

METIS HERITAGE IN THE VICTORIA REGION



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SITUATION BRIEF # 8

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The one hundred years of Victoria as essentially a Metis farming community constitutes a lost chapter in the popular narrative of Victoria's founding and development.

Charles Ross, Scottish HBC Chief Fur Trader and his wife, Isabella Mainville, an Anishinabe woman, from the Island of Michilimacinac, pitched their tent on the camas fields of the Songhees Nation, with their 9 Métis children in 1843, and built Fort Victoria around them. That area is now outlined by the bricks of Bastion Square, Government Street and Wharf Street. Names of the Chiefs and HBC officers who signed the Agreement to share the land are there in the bricks along with many other early Metis settlers.

The Rosses came directly from Fort McLoughlin in Heiltsuk territory near Bella Bella. After the closure of Fort McLoughlin, the buildings were dismantled and components were brought by the steamship, Beaver, to be reassembled as Fort Victoria in 1843. It took Charles Ross a year to supervise the building of Fort Victoria with the Songhees builders and the Métis Crew of 40. It was completed in 1844. Shortly thereafter Ross died of appendicitis. Isabella stayed in the Fort until her 10th child, William was born. She left to live at Fort Nisqually, WT. in 1846, but returned in 1853, and purchased 200 acres from James Douglas.



Isabella called the land Fowl Bay farm in 1854. That made her the first independent registered woman landowner, under colonial law, in BC, and arguably Canada. She became owner of one of the five founding family farms in Victoria.

Other areas of Victoria with Metis farming connections include the Ogden Fields, now James Bay, Ogden Point, the Gorge Road Métis district, including Portage Inlet.

The Ogden descendants from Peter Ogden Jr., the Métis Chief Trader, is another major Metis family group that preceded the Work, Tolmie, Finlayson, Douglas, Helmcken, Harris, Dallas, Bushby, MacKay, Legace, Sinclair, Rudge, Macaulay, McNeill, Morell and Simpson descendants.



First Nations wives married to European fur traders, mothers of the first generation of Métis families, birthed the New People, the now distinct Métis Nation of Turtle Island. Without such liaisons with First Peoples, Canada would not exist as a Treaty nation built on the fur trade economy. Other First Nation and Métis women who married into the HBC fur trade family and lived in the Fort Victoria region, after Isabella were: Flora Ross (Hubbs), Flora Ross Ottaway, Mary Bastien Ross, Margaret Ross Sweeney, Amelia, Lady Douglas (Cree-Métis), Cecilia Helmcken, Martha Harris, Agnes Bushby, daughters of James and Amelia Douglas (Black-Cree-Metis), Sophia Lolo Tod, First Nations mother of Mary Tod and other Métis Tod children, Catherine Norn (first Métis wife of Tod, mother of James Tod), Sarah Rudge, granddaughter of Peter Ogden Jr, Josette Work (Wark), Sarah Finlayson, Jane Tolmie, Mary Macaulay McNeill, et al.

All were Metis or married to Metis or First Nations wives. The Douglas family arrived in Fort Victoria in 1849, 5 years after Charles Ross died, and the Fort was completed. Their children were Black-Cree-Métis. The Francophone Association has marked Metis builder, Leon Morell's grave. Some Métis burials at



Pioneer Square, adjacent to Christchurch Cathedral, include Helmcken, Wallace, Charles and John Ross, Morell (wife and children). Later, many related to those same families were interred at Ross Bay Cemetery after it was founded in 1873.

The sale of farmland to Ms. Ross in the area of Victoria now known as Fairfield and Oak Bay was one of five first sales following the signing of the Douglas Treaties in 1850.

The Ross farm was typical of these first farms in the Victoria region. Isabella built her house on 200 acres stretching from what is now Memorial Crescent to King George Terrace at Fairfield Road, including what is now Harling Point. She called her farm Fowl Bay after the many waterfowl in the vicinity. The naming followed traditional Indigenous protocol whereby a place is named after geographic and natural features, in reciprocity with the land, air and water. A 28-acre remnant of the farm is now called Ross Bay Cemetery.

From 1853-1864 Isabella grew potatoes at Sahsimia now Harling Point and traded them internationally with First Nations along the coast from what is now Northern California to Alaska.



The crew of 40 Métis labourers that came to assist the Songhees in the building of the Fort, mostly left after 1844 when the Fort was completed. A few stayed and moved to Central Saanich. The McTavish and Andersons are two whose descendants are still here.

Observations

- While mention of some of the founding Metis families occurs in natural history interpretive signage in the region, identification with Metis Nation culture is most often overlooked. Metis history needs to constitute a part of any review of existing signage and plans for new plaques.
- The Metis Nation is pursuing NHSMBC designation of Isabella Ross as a person of National Historical Significance. Other aspects of Metis history and cultural could be commemorated this way.
- The Metis Nation maintains a rich spiritual and artistic culture: songs, dance, textile design, stories, and also contemporary artistic expressions. Metis culture, like local Indigenous culture, is undergoing a “recovery”. Educational space (schools, colleges and universities) along with opportunity (targeting funding support and public media time) should be provided to encourage this process

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