1. THE HISTORY OF ESQUIMALT

Esquimalt has a long and significant history resulting in a legacy of heritage buildings, sites, structures and cultural landscapes. Before the arrival of European settlers there was a First Nations presence, with people of the Coast Salish linguistic group inhabiting the area for approximately 4,000 years. 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. Esquimalt, pronounced Ess-KWY-malt, is an anglicized version of the First Nation's word "es-whoy-malth," meaning "the place of gradually shoaling water."

In 1790, the Spanish ship *Princesa Real* entered Esquimalt Harbour under the command of Lt. Don Manuel Quimper, who named the harbour *Puerto de Cordova*. In 1843, Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) Chief Factor James Douglas (later Governor of the Crown Colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia) visited Esquimalt Harbour with other HBC officials aboard the schooner *Cadboro,* looking for a suitable location for a new Fort north of the 49th parallel. Although Douglas established the new fort on the shore of Victoria Harbour, he recognized the agricultural potential of the land that is now Esquimalt. When he returned in 1848, Douglas negotiated Land Treaties with local First Nations that allowed the HBC subsidiary, the Puget Sound Agricultural Company, to establish three farms in the Esquimalt area: Viewfield Farm in 1850; and Constance Cove and Craigflower in 1853.

Esquimalt possesses one of the finest, natural harbours on the west coast, and this fact was not lost on the Royal Navy, intent on establishing their Pacific Headquarters there. With the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854, attention focused on the mostly undefended supply lines in the Pacific, and Douglas was asked by the Admiralty to build three wooden hospital huts on Admiralty property on Duntz Head to handle casualties if necessary. In 1865, Esquimalt replaced Valparaiso, Chile as the Royal Navy Headquarters in the Pacific.

British Columbia's entry into Confederation was almost inevitable, given its strategic location, abundant natural resources and the shifting balance of power on the Pacific. In 1867, the British Parliament passed the British North America Act, which contained provisions for British Columbia's entry into the new Dominion. The two most significant conditions for joining Confederation were the construction of a transcontinental railway to the coast, and relief of the colonial debt. Other conditions included maintaining the Naval station in Esquimalt Harbour and provision for the Militia, the latter a foremost concern for the Crown because of the Fenian threats and Britain's engagement in the Anglo-Russian conflict.

It was also a time of transition from sail to steam power, and Russian warships steaming off the mouth of the Juan de Fuca created fears about the vulnerability of Victoria and Esquimalt; effective coastal defences were subsequently initiated by the Militia. The future of the new province was of great concern to British capitalists, who had extensive investments in many different local enterprises. From London there were calls for the construction of a drydock at Esquimalt that would support coastal trade and defence. These were all key initiatives that would not only benefit and enhance Britain's world-wide interests in trade and Empire but also demonstrate a strong commitment towards this fledgling Canadian province.

First Graving Dock, Naden, Esquimalt, 1887 [Young Collection, Esquimalt Archives 995.24]

Work Point Barracks [Esquimalt Archives]

Work Point, looking west over the construction of the "Works Office" at Work Point Barracks circa 1893. In the background are the Royal Marine Artillery with their muzzle-loader carriage guns in the Parade Square and the Enlisted Men's Barracks to the far right. [Young Collection, Esquimalt Archives 994.4.7]

