

Esquimalt Lagoon: An Historical Journey

Esquimalt Lagoon and surrounding lands have been important to Coast Salish people for thousands of years. Since European contact, the area has been used for farming, logging, milling, fishing, and military activities, as well as recreation. Today Esquimalt Lagoon and Coburg Peninsula are protected as a park and Migratory Bird Sanctuary, enjoyed by thousands of residents and visitors who come to bird watch, enjoy the beautiful beach, have a picnic and experience nature in a spectacular setting.



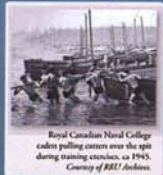
Construction crew in 1900 built Hayker Castle using materials brought by water from Esquimalt Harbour. Courtesy of BRF Archives.
 1860-1900: Spring Vale sawmill established on Colwood (Carterwood) Creek, later became Belmont Tannery.
 1900-1940: Coal heaver and pulpstone later. Dominion purchased 2300ha on the lagoon, built Hayker Castle and developed the Hayker Park formal gardens. The grounds were maintained by more than 100 Chinese workers who lived in a camp onsite.
 1940-1995: Canadian government bought Hayker Park estate and established a military training facility later known as Royal Roads Military College. About 6,000 cadets graduated from the college during this period.
 1995-present: Royal Roads University established on lands leased from the Department of National Defence.



First bridge over the lagoon built in 1900 by the Royal Garrison Artillery. In 1930 a more substantial road bridge was built connecting the spit to Belmont Road. The present Ocean Roadwood connection was built in the 1970s. Courtesy of Parks Canada/Fort Rodd Hill.



The sailing ship SS Gesseling beached at Esquimalt Lagoon in 1883. Image F-00555 courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives.



Royal Canadian Naval College cadets pulling canoes over the spit during training exercises, ca 1945. Courtesy of BRF Archives.

By the mid-1800s the anchorage off Esquimalt Lagoon was used by the Royal Navy and referred to as Royal Roads. Coburg Peninsula was used for many decades by the military as a firing range. Several small summer cabins were in use along Coburg Peninsula by the 1920s. The Wilson family lived in one during World War II, and recall the air force practicing bombing skills by dropping bags of flour on the lagoon bridge. Local farmer Fred Benson built the Dupont Park and Golf course in the 1930s. When the original burned down, he built a new one, taken over by the Defence Department during WWII.



Dupont Park and cabins on Coburg Peninsula, 1935. Image A-2995 courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives.

A naval base was established in Esquimalt Harbour in 1854. In the 1970s Fort Rodd was built nearby to protect the naval base. Figard Island became the site of the first lighthouse on Canada's west coast in 1860. Frank Green was appointed lighthouse keeper at Figard Lighthouse in 1909. Green had one of several farms that were established on the south end of Esquimalt Lagoon. He owned one each night to tend the light.



Detailed topographic map of the area produced by Royal Engineers in 1887. The Belmont Tannery, rifle range, and other early features can be seen around the lagoon. Coburg Peninsula, and Gocha Pt. were named for Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. Courtesy of Parks Canada/Fort Rodd Hill.



In 1934 Emily Carr took her easel, 'the Elephant' on sketching trips to Esquimalt Lagoon. While camping here she painted 'Above the Great Fir and Lagoon at Albert Head.' Image B-09610 courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives.

Archaeological excavations in this area revealed semi-subterranean houses, hearth features and many artifacts dating back thousands of years.

You can help protect Esquimalt Lagoon by:

- Staying on the designated paths and off the sensitive dune vegetation
- Keeping your pet on a leash and picking up droppings
- Taking only photographs, leaving only footprints

Pre-European Contact

As glaciers retreated approximately 13,000 years ago a large stretch of wetlands or estuary in depression which later formed Esquimalt Lagoon. Glacial sediments deposited around the block formed the barrier spit now known as Coburg Peninsula.

Oral history and archaeological evidence show a long and rich history of resource use and habitation by the ancestors of the Esquimalt and Songhai First Nations.

During construction of the pump station on the peninsula, archaeologists found a 5,000-year-old shell, 1,000-year-old baskets and bone, wood and stone artifacts, including this miniature whalebone club.



Miniature of whalebone club.

1700s

1747: Capt. Charles Barkley on the Imperial Eagle received a visit by named Juan de Fuca.

1790s: Manuel Quimper and his crew on the Princess Real were likely the first Europeans to see Esquimalt Lagoon.

1792: Spanish explorers Galindo and Valdes sailed into Esquimalt Harbour en route to the Salish Sea. In the same year, British Captain George Vancouver arrived and together they circumnavigated Vancouver Island, exploring and charting much of the region.



1800s

1846: European settlement starts, land is cleared and farms established.

1843: First Victoria established by Hudson's Bay Company.

1846: First survey of Esquimalt Harbour and adjacent channel Esquimalt Lagoon or 'Salt Lake' and the peninsula as 'Coburg Island'.

1850: Douglas Tisdale signed with First Nations family groups in the region.

1854: Naval base established at Esquimalt Harbour; Coburg Peninsula reserved later as a firing range.

1856: Colony of British Columbia formed, domestic increase in population following gold rush in BC's interior.

1860: Figard Lighthouse built.

1863: Sawmill opened by John Gilmore at Colwood Creek.

1871: Belmont Tannery replaced sawmill, BC joins Dominion of Canada.

1896: Fort Rodd built.

1900s

1900: First bridge built to lagoon.

1909: Hayker Castle completed at Hayker Park.

1920s: General mining operations ceased at Royal Bay.

1930s: First road bridge built.

1931: Esquimalt Lagoon Migratory Bird Sanctuary established.

1938: Emily Carr camped and painted at Esquimalt Lagoon.

1940: Department of National Defence purchased Hayker Park and established a military gage.

1939-1945: During World War II, military dumping range established to test build up of magnetic field on ships built.

1950s: Belmont Park military housing built.

1958: Fort Rodd Hill designated National Historic Site.

1962: Fort Rodd Hill National Historic Site opened to public.

1963: City of Colwood incorporated.

1995: Royal Roads University established. Hayker Park recognized as National Historic Site.

2000s

2001: Esquimalt Lagoon Neighbourhood Initiative formed.

2004: Sewer pump station and public washrooms built.

2006: Coburg Peninsula Invasive Management Guidelines adopted by Colwood City Council.

2007: Colwood purchased northern half of Coburg Peninsula from Canadian government for park.

2007: General mining operations discontinued at Royal Bay.

2008: Hayker Castle named IHA.

2009: Available Air Space created over public washrooms.

2010: Canadian Air Space created over public washrooms.

2011: Park Canada Commission established.



esquimalt lagoon stewardship initiative

www.elsi.ca

Esquimalt Lagoon background photo by Kevin Oke. www.kevinoke.com



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