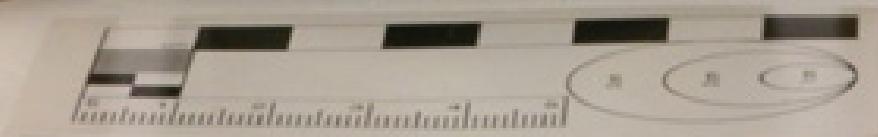


Post Contact Historic Archaeology in Greater Victoria



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SITUATION BRIEF # 50

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The year was 1846, and as a result of a series historical events, the Oregon Treaty was signed in Washington D.C. This was immensely significant to British Columbia as it established the border with the United States at the 49th parallel, with the exception of Vancouver Island. The same year was selected for the British Columbia Heritage Conservation Act as a cut-off date, after which archaeological sites are not protected. It has never been established if the Oregon Treaty was the specific reasoning for this date.



Now retired RBCM, curator of archaeology, Grant Keddie, examined historic era First Nations midden in 2016 within the areas of the Old Songhees Village. A report was made on the find but the developer said there was nothing indicated on a map. The site was completely destroyed the following day.

As a result, in British Columbia, with the exception of Heritage Branch designated sites such as Point Ellice House and Craigflower Manor, virtually all historic era sites can be destroyed at will. The Act protects sites before that date, but unfortunately leaves any buried British Columbia heritage within the last 176 years vulnerable to development. The criteria for protection rests solely on a fixed date with historical significance not considered as a factor.

In Greater Victoria, of the hundreds of potential locations lost in the last few decades, very few post-1846 sites have had any formal archaeological recovery. Up until the last decade or so bottle diggers and treasure hunters have typically recovered some historic material but with issues of liability, few if any landowners are willing to permit access especially while active development is in progress. As a result, most sites now meet with complete destruction. Even when occasional single artifacts are salvaged, once removed from their context and the associated objects, they are little more than a single page removed from a much larger story.

So, why is this period important?

The almost two centuries where the archaeology of British Columbia has had little or no protection has seen some of the most extensive social and technological changes in history. It represents a time of global expansion when, for the first time, people were capable of moving around the world in large numbers. In many cases the archaeological record gives us the only information of what these various groups were bringing in terms of goods and culture. It also gives us some insight as to how these groups were interacting. For example, few if any written records tell us how or if Asians, Hawaiians, and First Nations peoples connected and collaborated. For First Nations themselves, the period post-1846 saw massive cultural and technological changes. By utilizing

information recovered by historic era archaeology we have a chance to better understand which and how new products and technologies were being adopted by First Nations. Alternatively, we may get a better idea what was being provided



Chinese medicine bottle recovered from the Old Songhees Village (DcRu-25:151 RBCM Collection). One wonders what links did the Songhees have with the newly arriving Chinese immigrants?

by First Nations to the newcomers.

Greater Victoria is a key location for British Columbia historic archaeology. As the main sea port for the then colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, and later the Province, people and goods tended to arrive here first then disseminated throughout the province.

So, what are the benefits?

When added to the written record, recovering and studying what people lost, discarded, or simply left behind since 1846, can build a more complete historical record. This is especially important in recent years as people are questioning different aspects of history not always included in the written

documents. There is also a tendency to view history based on today's cultural norms and unfortunately misinformation is all too often added to the mix. Each and every fact that historic archaeology can contribute can shape this story to a more accurate narrative.

We are far beyond the days of telling a less than accurate and an often wishful but distorted version of history. These were the types of stories taught in school curriculums or told to tourists throughout most of the 20th century. Historic context remains a valuable economic commodity but it has to tell the story from all sides.



Collection of surface artifacts collected from the site in figure 1 (DcRu- 25). The recovered items comprised mostly of fragments of bottle glass, ceramics, glass tableware plus what appears to be a copper trade ring. Most of this material would date to the 1850-60's and each item tells a part of the story. (RBCM Collection)

Despite the overwhelming loss of this heritage resource to Greater Victoria in recent decades, the news isn't all bad. A number of sites have had recovery guided by professional archaeologists and sometimes assisted by volunteers such as the Archaeological Society of B.C (ASBC).

