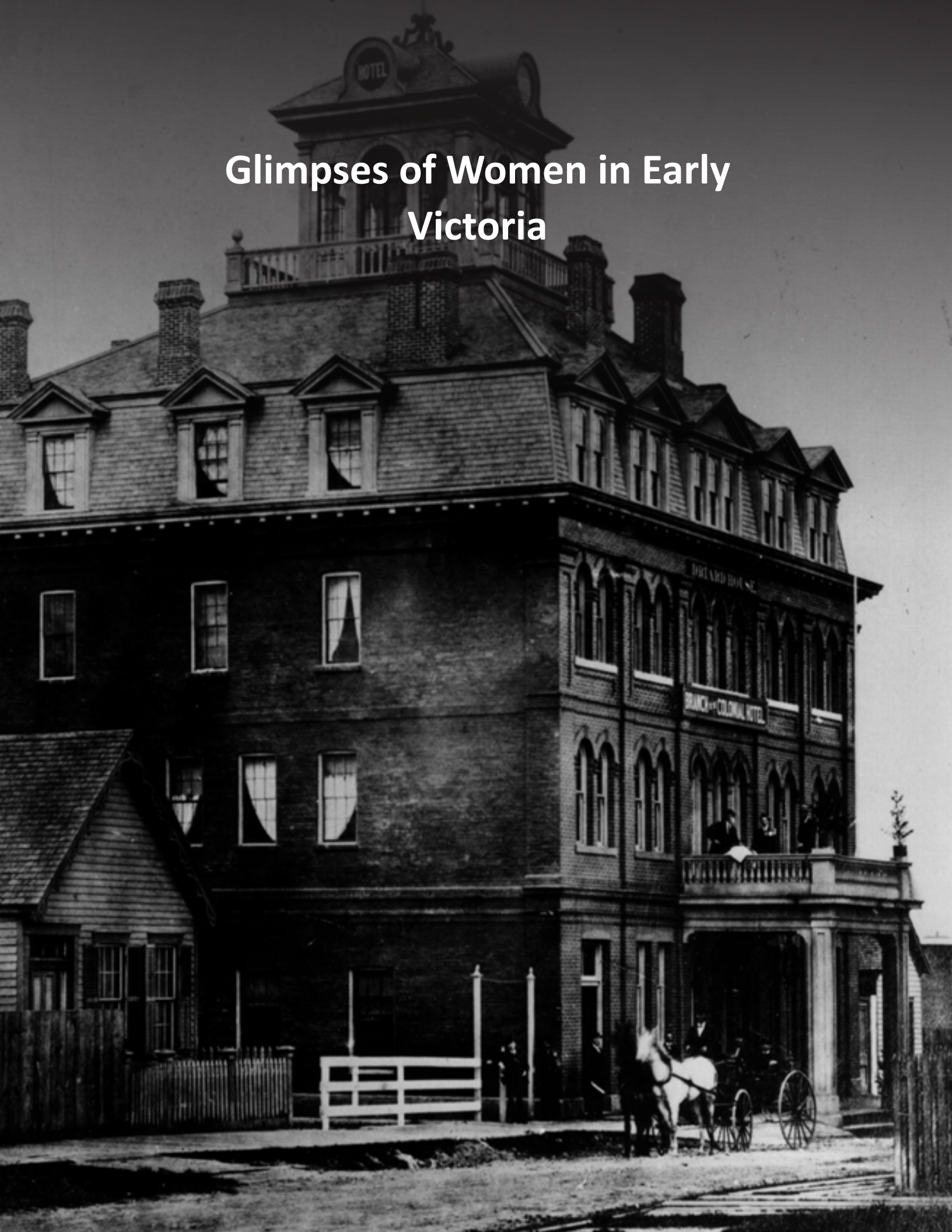


Glimpses of Women in Early Victoria



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SITUATION BRIEF # 38

Contributors: M. Elliott

When HBC Chief Factor James Douglas moved from Fort Vancouver to supervise the building of Fort Victoria in 1843 he brought with him his Métis wife Amelia and two children. Eventually Amelia had 13 children, five of whom died. While the family was still small they lived within the palisades of the fort. They were soon joined by other Métis HBC women from Fort Vancouver: Marguerite McLoughlin, wife of Chief Factor John McLoughlin, and Josette Work, wife of Chief Factor John Work. All three women spoke French and their own Indigenous language. From their special place in the growing community they were able to trade with the Lekwungen speaking women for berries, fish, baskets, and other necessities. Thus, the matriarchy of HBC wives and the Indigenous women helped to form the social and economic basis of the Fort Victoria community. Douglas and Work eventually built large, comfortable homes located away from the fort where the families entertained friends and visitors such as Judge Matthew Baillie Begbie and Captain/Surveyor George Henry Richards.



Many of these names are recorded in the Fort Victoria Heritage Brick Project. The named bricks trace the original palisades of the Fort in the sidewalks of View and Government streets.

Another Métis wife, Isabella Ross, purchased 100 acres along the Victoria waterfront, overlooking Juan de Fuca Strait, after her husband, Chief Factor Charles Ross, died in 1845. She is the first person to be registered as a landowner in Colonial British Columbia. Part of her property became the Ross Bay Cemetery now a heritage landmark site. During the June 1872 smallpox epidemic another section along Dallas Road was used as a campsite for Indigenous people.



