this profitable trade, ignoring Spain's traditional right in the Pacific Ocean. (Spain's claims were based on a papal bull of 1493 which divided the New World between Spain and Portugal.)

The struggle over the possession of Nootka Sound brought England and Spain to the brink of a war. In 1790 an agreement was reached, known as the Nootka Sound Convention, whereby England was granted equal sovereignty with Spain over the Pacific Coast lying north of San Francisco Bay.
To establish boundaries and to carry out the ceremony of taking British possession, Captain George Vancouver was sent to meet the Spanish delegate, Don Juan Francisco de la Bodiga y Quadra, at Nootka. In his search for Nootka, which was described to him as "The port of San Lorenzo, on the coast of California in the South Sea", Captain Vancouver discovered that Nootka was situated on an island.

In honour of their meeting the two delegates gave the name "Quadra and Vancouver's Island" to what is now called "Vancouver Island".

Captain Vancouver spent three years in the northern waters exploring and mapping the coastline, waiting in vain for further instructions from England regarding Nootka. In 1794 he left Nootka to Chief Maquinna and the Nootkan Indians and returned to England.
The development of the fur trade on the North American continent is historically portrayed as a progression from the Atlantic to the Pacific, beginning in the era of Cartier and Champlain and arriving about three centuries later on the Pacific Coast.

The Hudson's Bay Company, a British firm chartered in 1670, won a dominant position in the north west fur trade. Years of struggle with the North West Company ended in the union of the two companies in 1821, which left the Hudson's Bay Company as the sole representative of British claims in the north west. Her explorers reached the Pacific coast in the early 19th century.

Alexander Mackenzie, a Scotsman, knew 1793 when he tasted the water of the river in the Bella Coola Valley and found it brackish that he had won the honour of being the first explorer to cross the continent north of Mexico.

In 1808 Simon Fraser, in search for a water way leading to the sea west of the Rocky Mountains, descended the river that now bears his name to its tidal waters. But he found the river too turbulent to be used by the traders.

From 1808 to 1811 David Thompson was conducting the advance westward down the valley of the Columbia River, building posts in the present states of Washington, Idaho and Montana.

But the Americans were also acquiring rights in this region. In 1804 President Jefferson sent Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark across the continent to claim the land west of the Rocky Mountains. American ships under Captain Gray had discovered the mouth of the Columbia River, and Fort Astoria had been established there by Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company. When this company was bought out by the North West Company in 1817, both England and the United States claimed sovereignty to the land. An agreement was reached by which each nation recognized the other's right to trade. This continued until the Oregon Treaty in 1846.

After the merger of the North West Company into the Hudson's Bay Company, Fort Astoria, renamed Fort George, became the western headquarters of the Company.

In order to strengthen the British claims to the territory north of the Columbia River and to be near lands more suitable for farming, the Company decided in 1824 to move its western headquarters from Fort George (previously Fort Astoria) to a site some eighty miles upstream.
FORT VICTORIA
Est. 1843 by James Douglas
Main port of the Pacific Coast
Juan de Fuca 1892

Captain Vancouver
circumnavigated the Island and bearing
his name 1792

David Thompson
maps the Columbia
River 1811

COLUMBIA RIVER

ASTORIA
(FORT GEORGE 1812)

Lewis and Clark
overland to the
Oregon Country 1804

FORT VANCOUVER
1825 by George Simpson

NEW WESTMINSTER 1859

FORT LANGLEY
1827

Simon Fraser
explores the Fraser River
1808

FORT NISQUALLY

S.S. BEAVER 1856

Dr. John McLoughlin gives
aid to the travel worn
Landskickers of the Oregon
Trail 1840's

FORT VANCOUVER
1825 by George Simpson
Between 1824 and 1846 Fort Vancouver was commanded by Chief Factor Dr. John McLoughlin. He was known among the Indians as the "White Eagle", while in American history he is called "The Father of Oregon".

