

**CASE STUDY 1:  
RUINS OF THE WHARF STREET  
HUDSONS BAY COMPANY  
WAREHOUSE: AN INTERPRETATION  
AND CONSERVATION OPPORTUNITY**



# *CASE STUDY 1: RUINS OF THE WHARF STREET HUDSONS BAY COMPANY WAREHOUSE: AN INTERPRETATION AND CONSERVATION OPPORTUNITY*

## **SITUATION BRIEF # 26**

**Contributors: M. Segger, C. Gower, K. Johnson**

There is one major monument, surviving as Old Town's largest archaeological ruin, that deserves some serious consideration for designation and public interpretation.

The Wharf Street harbour retaining wall visible from the parking lot below Bastion Square is the last surviving remnant of the massive Hudson Bay Company trading warehouse. It was built to replace the fort in 1858 as gold replaced fur as the economic foundation of the city. This monumental building, which dominated the townscape for nearly 100 years, represented the very reason for Victoria: the HBC fort and its trading partners in the Songhees village on the facing shoreline across the harbour.



Early Victoria Fire Insurance Map shows footprint of HBC Warehouse.

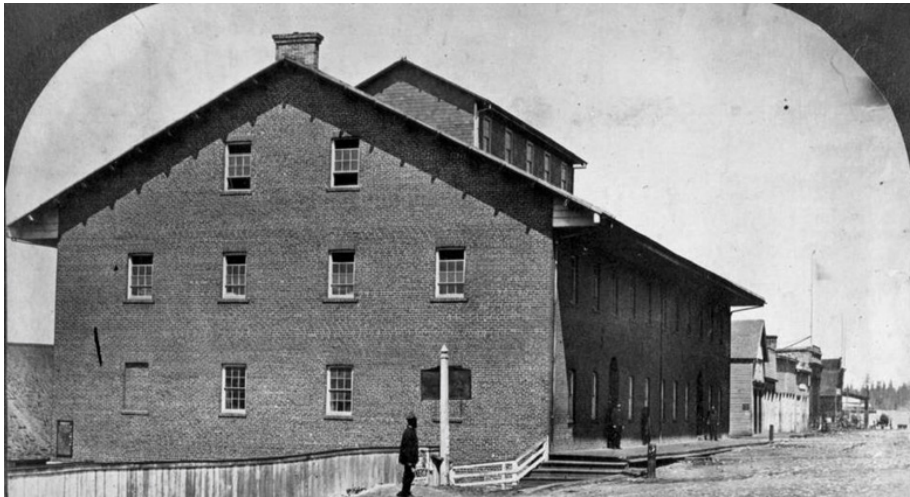


Western retaining wall and first floor interior elevation of the 1858 HBC Warehouse on Wharf Street, Victoria.

The massive brick warehouse also symbolized a pivot point in North West Coast history when a fairly amicable accommodation between First Nations and the European fur trading companies gave way to formalized colonialism. From the Songhees perspective, as Dr. John Lutz points out in his book, *Makuk*, on the trading history of First Peoples in British Columbia, the notion that the Europeans were guests on Indigenous territory had started to evaporate. Yet in all likelihood Songhees skilled artisans were employed in the construction of buildings such as this, as they had been the Fort. The economic spin-offs from the Songhees acting as middle-men in coastal indigenous trade, along with ‘hosting’ the thousands of indigenous visitors who arrived every year from as far afield as Alaska, produced considerable wealth for many local families.



For more than 50 years after the 1843 establishment of the Fort, this relationship underpinned one of the richest potlatch cultures in the Pacific North West. The ritual continued even after the Dominion Government banned potlatches in 1888 as both the local white and indigenous communities ignored the Ottawa directives. Judge Begbie, from his bench in the Supreme Court Building on the other side of Bastion of Square, had long been sympathetic to plight of First Nations now under Ottawa's thumb. He threw out the first attempt at prosecution on the grounds that the law was unenforceable.



Archival image HBC Warehouse, Wharf Street, Victoria ca. 1860. ( Image archival Photo)

Perhaps it is too outrageous an idea to imagine a reconstruction of the HBC warehouse which could then contain a visitor interpretation centre telling the story about the 150 years of this highly complex trading economy, its replacement with settlement colonialism, and lessons to be learned from the resulting suppression of First People's rights and cultural expression?

Local architect Chris Gower has suggested we could reimagine the warehouse scale and form but expressed in contemporary materials. His resulting design proposal could be adapted for use as a museum or festival centre. At the very least the surviving masonry wall, long-neglected, and it seems all but forgotten, deserves an interpretive panel explaining its critical but

nuanced significance in the history of Victoria.

The original walls offer a two-hundred-year vantage: looking both back to the 1850's - and possibly ahead to the 2050s - a very rare opportunity in a young North American city. Because remnants of both the east and the north foundation walls remain, one can actually see the outlines of the corners of the building (likely exactly 50 feet long). Furthermore, the surface of the parking lot could be stripped off revealing the original foundation footings, thus the outline of this massive structure.

Within the original stone and brick coursing is the original mortar grout still as hard and solid as 150 years ago. These walls are massive and solidly assembled masonry an embodied metaphor of endurance.

Above, just below street-level one can see the bases of the three original doorways to Wharf Street - and a remainder of the brick original second-floor level wall construction, acting now as a guard wall for the sidewalk - all part of a mostly-lost building's continuing ghost frontage beside Wharf Street.



In the study, a glazed version of the warehouse rises from a two-storey podium fronting the harbour. Stairways and light-wells open onto the historic walls - with public views possible both from above - and as one might descend to lower building floors. (Design and image Chris Gower AIBC copyright 2021)

## **Observations**

- It is probably an oversight that the wall (and footprint of the building) is not designated under the municipal act. It should be.
- While secure for now, the wall should be investigated for seismic resilience.
- As a matter of urgency, the foundations footprint of the building should be subject to an archaeological investigation. Should the foundation footings be discovered intact in the parking lot, they should be revealed.
- The Victoria Harbour Authority and the City could collaborate on producing interpretive signage for the site.
- The proposal to commemorating both the site and the historic wall as part of a permanent structure merits further investigation.

## **Reference**

Pethick, Derek. *Victoria: The Fort*. Mitchell Press, Vancouver, 1968.