

### **1. First Nations**

First Nations people of the Coast Salish linguistic group had used the area now known as Esquimalt for approximately 4000 years before the advent of European settlement. Approximately 11 loosely affiliated groups occupied the lands between Sooke and the Saanich Peninsula. The Victoria Treaties, signed in between 1850 and 1854 between the Hudson's Bay Company and local native leaders, indicate that at that time the Esquimalt Peninsula was the territory of the Kosampsom group. There has long been a village site near Ashe Head on the eastern shore of Esquimalt Harbour and this is where the Esquimalt Band makes its home today. Another group, the Songhees, has a reserve nearby, established in 1911. Prior to 1911, the Songhees had lived on the west shore of Victoria Harbour.

### **2. First European Visitors**

The first European to enter Esquimalt Harbour was the Spanish explorer Don Manuel Quimper, who arrived in 1790 and gave it the name "Puerto de Cordova." Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) Chief Factor James Douglas (later Governor of the Crown Colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia) visited Esquimalt Harbour in 1843 on a mission to seek a new site for the HBC's operations north of the 49th parallel. Although Douglas established the new fort on the shore of Victoria Harbour, he evidently saw the agricultural potential of the land that is now Esquimalt. After signing a series of treaties with local First Nations to acquire the area for the HBC, Douglas established three farms here to supply Fort Victoria and other HBC forts in the northwest with agricultural products.

### **3. The Puget's Sound Agricultural Company**

The three large farms (Viewfield, Craigflower, and Constance Cove) were controlled by a subsidiary of the Hudson's Bay Company called the Puget's Sound Agricultural Company. Each farm operated independently under the direction of a bailiff who was responsible for land clearing, provision of labourers, and daily operation of the farm. Viewfield was the first farm, established in 1850 in the southeast part of Esquimalt. Its bailiff was Donald Macaulay, who had been with the Hudson's Bay Company for many years. Constance Cove and Craigflower Farms were both established in 1853, under the direction of Thomas Skinner and Kenneth Mackenzie, respectively. The Puget's Sound Co. farms were active for only a few years before events such as the gold rush rendered them obsolete. The land was held by the Company for many years afterward and was sold off in small sections until the 1930s when the municipality acquired the remainder in lieu of unpaid taxes.

### **4. The Royal Navy**

Esquimalt possesses one of the finest natural harbours on the west coast of the Americas, and this fact was not lost upon the representatives of the Royal Navy who visited the area in the 1840s and 1850s. The first hydrographic survey of Esquimalt Harbour was made in 1846 by the Pandora under the command of Lieutenant Commander James Wood of the Royal Navy. The Navy made use of Esquimalt Harbour from time to time, and even constructed three hospital buildings on Duntze Head in 1855 in preparation for treating men injured in the Crimean War, but it was not until 1865 that Esquimalt replaced Valparaiso, Chile as the headquarters of the Royal Navy's Pacific Squadron. In 1887, the naval dockyard was completed, giving the Royal Navy a state-of-the-art ship repair and refitting site on Canadian soil.

### **5. The Old Village**

After 1855, when the Royal Navy began to use the lands along the south side of Esquimalt Harbour, a small settlement began to grow up just to the east, in the shadow of Signal Hill. Its wharf and few small shops were there to supply Navy personnel with basic necessities, and its residents built their homes along Wharf Street, which ran south from the harbour. There are few descriptions of the village in those early days. Between 1856 and 1858, Crown lands from the original Esquimalt town site to the western boundaries of the Puget's Sound farms were surveyed and sold off. The buyers included many of British Columbia's most prominent early citizens such as Roderick Finlayson and Dr. Helmcken.