Would-be female settlers such as black nurse Rebecca Gibbs and her husband Richard, from Philadelphia, USA, likely felt more comfortable when they learned that there were women in the community living safely and well. When the Cariboo gold rush began in 1862, sixty English women, sponsored by the Columbia Emigration Society, arrived. Most of them soon found employment in the new city of Victoria and a few, such as Florence Wilson, from London, established a business that catered to the gold miners. She opened a library in the St. Nicholas Hotel and sold tickets for the theatres. Recent arrivals from San Francisco, Fanny and Louis Bendixen consulted with Victoria architect John Wright to build a similar hotel, the St. George. For many years it was considered the finest accommodation available in Victoria and was later called the Driard. It wasn't long before more accommodation for visitors was built outside the fort which was torn down in 1864.

The Driard evolved into one of Victoria's foremost hotels. Its View Street frontage can be seen today as it was reconstructed as part of the large Bay Centre shopping mall.

It is fascinating to see how quickly Victoria's diverse population grew and spread north to the goldfields in 1864. What had been a small Chinese community on the waterfront was soon bustling because of the many immigrants arriving from California, Australia, and Asia. In the spring of 1860 Mrs. Kwong Lee arrived with her child on the *Pacific*, the first Chinese woman in Victoria. By the summer of 1858, 1,195 gold seekers had arrived and her husband had become one of the leading merchants in the city. Eager gold miners who left home without adequate supplies could find them at Kwong Lee's strategically accessible stores placed along the gold rush trail at Yale, Lillooet, Quesnelmouth and Forks of Quesnel. Mrs. Lee likely helped her husband fill orders for many of the special staples required, such as Chinese long grain rice, peanut oil, Chinese

mushrooms, dried bean curd (foo jook), pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, rice noodles (chung choy), preserved vegetables and red dates.



“In 1901 Victoria had 189 Chinese firms and there were profits to be made. Fourteen trading houses imported \$107,595 in goods from China. Victoria’s Chinese spent four times that amount - \$464,369 – on Canadian, British and American products.” (See Rich E. E. ref.)

KWONG LEE & CO.,
LEE CHANG, Manager.
Commission Merchants,
IMPORTERS AND DEALERS
IN ALL KINDS OF
CHINESE GOODS,
Cormorant street, Victoria, V.I.
Branches...At FORT YALE, British Columbia
LILLOOET " "
MOUTH of QUESNELLE " "
FORKS of QUESNELLE " "
San Francisco House.....HOF KEE & Co.
Also in China—Canton City.....YU TSAN & Co.
Hong Kong.....KWONG MAN FUNG & Co.
ap6 2m

At the same time many young Jewish merchants such as Frank Sylvester had also arrived from San Francisco. He spent the winter selling guns and provisions for his brother-in-law, Martin Prag, before heading north to seek his fortune in the Cariboo. When the excitement died down he returned to Victoria and married Cecelia Davies, daughter of pioneer auctioneer Judah P. Davies, in 1869. The family business, the Sylvester Feed Company, employed their eight children. Volunteer work filled what little free time was left. Cecelia was an active member of the Hebrew Ladies Association and served on the Royal Jubilee Hospital Board. Frank joined the Masons and the much respected Victoria Fire Brigade, and contributed to the building of the Congregation Emanu-el Synagogue. By 1863 the small congregation of 50 people had managed to raise \$9,000 for the building designed by local architects Wright and Sanders. It is the oldest synagogue on the West Coast of North America.

Frank's hobby was collecting historical information and speaking at the Royal Society. He eventually found time to write down his stories and they are now preserved at the University of Victoria Archives.

Thirty years later Hannah Maynard and her husband Richard arrived from Ontario and established a photography studio and boot shop on Johnson Street. Hannah had been trained in photography and taught her husband. She advertised her business as: Mrs. R. Maynard, Photographic Artiste and Dealer in all kinds of Photographic Materials. Although most of her time was spent photographing local residents, and visitors such as Naval officers, and Chinese families in her very accessible downtown studio, she was sometimes called upon to photograph criminals for the Victoria Police Department. Her portrait work was soon recognized internationally and she photographed Indigenous people inhabiting the Northwest Coast of British Columbia for Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Together, the Maynards

travelled throughout the province. Many of their photographs portray Victoria as it grew from a fort to a thriving maritime city.

The Hudson's Bay Company had always carried medicines and vaccines, when necessary, to care for their employees. Health care for the growing Victoria community was soon taken over by the Sisters of St. Ann's in 1876, with St. Joseph's Hospital. The hospital and adjacent St. Ann's Convent buildings are preserved as a historic site and museum on Humboldt Street. In later years Victoria women worked together to gather funds to build a second hospital, the Royal Jubilee.



The building housing their upstairs studio and street-front shoe store is preserved at 723-725 Pandora Street.

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ALEXANDRA CLUB.
RAE STREET VICTORIA B.C.



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Clubs and societies were the core of early Victoria social, religious and cultural life. Women were the backbone on many of these organizations from the Vancouver Island Arts and Crafts Society to the Women's Institute movement. An early exhibitor with the Island Arts and Crafts Society was Emily Carr, destined to ultimately become British Columbia's, and one of Canada's, most famous artists.

In 1911 a local group of influential men, who had formed the British Columbia Union Club some years earlier, built themselves and new resplendent Club House over-looking the harbour. It was a male-only gentleman's club. The women, many wives of Union Club members, responded by establishing the Alexandra Club and building an equally well-appointed club house. The Edwardian Classical building survives at 716 Courtenay.

Miss Sarah Finlayson and Laura Dunsmuir, despite a vast difference in



family wealth shared something in common. Both employed local architect Samuel Maclure: Miss Finlayson to renovate and expand an Arts-and-Crafts style chalet cottage in Rockland, Laura to design the vast country estate “castle” for the Dunsmuir family in Sooke. The great success in Maclure’s local architectural practice lay in his skill at working with Victoria’s middle class women who controlled domestic taste and fashion, and thus defining the image of Victoria as an Arts-and-Crafts urban landscape to this day.

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