

# Historical Snapshots – Esquimalt Municipal Archives

## Battery



The late 19th century saw periodical outbursts of hostility between Britain and Russia. While the possibility of military action against Esquimalt was actually very remote, it appeared to many in the military and government of the day, that a real threat existed. Russian cruisers could easily score a hit against the British by bombarding a defenseless outpost of empire like Esquimalt/Victoria. As a consequence, steps were taken to create an artillery battery.

This photo (c. 1883-5) shows the rather inadequate result – the guns shown would likely not have had the range nor hitting power needed to be effective against a naval vessel. In addition to a field gun [large wheels], there is a heavy gun which appears to be a heavy naval or garrison piece. Undoubtedly the presence of the battery would have reassured the populace somewhat.

Twenty years earlier, an artillery battery was established on the seaward side of dockyard at Hospital Point. This was in response to a perceived threat by the Fenian Brotherhood, who were intent on attacking British possessions from the U.S. especially after the end of the American civil war.

## Brief Military History of Esquimalt

The relationship between the armed services and their members and Esquimalt/Victoria extends back more than a century and a half. Right from the arrival of the Royal Navy and the establishment of settlement on the shore of the anchorage, interaction increased between the military and the community.

Vancouver Island, for much of the nineteenth century, was just about as far away as you could get from Britain with the only realistic access between the two points being a very long voyage around Cape Horn. Britain was interested in controlling expansion by Russian fur traders, who were active in Alaska and even northern California, and the Americans who were clearly intent on moving into north western North America—something they termed “Manifest Destiny”. As a result the Hudson Bay Company planned to move their headquarters north to Vancouver Island in 1842. Esquimalt was investigated by the Company, but the presence of better agriculture land led to the present site of Victoria being chosen and Fort Victoria was built in 1843.

The first Royal Naval presence in Esquimalt was a hydrographic survey carried out in 1846. This indicated that the harbour could accommodate larger vessels, an important requirement for the Navy. This was followed by a visit of the frigate *Constance* two years later, an event that brought to the fore a potential problem with the Navy's presence — feeding the crew. This placed a burden on Victoria as the navy did not have a shore facility at this time.

However, there wasn't any suggestion that ships would be based here. Royal Navy activities in the Pacific in the first half of the century were based in Valparaiso, Chile, the site of an excellent harbour but one which had a very hot, humid and therefore uncomfortable climate. The trip north from South America was long, and due to the peculiarities of wind and currents on the west coast, was made via the Sandwich Islands [Hawaii].

To better consolidate their claim to the region in the face of American expansionism, the British dispatched Richard Blanshard as Governor of Vancouver Island in 1849. He was intended to run the Government of the new colony, which had been established by Royal Charter.

Gold rushes, in 1852 in the Queen Charlottes, in 1858 on the Fraser River, and four years later, in the Cariboo, brought about major changes. For Esquimalt, it meant that most gold seekers heading for Fort Victoria to purchase necessary licences and supplies would arrive at Esquimalt harbour. James Douglas, who took over as Governor on the departure of Blanshard in 1851, was concerned—reasonably- that if steps weren't taken, British sovereignty and control might well be lost.

The answer was simple: the 'inclusion' of Vancouver Island and the mainland into the British colonial system had legitimized the use of British armed forces when needed. The Navy, Royal Engineers, and later, artillery—and therefore Esquimalt Harbor- became real components of Imperial defence in this region. Ships were deployed from Chile when needed and became increasingly frequent visitors to Esquimalt. It was more than a good place to escape the Chilean summer.

Large tracts of land were set aside in Esquimalt by the colonial administration for use by the "War Department". A rudimentary base was established on the harbour, which, though very small, served the needs of one or two ships on a temporary deployment. By 1862, guns were landed from ships to hospital point—the first, but not last, defensive armament. The virtues of Esquimalt were becoming increasingly apparent to the Admiralty and it officially designated an Imperial Base in early 1865.

With the base established and 'legal', permanent facilities were built, local contractors and workers were hired, and as happens elsewhere, a village grew up outside the base. In addition to the homes of people who worked on the base or in the village, there were businesses such as foundries, chandleries, laundries, and before long, shipyards. There were hotels and other businesses—such as bars. Ships too large to enter Victoria's shallow, narrow harbour disembarked passengers at Esquimalt.

Initially, the only connection between Esquimalt and Victoria was by water, a dangerous proposition in bad weather, but this improved with the development of a trail and later, a wagon road. Work parties from the base played an important role in road building.

The presence of the armed services in the colony, and later, province, provided a sense of security to what was largely a British population. On occasion, events taking place far away appeared to require a strong defence locally. The end of the U.S. Civil War, and the defeat of the Confederacy made for some insecurity here—the British had supported the South in that conflict. There were fears that the U.S.—with a huge army—might move against British territory to the North. It was groundless. Another rumor circulating in the late 1860s-70s was that the Irish Fenian Brotherhood might attack vulnerable British possessions. The U.S., which had initially encouraged them, put a stop to any moves in this regard.

The construction of a dry dock in Esquimalt in the mid 1880s, largely to carry out repair on naval vessel, made it unnecessary for the work to be carried out in a U.S. yard—an awkward situation in the event of bad relations between Britain and the U.S. For Esquimalt, it meant more jobs and new skills—an expansion in ship repair/-building.

British troops were pulled out of British Columbia when it joined Confederation in 1871, leaving the new province vulnerable although the navy was still at Esquimalt. In the late 1870s, the Russians and Turks came into conflict and the British lines of communication to India were threatened. The Russians were less than thrilled at the British interference and Canada, which now was responsible for its own defense, became concerned. There was ample cause: a Russian naval Squadron of five warships arrived in San Francisco in February 1878.

This provoked Ottawa into defending Esquimalt and Victoria. Coast artillery units were formed, and with a combination of naval and field guns, a coast artillery battery was created at Macaulay Point. Fortunately there wasn't an attack, but permanent fortifications were built at Macaulay and at Rodd Hill in the 1890s.

The British, by the turn of the century, no longer required a presence in the North Pacific, and so pulled its last troops from Esquimalt in 1907. The Royal Navy also had been all but completely withdrawn. As a consequence Canada created a Navy in 1910 and took over responsibility and control of its own defense.

The Canadian Army took over all military facilities in Esquimalt and Victoria and the coast artillery remained active until the late 1940s and was finally declared obsolete in the Mid 1950s. Work Point was also developed in the 1890s and served as the base for many units that served Canada in the World Wars, Korea and in Peace keeping. The last infantry battalion left in the early 1990s.

Esquimalt and Victoria have almost always been considered military towns, but especially Esquimalt!