Under McLoughlin's energetic leadership the Hudson's Bay Company won a virtual monopoly of the fur trade in the Oregon country; and the firm's Columbia Department was extended until it stretched from the Rockies to the Pacific, from Russian Alaska to Mexican California, with outposts on San Francisco Bay and in Hawaii.

Fort Vancouver was the centre of this vast commercial empire. From its warehouses went out the supplies for the many interior posts and for the vessels and forts. Each year the fur returns from the entire western trade were gathered in Fort Vancouver for shipment to England.
The Oregon Treaty

But there were other ways of holding a country than by fur trade. Patriotic missionaries spread the praise of the Oregon country to land-hungry people in the east. A mass movement of American settlers to Oregon followed and soon a provisional government was formed.

It was evident to the Hudson's Bay Company officials that the valley of the Columbia was to be American and that the main depot of the Pacific coast would have to be moved to a territory which would ultimately remain British.

Already in 1830 George Simpson, the Governor of the Northern and Southern Department of the Hudson's Bay Company, had directed that the search for a suitable site for the new fort should be extended to Vancouver Island.

When James Douglas, whom McLoughlin had chosen to be his assistant, surveyed the southern end of Vancouver Island in 1838 he reported: "I am persuaded that no part of this sterile and rock-bound coast will be found better adapted for the site of the proposed depot or to combine in a higher degree the desired requisition of a screened harbour accessible for shipping at every season, of good pasture and to a certain extent of improvable tillage land!"

In 1843 Douglas received orders to build the fort on the suggested site.

This proved to have been none too soon. For only three years later in 1846 the Oregon Treaty between the United States and Great Britain established the 49th parallel as the southern boundary of the British territory, a compromise between the British desire for everything north of the Columbia River and the American goal expressed in the slogan "54-40 or Fight", i.e. the present southern boundary of Alaska or fight.

Fort Vancouver thus found itself in American territory and in the years following the influence of this post and of the Hudson's Bay Company declined rapidly south of the British boundary line.
It was a blustery day in March of 1843 when James Douglas stepped ashore off Victoria’s Clover Point from the steamer *Beaver* and plodded through the knee-high clover of what is now Beacon Hill Park. Through the brush and deep forest he went to the shores of Victoria’s inner harbour, where he gave orders for the building of the fort.

"We commenced building," writes Roderick Finlayson, "50 men and three officers, one of whom, a Mr. C. Ross, a trader, was appointed to the charge with myself as second in command, the *Beaver* and the *Cadboro* remaining as guard vessels until the fort was built.

"At this time there was dense forest along the water of the harbour —where the fort was built there was an open glade with oak trees of large size."
James Douglas describes his experience in his diary: "Wednesday, March 15th, 1843 — Went out this morning with the boat and examined the wood on the north shore of the harbour; it is not good, being generally short, crooked and almost unserviceable. On the south shore the wood is of a better quality, and I think I will have no difficulty in getting enough for our purpose. Small wood for picketing (for the stockade) is scarce, particularly cedar, which answers better than any other kind for the purpose, from its lightness and greater durability under ground. We will probably have to bring such as we require from a distance."

"Thursday, 16th March, 1843 — Put six men to dig a well, and six others to squaring timber. Spoke to the Songhees today and informed them of our intending of building in this place, which appeared to please them very much, and they immediately offered their services in procuring pickets for the establishment, an offer I gladly accepted, and promised to pay them a blanket for every 40 pickets of 22 feet by 36 inches which they bring. I also lent them three large axes."
Building the Fort

Since the fort was to be the main depot on the Pacific Coast its size was chosen accordingly.

A quadrangle 300 x 300 feet, surrounded by an 18-feet-high stockade eventually contained six buildings of 60 x 30 feet and two buildings of 60 x 40 feet with 18-feet posts and pavilion roofs, each disposed in the following manner: two in the rear facing the harbour and three on each side standing at right angle with the former leaving the front entirely open. The outhouses and workshops were in the rear of the main buildings.

In the fall of 1843 the stockade was completed and fortified by an octagonal bastion, equipped with nine-pounder blunderbusses and cutlasses which had been taken from dismantled forts.