The 1880s brought major changes to the region. In 1886, the Esquimalt & Nanaimo Railway was constructed through the centre of Esquimalt. The following year, a military base was established at Work Point Barracks near the Victoria city boundary. It was the garrison headquarters for the first Permanent Force unit "C" Battery, Canadian Artillery for coastal defence, and played an essential role in protecting and guaranteeing Canada's sovereignty. Operation of a number of gun emplacements such as Macaulay Point, Finlayson Point and Brothers Island were necessary to protect both Victoria and Esquimalt harbours, and larger portions of Esquimalt lands were taken over by the crown for military operations. In 1887, the naval dockyard was completed, giving the Royal Navy a state-of-the-art ship repair and refitting site on Canadian soil. As the area's population grew, the presence of the Navy and the Army dominated social life both in Victoria and Esquimalt. Wealthy businessmen built large homes in Esquimalt along the shoreline, the banks of the Gorge and the rocky hillsides near Old Esquimalt Road, while more modest residential development took place in the southern part of the Township. In 1893, the gunners of the Royal Marine Artillery at Work Point built the province's first golf links on the Macaulay Plains.
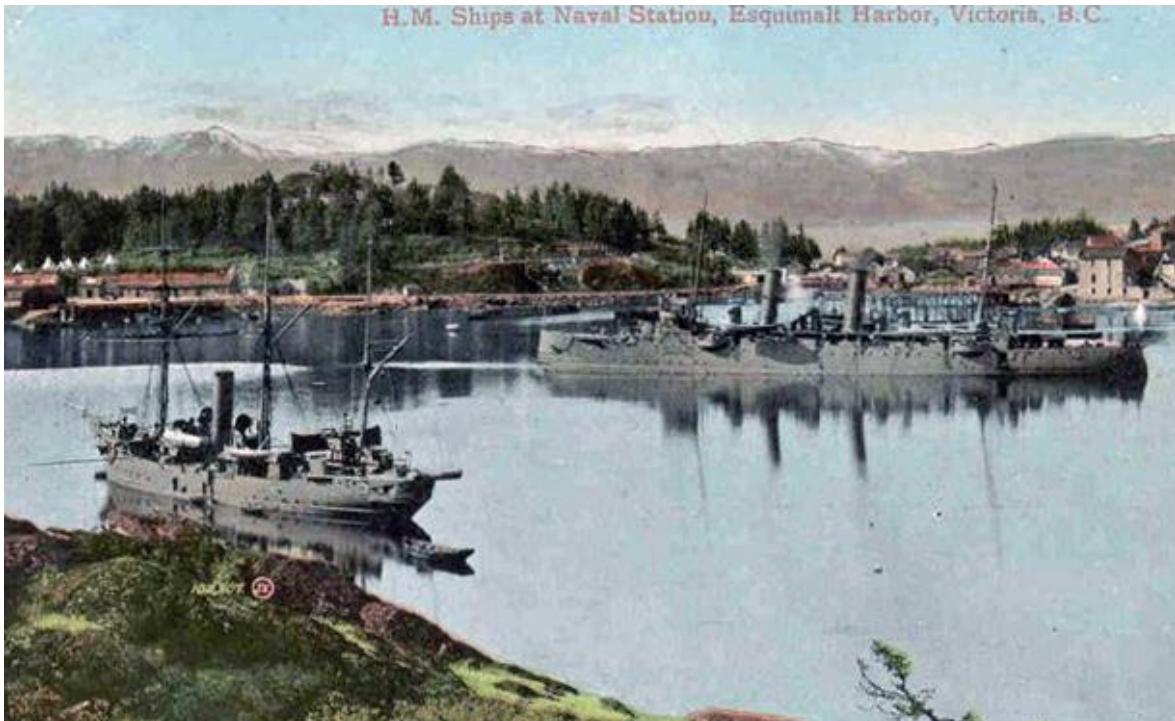
"H.M. Ships at Naval Station, Esquimalt Harbour" [Esquimalt Archives A-00025]


Esquimalt Old Village, pre-1904 [Esquimalt Archives 992.23.6]

The last British Army garrison in Canada left Victoria and Esquimalt in 1906, leaving the Government of Canada in charge of Military District #11 (BC) Headquarters at Work Point, with Canadian Artillery Gunners responsible for Coastal Defence. Although the Royal Navy abandoned the naval base in 1905, it was revived in 1910 as the West Coast base for the newly-created Naval Service of Canada [renamed the Royal Canadian Navy in 1911] and continued to play an important role – along with the Military – in the life of the community.