### **6. The Gold Rush**

The discovery of gold along the Fraser River in 1858 woke Esquimalt from its sleepy beginnings. Almost overnight, a flood of prospectors descended on Esquimalt en route to the small town of Victoria that had grown up around the original HBC fort at James Bay. Some vessels made their way into Victoria Harbour, but larger ships had to anchor in Esquimalt Harbour. Thus many miners disembarked at the little wharf in Esquimalt Village and made their way on foot or by horse and wagon along the trail (a rough road cut through the forest by sailors from H.M.S. Thetis in 1850) to Victoria. There they bought food and supplies for the journey up the Fraser River to the gold fields. The gold rush of 1858 and the subsequent Cariboo gold rush of 1860-1863 spurred a building boom in both Victoria and Esquimalt. In the ensuing years, development continued in the village and along Esquimalt Road.

### **7. Early Development**

The 1880s brought some major changes to the region. In 1886, the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway was constructed through the centre of Esquimalt and in 1887 a military base was established at Work Point near the Victoria boundary. As Victoria grew and the Navy presence began to dominate the town's social life, Esquimalt became an attractive place for Victoria's wealthy business people to build their substantial homes. Favoured locations included the shoreline, the banks of the Gorge and the rocky hillsides near Old Esquimalt Road. More humble residential development took place in the southern part of the peninsula. Although the naval base was abandoned by the Royal Navy in 1905, it was revived as the West Coast base for the newly-created Royal Canadian Navy in 1910 and continued to play an important role in the life of the community.

### **8. Incorporation**

By 1912, the landscape of Esquimalt had been altered forever. Forests and meadows were gradually being replaced by new construction. A major shipbuilding operation had been established at Lang Cove. The village was a bustling commercial centre with hotels, general stores and Chinese laundries, and clusters of houses were scattered throughout the municipality, separated by areas of undeveloped bush. The residents were eager to have access to services such as city water and sewage disposal. The Township of Esquimalt was incorporated on September 1, 1912, under the leadership of Reeve Charles H. Lugin. Almost immediately, the provincial government began to transfer taxes to the municipality to allow development of badly needed services. A new era in Esquimalt's history was underway.

### **9. Between the Wars**

Residential, commercial and industrial development all accelerated in the early 1920s. A local shipyard, the B.C. Marine Railway Co., (established in 1893 at Lang Cove), had been purchased by Scottish shipbuilding baron Sir Alfred Yarrow in 1914 and had quickly expanded to become a major

employer. The federal government constructed a huge graving dock at Skinner's Cove, which opened in 1927. These operations established Esquimalt as a shipbuilding and repair centre on the West Coast. A municipal hall was constructed near the centre of the municipality in 1929. Expansion of the Canadian naval base in the late 1930's caused the expropriation of the original village site, and many local businesses were forced to relocate to a section of Esquimalt Road just west of the current municipal hall.

### **10. WWII to Present**

Esquimalt's naval and shipbuilding operations were the focus of intense activity throughout the Second World War. At its peak, Yarrows employed over 4300 workers, and churned out dozens of new ships for the war effort. Several new housing developments were built to provide accommodation for these workers. At the conclusion of hostilities, the frenzy of war-related activity died down, but the naval base has continued to be important to the municipality's economy. A naval training facility, barracks and other related operations continue to be major employers and their personnel to be customers of local businesses. In the post war era, a light industrial zone was established in the eastern part of the municipality, and many improvements were made to municipal roads, sewer and water systems and recreational facilities. Residential construction has focused on the redevelopment of large estates into apartment complexes and small single-family subdivisions. Many war-time heroes came from Esquimalt.

Although Esquimalt began as an agricultural settlement, little remains of that heritage today. The fledgling naval base of 1865 has grown to become the largest employer in the region, and the original town site has disappeared inside the boundaries of the Canadian Forces Base.

Today Esquimalt has a healthy mix of commercial, residential, and industrial development. The municipality's 17,000 residents enjoy a variety of amenities including schools, recreational facilities, a library, and archives, in addition to parks, beaches, and green spaces.

Esquimalt is one of the core municipalities in the Capital Region District. A mayor and six councillors serve the community and Esquimalt is protected by a dedicated Fire Department and by the joint Victoria-Esquimalt Police Department.