In 1847 Fort Victoria was enlarged to the north to measure 300 by 465 feet and a second bastion was added.

On the east and the west sides of the stockade were two large gates, 10 feet wide and 12 feet high. In each was a smaller gate, called wicket, permitting only one person to pass through at one time.

Model of the enlarged fort.
The fort was constructed by a team of French-Canadians, who had worked for Douglas before in building other forts. They employed the so-called "poteaux - sur - sole" method, which originated in the French colonies of Canada and had been used for many Hudson's Bay Company establishments in the Northwest.

Logs of Western fir or red cedar were squared with the broad axe to serve as the principal timbers, sills, posts, plates, beams, wall-fittings and roof members. The different parts were then dressed with the adze to fit together closely and provide reasonably smooth surfaces.
which passed into grooves of the vertical posts. Large beams and widely-spaced rafters completed the framing.

* These logs have been taken from the Cloverdale Farmhouse, before it was demolished in 1963 to make room for apartments. Examining this building for its historic value, I found that the centre part was built with handhewn logs in the same manner as the buildings of Fort Victoria. Further study of this discovery revealed that actually one of the fort buildings when taken down (see page 34) had been reassembled on the Cloverdale farm to house the Tolmie family until their stone house in immediate connection to the log structure was completed. I disassembled the historic centre part of the Tolmie residence and preserved the logs for the reconstruction of Fort Victoria Museum at 340 Island Highway (Route 1A).
Cedar shakes, hand split from the balk of wood with the frow and mallet (maul), and finished with the drawknife were fastened to the roof batters.

The same technique has been used in the reconstruction of the bastion of Fort Victoria Museum. First the timbers were squared 12" x 12" with the broad axe. For the two lower stories 144 such timbers were required. They were then cut to 12 feet length in a 45° angle and notched at the ends. Eight such beams with their angles put together create the octangular shape, locking into each other so that they cannot be moved to any side. This explains the fact that the whole bastion could be built without the use of a single nail.
The reconstructed bastion of Fort Victoria at 340 Island Highway, Victoria, B.C., which is now a museum.
The floorbeams of the 3rd storey extend 4 feet beyond the lower floors and are supported at the ends by brackets. They carry the sill in which eight corner posts are nodged. Into the grooves of the corner posts 6" handhewn planks are slit, the last one fastened with a wooden peg. The corner posts also carry the plates on which 16 roof rafters rest, anchored down with crawfeet and oak pegs.

The roof rafters are nodged into the central post, which served during construction as a ridgepole for pulling up the building material.

Since there was no metal flashing available in those days, the cedar shingles were set into a cutback of the central pole. Between the roofing and the plate were openings which permitted cross ventilation, very important for fast removal of powder fumes.

The white paint around the holes of the shutters created the impression that there was a cannon in each hole, while in fact they had only 4 cannons in the bastion.
Life at Fort Victoria

During the construction of the fort the Indians had shown themselves quiet and peaceable.

But later on there were occasions when the stockade and the bastions proved very valuable.

In the memoires of Roderick Finlayson, the man in charge of the fort in 1844, we find the following remarks:

"The natives for sometime after our arrival kept aloof and would not come near. Afterwards some of them came round gradually and, finding them inclined to steal anything they could get, a watch was kept night and day, while we lived in tents before the houses could be built. The natives, however, soon got rid of their shyness and began to remove from the village on Cadboro Bay and erect homes for themselves along the bank of the harbour (as far as the present Johnson Street). Their houses consisted of white cedar boards placed on poles stuck in the ground, with cross beams, over which the boards were placed.

"Some of the men were employed clearing the land around to raise vegetables and cereals for the use of the place. In these operations we gradually got some of the young natives to assist, paying them in goods, and found them very useful as drivers in ploughing the land. Horses and cattle were imported from the station at Nisqually, on Puget Sound, to enable us to open a farm here."
"One day it was found that the natives had killed some of our oxen feeding in the open spaces. I then questioned the Songhees chief about this and demanded payment, as we would not allow our cattle to be killed this way with impunity.