In 1912, the Esquimalt Village was a bustling commercial centre with hotels, general stores, Chinese laundries and machine shops surrounded by houses. In the District, Hudson's Bay Company property was subdivided and sold, with new houses appearing throughout the area. The District of Esquimalt was defined in the letters patent signed August 15, 1912 and incorporated September 1, 1912, with the municipality to be called the Corporation of the Township of Esquimalt. Charles H. Lugrin was acclaimed as the first Reeve. One of the first items tackled by the new Council was the installation of a modern sewerage system.

Esquimalt Municipal Hall, 1930s [Esquimalt Archives 989.36.1].
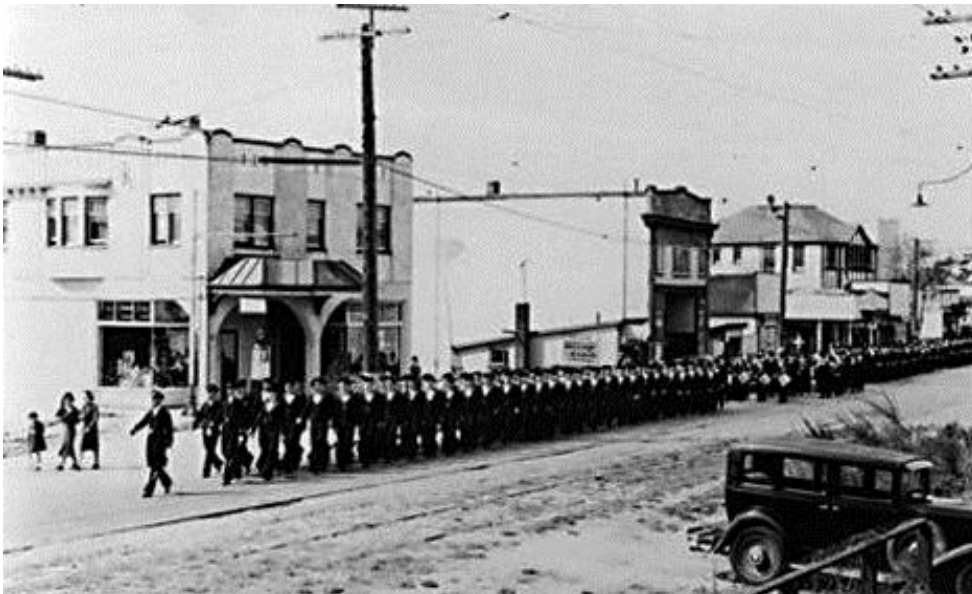
Military Parade, Esquimalt Road, 1938 [Esquimalt Archives 991.43.13 N.557 B1/6/12].

Shipbuilding and repair, the major industry since 1893, continued its role as a major employer throughout the First World War, with major expansion taking place during the Second World War when Yarrow's Shipyard built new ships for the Royal Canadian Navy and the Canadian Merchant Marine Service. Esquimalt became a focal point of activity during the Second World War, with Pacific Command Headquarters set up at Work Point Barracks. At one point, these staging grounds held 10,000 troops and officers training before deployment. The Old Esquimalt Village was expropriated in 1941 as well as property in the Naden area when more space was needed to enlarge the military barracks. In the post war era a light industrial zone was established in the eastern part of the municipality where access to the railway was established through spur-lines. Recreational facilities, new schools, shopping plazas and commercial development expanded throughout the 1950s to 1970s. Many large homes were lost when their property was sub-divided to build apartment complexes, and single-family residential development took place throughout the Township.

Esquimalt today has a healthy mix of commercial, residential and industrial development. The almost 17,000 residents of Esquimalt enjoy a variety of amenities including schools, recreational facilities, library, archives, parks both active and passive, a golf course, beaches and green spaces. This rich legacy of settlement and development has defined a unique community heritage identity that is preserved, protected and celebrated through the Township's Heritage Policy.