

From Fur Trade to Gold Rush

For decades First Nations people had incorporated the fur-trade economy into their societies, but soon a new economic force--the gold rush--was to bring about a greater transformation in their lives.

In the 1840s, westward expansion of the United States forced the Hudson's Bay Company to move its Pacific headquarters at Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River because this was now American territory. To replace Fort Vancouver, Fort Victoria was established in 1843 at the southern tip of Vancouver Island. The site was chosen because of its large harbour and the rich agricultural land nearby.

Meanwhile, hoping to forestall the advancing Americans, the British parliament decided to create an official colony to establish its sovereignty on the coast. In 1849, Fort Victoria became the capital of a new colony of Vancouver Island. The colonial office in London leased the colony to the Hudson's Bay Company for ten years, with the understanding that the HBC would administer the colony in addition to its fur-trading activities. The first British governor was Blanshard, but he was soon replaced by long-time HBC employee James Douglas, who continued to work for the HBC as well as acting as governor. It was Douglas who established the first government policies that had such an enormous impact on First Nations people.

The colony of Vancouver Island was established without negotiation with, or even consideration of, First Nations governments. The presence of First Nations people was simply irrelevant to the Europeans intent on carving up North America.

Furs continued to be the prime economic resource of the colony, but some First Nations people recognized that the Europeans were also keen to trade in minerals, particularly coal and gold. The Kwakwâkâ'wakw and the Snuneymuxw had both traded small amounts of coal to the HBC, and pointed out the sources of these minerals within their territories. Rather than trading with these First Nations, however, the HBC started a mining division and built mining camps at two new posts, Fort Rupert and Nanaimo. These were small-scale developments compared to events that occurred when gold was discovered on the Fraser River.

Through the 1850s, First Nations people along the Fraser River had traded small amounts of gold with the Hudson's Bay Company. The company encouraged First Nations to search for other sources by paying for their prospecting equipment. Douglas tried to keep the discovery of gold secret because he was familiar with the destructive lawlessness that occurred when gold fever infected California in 1849. The news leaked out in spite of his efforts and in 1858 thousands of miners, mostly American, flooded into Victoria, crossed the Strait of Georgia, and headed up the Fraser River.

The book *You Are Asked to Witness*, published by the Stô:lô Nation, describes how First Nations people perceived the gold miners: "In the Halq'emêylem language the word for people of European descent is Xwelîtem. Stô:lô Elders explain that Xwelîtem

translates as 'hungry people' or 'starving people'. No one remembers exactly when the Stô:lô adopted this term to describe the immigrants who came to their land, but Elder Dan Milo was of the opinion that it dates back at least as far as the 1858 gold rush when thousands of poorly provisioned miners arrived in Stô:lô territory."

In the decades that followed, the gold rush moved from places near the coast like Hope and Yale up into the Cariboo to Barkerville. As the gold was exhausted in one area, the miners moved on. Thousands of men and women journeyed along the gold rush trails, trying to make their fortunes. In their hunger for gold, they frequently ignored traditional First Nations use of the rivers and valleys they passed through. They disturbed the environment with their mining activities and with the communities they built to meet their needs, in most cases showing no respect for the First Nations.

First Nations people became miners too, sometimes working alongside miners from other countries. At one spot on the Fraser called Hill's Bar, for example, five hundred First Nations people and seventy foreigners mined the river banks for gold. However, most foreign miners opposed the participation of Aboriginal people, because they viewed them as competitors for the gold.

Douglas and the colonial office were determined that the lawlessness which characterized the American frontier would not be copied in British territories, so in 1858 the British government decreed the formation of an additional colony on the mainland. It was named British Columbia, and its headquarters were established at New Westminster.

During the gold rush era, both colonies were opened up to newcomers as never before. The influx of miners caused the creation of transportation routes that enabled them to participate in the gold rush. Prospectors spread out from the Fraser River and Cariboo gold fields, exploring nearly every part of the province. Smaller scale gold rushes occurred, including on the Stikine, the Omineca, and the Peace Rivers, as well as at Kamloops and on the Leech River near Victoria. Once a viable mining region had been established, roads had to be built for easy access. The age-old transportation routes of the First Nations and the fur traders were no longer sufficient, especially on the Fraser River route where the Caribou Wagon Road crossed the interior plateaus to Barkerville. Other people dreamed up alternative schemes to reach the gold fields; for example, Alfred Waddington led forays from the coast at Bute Inlet into the Chilcotin region, resulting in what is sometimes called the Chilcotin War.

The British felt that it was imperative for British justice to prevail in these colonies. The chief agent of the justice system in the colonial era and after, was Chief Justice Matthew Baillie Begbie who, through his judgements on a number of early cases, played an important role in administering colonial policies involving First Nations people.

James Douglas continued to administer both colonies until 1864. By that time, running two colonies was becoming too expensive, so they were joined, in 1866, under the name British Columbia, with the capital at Victoria.