"He went away in a rage, assembled some Cowichan Indians to his village and the next move I found on their part was a shower of bullets fired at the fort, with great noise and demonstration on the part of the crowd assembled, threatening death and devastation to all whites.

"I had then to gather our forces and man the bastion, and I did not allow any of our men outside the fort until I could settle the matter with the Indians. Noticing the chief’s lodge the largest among the others, I directed the interpreter, a halfbreed, to go outside to pretend he had deserted us, and tell them, as if from himself, that all the inmates had left in order to prevent bloodshed, and to make a sign to me, at the same time watching matters from the bastion, by twisting his handkerchief around, that all was vacant, which he did.
"I then fired a 9-pounder with grape in, and pointed the gun to the lodge, which flew in the air in splinters like a bombshell. After this was such a howling that I thought a number were killed, and was quite relieved when the interpreter came round and told me none was killed, but they were much frightened, not knowing we had such destructive arms. The chief, with some of his men, shortly after this came to the gate and asked to see me. I went and assumed a warlike attitude and mentioned that unless the cattle killed were paid for I would demolish all their huts and drive them from the place. The reply was that they would pay, and asked the price, which was named, and the next day payment in full of furs was made, when peace was restored and hand-shaking took place. I mentioned to them that we came here to trade peaceably with them, and did not want war unless we were forced, and so ended this disagreeable affair. I knew our guns would bring them to their senses, as they had no idea of their power. Had I permitted our men to fire on them the results would have been unfortunate."
"In the spring of 1845 a party of natives from Bellingham Bay came to trade with us, and traded a large quantity of furs, for which we gave them the goods they wanted in exchange. On leaving the fort in their canoes, they were waylaid about Clover Point by a party of Songhees and robbed of their goods, after which they came back to the fort and complained of their treatment, and asked to be allowed to pass the night within the fort, as they were afraid of their lives. This was a clear case in which I was bound to interfere, to protect friendly Indians coming to trade with us.

"I then sent the interpreter to get them to restore the goods they took from these friendly Indians, as otherwise I would have to take action on their behalf, as they came to trade with us.

"After considering the matter for some time, these robbers came to the fort and delivered up the goods; the Bellingham Bay Indians then left with their property, content, and to prevent further trouble, I sent a party of our men, armed, to Trial Island to see them safely homewards. Thus these wild savages were taught to respect British justice.

"In the spring of 1849 a vessel appeared in the harbour, the crew of which wore red flannel shirts, and when they landed we took them for pirates.

"I ordered our men to the guns, manned the bastions and made ready for defence. I then interviewed the men, from the gate, who told me they were peaceable traders, come from San Francisco with gold to trade for goods, as this was the only station on the northern coast where they could get the goods they wanted. Having satisfied myself that they were what they represented themselves to be, I let them in, and they then told me that gold had been discovered in California in large quantities the previous fall, and that they had gold nuggets which they would gladly exchange for goods. They produced several nuggets, the value of which I at first felt slightly doubtful, but brought one of the nuggets to the blacksmith shop and told him and his assistant to hammer it on the anvil, which they did, and flattened it out satisfactorily.

"I then referred to my book on minerals and found that the specimen appeared to be genuine.

"I then offered them $11 an ounce for their gold, which they accepted without murmur, and having thus mentioned my price and received no objections I felt a little doubtful, but concluded to accept it, and the trade went on. Then they took in exchange such goods as were not required for our own trade, such as old pots of iron, sea boots, blankets, baizes, etc., for which I got satisfactory prices.

"I thus traded a considerable sum in gold nuggets ..."
"There was a watchman attached to the fort, a Kanaka (Hawaiian) whose duties were to lock and unlock the gates, to ring the bell for rising, for meals and for divine service on Sundays. He paraded the fort during the night and at stated intervals would call out 'all's well'. Divine service was conducted in the Mess Hall and was attended by all attaches of the fort and the school."

Slowly and imperceptibly the English settlers and the visiting naval officers had made an impact on the life of the old fur traders who were attached to Fort Victoria and had changed the tone of their simpler society. There were outward signs of these inner adjustments, flower gardens with typical English flowers like Minyonette, Stocks and Hollyhocks inside the log pickets.