One of the earliest recoveries was during the expansion of the Royal Jubilee Hospital in 1991. Grant Keddie, Royal BC Museum Curator of Archaeology, lead a dozen or so Archaeological Society of British Columbia volunteers for about six consecutive week ends. The material was tightly dated between 1890 and 1893 and with over 500 objects recovered they told an unprecedented story of daily life in a Victorian era hospital. This collection is held at the RBCM and was used by a University of Victoria archeology class in 2017. Students each took an artifact category for research, then presented the findings along with the artifacts in a well attended one day pop-up exhibit at the museum. It should be noted the Royal Jubilee Hospital dig was completely volunteer and any funds required were provided by the ASBC. Additionally, as there was advanced warning, there were no delays in construction as all excavation work was done after hours or week ends ahead of the main construction.

The City of Victoria deserves credit as the Johnson Street bridge extension included archaeological funding. Once again, the artifacts are in the RBCM collection and were used by the University of Victoria students for a one-day pop-up exhibit. Many of these objects enhanced the story of Victoria as a sea-faring port as well as the presence of an early Chinese community.

The historic Songhees Village in Victoria West has had some excellent archaeology; however, it has also witnessed considerable missed opportunities. The largest project was during the construction of the Shutters Condominium building located in what was the heart of the harbour-side village. Normally this site would have been exempt if it weren't for finding a single bone awl that

appeared to be traditionally made and likely predated 1846. That one object led to a proper archaeological recovery and resulted in probably the most significant historic collection the Songhees and Esquimalt people have. A waterlogged cistern had preserved baskets, cordage, traditional halibut hooks and scores of shoes. The majority of the rest of the village, apart from two small projects at Limebay and 95 Esquimalt Road, has been largely lost except for isolated finds by volunteers. In 2017, when the Songhees opened a cultural centre on the lower floor of the old CPR terminal building on the harbour, the historic collection at the RBCM was reviewed and enough artifacts from the original village were selected to fill seven show cases. Signage in the cases explained that the Songhees were adopting and utilizing goods from around the world and in many cases these items were of exceptional quality. Although the cultural centre has since closed, the artifacts will likely be used once again when a new center is created.



A transfer printed ceramic tooth paste jar lid recovered from the Royal Jubilee Hospital. Victoria had strong links to the British Empire even though American products would have been available. (RBCM collection)

Currently, the Federal Government and the Department of Defence deserve credit for the continued archaeological salvage during the dredging of Esquimalt Harbour. At the time of writing most of the recovered artifacts still need to be described and analysed, however this collection will be significant to British Columbia as well as Canadian history. Based on the limited public engagements so far, such as the Shipwrecks Conference held March 2022 in Victoria, the artifacts recovered have drawn considerable interest. A parallel project with the dredging of Portsmouth Harbour, England may result in some interesting comparisons.

So, we need to ask why is it we are tied to 1846, and was it the signing the Oregon Treaty that dictated which of our historic era sites require archaeological attention? Not all historic archeology requires detailed time-consuming and expensive excavation.

In many cases historic sites can just be monitored so, if or when, archaeological material is encountered the information and artifacts can be salvaged.



The center of a 19th century mess plate used by the Royal Navy recently dredged from Esquimalt Harbour (DcRu-1278:190 RBCM collection)

Despite the current Heritage Conservation Act, individual communities can be determining and mapping areas of high or even medium post-1846 archaeological potential. This would serve Greater Victoria well so developers, local municipalities, and the community can work together to save our heritage rather than see it crushed and trucked away. Each year that passes compounds the loss especially as so many aspects of our history are now being revisited and coming under such close scrutiny.

Observations

- The current review of the British Columbia Heritage Conservation Act provides an opportunity to address the lack of protection for post-contact local archaeological sites.
- Ways and means need to be found to permanently share the discoveries of local excavations with the community, artefacts and information.
- A local “archaeological discovery centre” perhaps along the lines of existing nature centres could unite pre and post contact archaeological findings to tell the story of Victoria.
- Municipal level policies for the protection of historical archaeological sites, and funding for professional help in excavation or salvage operations, is desperately needed.

Resources

Cover image: Recently dredged bottles from Esquimalt Harbour. Local companies such as Alex Phillips, Thomas Shotbolt, and Kirk and Company were all benefiting economically from the Royal Navy (RBCM Collection).

The Archaeological Society of British Columbia (Journal: The Midden) <http://www.asbc.bc.ca/the-midden/>

Brenda Clark (Editor), Nicole Kilburn (Editor), Nick Russell (Editor)

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