The fort was becoming a "Little England, as civilized as any respectable village in England, with the few, very few, upper ten leading." (From the memoires of Dr. Helmcken.)

"The first man I saw in the bastion prison was a half-Kanaka. He was fed three meals a day, and in the morning was turned out and told what to do—I think to improve Fort Street. No one looked after him and he returned regularly to his meals and prison room."
This view of the fort from James Bay shows the Hudson's Bay Company's paddle steamer Otter tied up outside the fort.

"In Bachelors' Hall in the evenings there was also singing going on, particularly on Saturday nights, much to the annoyance of the parson and his wife, but not so to the girl boarders in the Staines School. Bachelors' Hall was the rendezvous of all visitors, i.e. if they were socially acceptable, so sometimes there was a goodly number, including Captain Grant and the captains and mates of Her Majesty's ships when in harbour. Of course, sometimes they were a little boisterous, but never much, because the parson was on one side and Mr. Douglas only 50 feet away.
During the years following the founding of the new fort the character of the Hudson's Bay Company was gradually changing from fur trading and trapping to farming, salmon-curing and lumbering. Large scale agricultural operations were starting at Fort Victoria. There was a great demand for provisions to supply the ships of the Royal Navy which had arrived to protect the British subjects. Also a flourishing trade had been established with American whalers and with Russian ships and posts.

In 1849 the whole of Vancouver Island was leased to the Hudson's Bay Company by the Crown at an annual rental of seven shillings, "upon condition that the said Governor and Company should form on the said island a settlement or settlements."

At this time James Douglas, who had succeeded Dr. McLoughlin in the command of the Western Department of the Hudson's Bay Company, returned to Fort Victoria.

He lived with his family within the fort enclosure until his own residence was built in 1851 on a property adjacent to what later became the site of the Parliament Buildings.
Upon request from London, Douglas made 10,000 acres of farm-
land available for sale and advertised throughout England for settlers
and labourers. The response was negligible on account of the high
price and stiff conditions attached. The Puget Sound Agricultural Com-
pany, a subsidiary of the Hudson’s Bay Company, established and
operated several farms, of which the Craigflower farm, with 900 acres,
was the largest and most successful.

Farmland was also sold to Hudson’s Bay Company employees; for
instance Dr. Helmcken (see page 27) acquired 640 acres in 1854.
(The area is now called View Royal.)

Douglas also organized and supported mining operations in the
northern part of Vancouver Island.

When large coal deposits were found at Nanaimo and the min-
ing activities increased, Douglas ordered a bastion to be built there as
a fortification for the miners.

This bastion is still standing, although re-
moved from its original location, and represents
a point of interest for the tourist.

The increasing activities on the island and the growing importance
of Fort Victoria as headquarters of the Western Department impelled
the British government to proclaim Vancouver Island as a Crown
Colony.

In 1850 the first governor, Richard Blanchard, arrived to take charge. But it soon became evident that Blanchard could not handle affairs to
the best advantage of the new colony, therefore he returned to England
and James Douglas became governor of Vancouver Island.
Men Connected with Fort Victoria

Sir James Douglas was born in British Guiana on August 15, 1803, and was educated in England.

After several years of service with the Hudson's Bay Company, Douglas became acquainted with Dr. McLoughlin, who recognized his great abilities and kept him at his side. Meeting the great challenges offered to him in the following years with ingenuity and success, Douglas succeeded McLoughlin as "a giant of the fur trade." His outstanding ability to organize people and affairs as well as his unwavering loyalty to the company and to his country were the basis for the successful advancement of the post.

In becoming governor of Vancouver Island in 1850 Douglas combined the powers he held as head of the Western Department with those of a representative of British Government. Under his autocratic leadership the colony developed steadily.

When British Columbia was proclaimed a Crown Colony in 1858 Douglas was appointed governor of this colony as well, on condition that he resign as Head of the Western Department of the Hudson's Bay Company. He accepted this position, giving all his abilities to the development of the two colonies.

When Douglas retired in 1864 he was knighted by Queen Victoria.
On March 17, 1850, the first emigrant ship, the Norman Morrison, arrived at Fort Victoria. Among the 80 passengers was Dr. John Sebastian Helmcken, the physician of the vessel.

Born in London, England, in 1824, Dr. Helmcken had left the old country to become clerk and surgeon for the Hudson's Bay Company. It was said of him that he was "the leading physician from San Francisco to the North Pole and from Asia to the Red River."

Dr. Helmcken's political career kept pace with his medical practice. Representing Esquimalt in the Legislative Assembly, which first met in Bachelors' Hall in the Fort in 1856, he was chosen Speaker, an office he held for many years. Also he was one of the B.C. delegates who negotiated the colony's entry into Confederation.

Helmcken House, on Elliot Street, which was built for the doctor and his bride in 1852, has been preserved as a museum and houses the doctor's first instruments and his medical chest that he brought with him from England in 1850. When he died at the age of 96 he was buried at Pioneer Square in Victoria.
Dr. William Fraser Tolmie, a graduate from Glasgow University, had joined the Hudson’s Bay Company as a surgeon and had been in charge of Fort Nisqually before coming to Fort Victoria in 1859.

Here he turned his attention to farming, introducing thoroughbred livestock to the island. Durham cattle, Berkshire pigs and Leicester sheep were bred on his "Cloverdale Farm," which spread over 1,250 acres.

He built the first stone house on the island, but the kitchen he constructed with handhewn posts and beams from a removed fort building (see page 14).

Dr. Tolmie was a man of many talents—a keen observer, an expert botanist, a student of literature and religion, a handy man with the gun, and a strong swimmer.

He was the first white man to make an approach to Mount Rainier, leading a small band of Indians as far as they would go without incurring the wrath of the "Snow Gods".

Dr. Tolmie also gained recognition for his anthropological and language studies of coast Salish and Kwakiutl Indians of Washington and British Columbia.

He organized the first lending library and introduced some of the first educational laws in the West.

Dr. Tolmie held many positions of trust and responsibility and was everywhere recognized as a valued and respected citizen.
Kenneth Mackenzie was hired by the Puget Sound Agricultural Company to operate the Craigflower Farm as the bailiff (man in charge). When he arrived with his family at Fort Victoria in 1853 he brought carpenters, blacksmiths and labourers, twenty-five families in all, to work on the Craigflower Farm. Under his energetic and able management this 900-acre farm became quite important to Fort Victoria. Already one year after his arrival the farm housed 70 families and Mackenzie was appointed Justice of the Peace for the Peninsula.

The Craigflower Manor House, built by Kenneth Mackenzie in 1853, is preserved as a museum. It was a mansion in those days and rivalled even the Governor's residence for size and comfort. The front door, studded with hand-forged iron nails, and the heavy window shutters are reminders that the Manor was built to be a fortress as well as a home.

At the end of 1854 a schoolhouse was built for the many children of Craigflower neighborhood. Today this is the oldest school building standing in Western Canada and is used as a museum of Craigflower relics.
Sir Matthew Baillie Begbie was the first Chief Justice of British Columbia. He had very definite ideas about treating his prisoners: "My idea is that if a man insists upon behaving like a brute, after fair warning and won't quit the Colony, treat him like a brute and flog him."

Begbie travelled through the mining district, holding court, settling disputes and dispensing justice with a stern but impartial hand. He deserved the knighthood with which he was honoured.

James Douglas wrote about him to the Colonial office in London: "Able, active, energetic and highly talented, Mr. Begbie is a most valuable public servant. I feel greatly indebted to him for the zealous discharge of his official duties and for many services beyond the strict line of official duty. It would be impossible, I think, to find a person better qualified for the position he fills."

Sir M. B. Begbie lived permanently in Victoria after his retirement until his death in 1894. He lies buried in historic Ross Bay Cemetery.

Amor de Cosmos arrived at Fort Victoria in the summer of 1858 with the hordes of miners from California. On December 11 of that same year he founded The British Colonist, the newspaper which is still in existence today.

In 1876 he wrote about himself: "Mr. de Cosmos was the first British Columbian to advocate the introduction of responsible government into the colony; he was the first person to recommend a union of the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia—and he was the first to advocate the Confederation of British Columbia with the Dominion."
The Gold Rush and Its Effects

In summer of 1858 when gold was discovered on the banks of "Fraser's River" Victoria became a boom town. Thousands of American gold seekers came with any kind of vessel up the coast from California, to get supplies and equipment at Fort Victoria.
Supplies at the Hudson's Bay Company trading post were sold to the miners as fast as they could be brought out. Other merchants' stores were opened outside the stockades, where exorbitant prices were charged. The price of lots in Victoria rose from $5 to $500 and more overnight. Wharves were built on Esquimalt Harbour with warehouses to store the incoming tide of goods.

It is said that at one time more than 30,000 people were living in tents and shanties around Fort Victoria.

James Douglas handled the tremendous influx of people very efficiently by providing rules and regulations for behaviour and protection.

He addressed the miners gathered in Fort Victoria in July, 1858:

"My friends—

"You wish me to speak to you about the Fraser's River, and get my advice about going there, and my opinion of the country . . .

"Now I will tell you all plainly that I will not take the responsibility of giving advice on the subject. You have all heard what has been said of Fraser's River, and I know nothing more about the gold there than has already been told you by others.

"But this I will tell you as my own opinion—that I think the country is full of gold, and that east and north and south of the Fraser's River there is a gold field of incalculable value and extent.

"I would advise you not to go beyond Fort Yale in your canoes, as the river is dangerous above that point; neither would I advise you to take the Fort Hope road, as you cannot carry enough provisions to last over the journey.

"The route by Harrison's River is, I think, the best, and we are now preparing to get a road opened that way; in fact, I expect to see teams and wagons on the 20-mile portage that divides that river from Anderson's Lake before many months are over. That is a safe and accessible route at all seasons to upper Fraser's River.

"One more word about the views of the government. The miner who acts in submission to the laws, and pays the Queen's dues like an honest man shall be protected in person and property, and as soon as good and trusty men are found, measures will be taken for the conveyance and escort of gold from the mines to this place. Every miner will give his own sack, and his own weight, and have it addressed and sealed in his own presence, and get a receipt for the sack to contain so much gold dust. It will be deposited in the Public Treasury in Victoria, and delivered to the owner on production of the deposit receipt. There will be a charge made for the expense of conveyance, but that will be a small matter compared to the security of your property."
As a direct result of the mining activities on the mainland the British Government passed an act providing for the government of British Columbia. The formal proclamation of the new Crown Colony took place on November 19, 1858, at Fort Langley.

Fort Langley had been established by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1827 on the Fraser River, 30 miles from the present city of New Westminster, a location wisely chosen as it marked the farthest point to which a seagoing vessel could then navigate up the Fraser. From Fort Langley as a base the Company had established a dominating trade with the interior as well as practical and productive agricultural and industrial activities.

To proclaim the new colony, James Douglas, the governor of Vancouver Island, and Mathew B. Begbie, the jurist, travelled to Fort Langley on the Beaver.
In 1860 the Hudson’s Bay Company decided to remove the stockade. Gradually the fort buildings were taken down and the fort property was sold by public auction.

The newspaper reports in midsummer, 1861: "Removal of the Hudson’s Bay Company Flagstaff — this old landmark is in process of removal. There is considerable grumbling on the part of the Company’s oldest attaches, who declare that by its removal they will not only be deprived of telling which way the wind blows, but they have not a stick left from which to hang a bit of bunting on gala days."

In the fall of the same year the fur storehouse, erected in 1846 in the northeast corner of the fort, was converted into a theatre.

For 21 years the Theatre Royal with a seating capacity of 500 continued to be "the only theatre worthy of the name in the province." According to the Victoria Colonist in August, 1882, this last fort building had to make room for progress.
"Alas, poor old bastion! Thy removal should be enough to break the heart of every Hudson's Bay man in the country. Such an ornament to the city and yet doomed to destruction."—Victoria Colonist, 1861.
Victoria Incorporates . . . .

By 1862 it had become apparent that civic administration was needed in Victoria. Goats were wandering the streets. There was constant danger from fire.

The people were tired of buying their drinking water from carts hauled through streets which were full of potholes.

Douglas Street, between Yates and Pandora, today's centre of town, was a sea of mud—there were no street lights—the wooden sidewalks were death traps—wise folks stayed home after dark.
... and Becomes Capital of B.C.

An act to incorporate the city of Victoria passed the Council on July 22nd, 1862, and received the assent of Governor James Douglas on August 2, 1862:

"Whereas, it is expedient that the District commonly known as Victoria Town should be incorporated.

"Be it enacted by the Governor, on Her Majesty's behalf, by and with the consent of the Legislative Council and Assembly of Vancouver Island and its Dependencies."

By this act Victoria became "'The Queen City of the Pacific possessions of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria.'"—The Victoria Colonist, August 18, 1862.

When in 1866 the Crown Colony of Vancouver Island merged with the Colony of British Columbia, New Westminster was chosen as the Capital. But two years later this decision was revoked and Victoria became the Capital of British Columbia.

Queen Victoria, her Prince Consort Albert and their family.
VICTORIA — 1862

(In the directory published by Howard and Barnett.)

At no time since the excitement attending its first settlement in 1858 has Victoria made greater strides, or her prosperity so materially increased, as during the past year.

Her true position as the centre and headquarters of commerce north of the Columbia has been placed beyond doubt. The influx of capital and immigrants from Europe, and the rich and extensive discoveries of goldfields on the mainland, are the principal causes to which the present prosperity of the town may be attributed.

Since the commencement of the past year her population has at least doubled itself, and the increase of buildings and improvements has been almost in proportion. During the winter season the town is thronged with strangers from British Columbia and elsewhere, who migrate in the spring. Apart from these the number of inhabitants may be set down at 6,000.

Victoria contains about 1,500 buildings—some of them very creditable to the size of the town. Among the public ones are the government offices and the jail. There are several commodious brick hotels, the principal being the St. Nicholas, the St. George and the Royal. Substantial warehouses and stores are also becoming very numerous.

The city is adorned with five churches, two belonging to the Church of England, one Roman Catholic, one Wesleyan and one Congregational. A Jewish synagogue and a Presbyterian church are in course of construction. There is also a theatre and a hospital, the latter being chiefly supported by voluntary contributions. The sittings of the Legislature and the Law Courts of Vancouver Island are all held in the city. There are two joint stock banks and three private banking houses.

The value of real estate in the town of Victoria has increased, in many places over 75 per cent during the past nine months. Frontage on the best business streets commands a rental of from two to six dollars per month.

The city is a Free Port, and therefore not troubled with customs, duties or bonded warehouses. Vessels drawing 14 or 15 feet of water may, under ordinary circumstances, cross the bar of the harbour at high tide, and ships drawing 17 feet have entered, though only at the top of spring tides.

A somewhat surprising impetus has been given to the development of agriculture in the colony by the number of newly-arrived immigrants, who have settled in the most fertile districts in the neighbourhood of Victoria. With land at the low figure of four shillings, two pence per acre, and time allowed for payments, together with the improved state of communication between Victoria and the back settlements, we may reasonably hope that the inhabitants of the town will not in the future be so dependent on neighbouring countries for their supplies of produce.
The location of the original Fort.
1843 ... the stockade was completed and fortified by an octagonal bastion, equipped with nine-pounder blunderbusses and cutlasses. (Building the Fort, see page 12.)

1844 ... "I then fired a nine-pounder with grape in, and pointed the gun. (Memoires of Roderick Finlayson, see page 20.)

1845 ... "I ordered our men to the guns, manned the bastions and made ready for defence. (Memoires of Roderick Finlayson, see page 21.)