

# Esquimalt Lagoon: An Historical Journey

Esquimalt Lagoon and surrounding lands have been important to Coast Salish people for thousands of years. Since European contact, the area has been used for farming, logging, milling, fishing, and military activities, as well as recreation. Today Esquimalt Lagoon and Coburg Peninsula are protected as a park and Migratory Bird Sanctuary, enjoyed by thousands of residents and visitors who come to bird watch, enjoy the beautiful beach, have a picnic and experience nature in a spectacular setting.



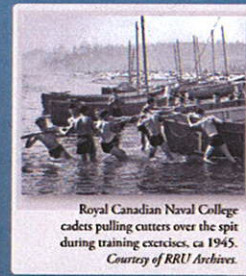
Construction crew (ca 1908) built Hatley Castle using materials brought by water from Esquimalt Harbour. *Courtesy of RRU Archives.*  
 1860-1900: Spring Vale sawmill established on Colwood (Cottonwood) Creek, later became Belmont Tannery.  
 1900-1940: Coal baron and politician James Dunsmuir purchased 230ha on the lagoon, built Hatley Castle and developed the Hatley Park formal gardens. The grounds were maintained by more than 100 Chinese workers who lived in a camp onsite.  
 1940-1995: Canadian government bought Hatley Park estate and established a military training facility later known as Royal Roads Military College. About 6,000 cadets graduated from the college during this period.  
 1995-present: Royal Roads University established on lands leased from the Department of National Defence.

First bridge over the lagoon, built in 1906 by the Royal Garrison Artillery. In 1930 a more substantial road bridge was built connecting the spit to Belmont Road. The present Ocean Boulevard connection was built in the 1970s. *Courtesy of Parks Canada/Fort Rodd Hill.*



The sailing ship SS Gettysburg beached at Esquimalt Lagoon in 1883. *Image F-00595 courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives.*

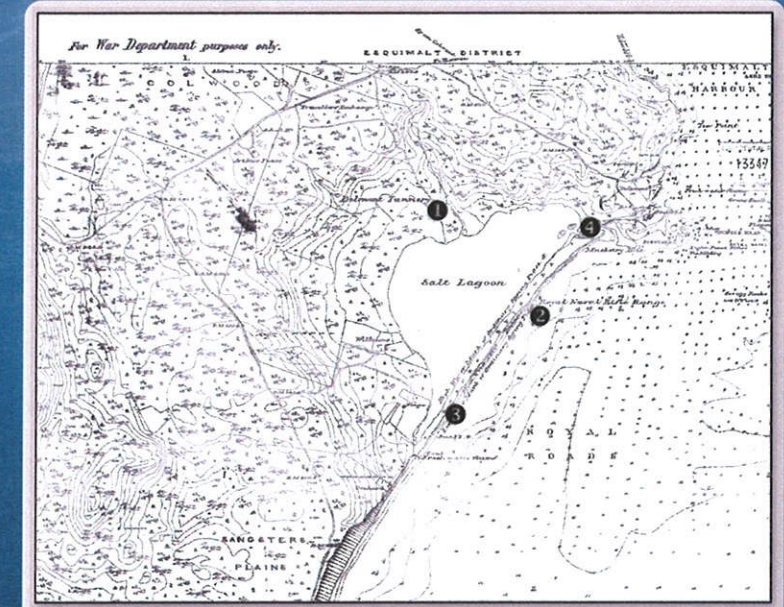
By the mid-1800s the anchorage off Esquimalt Lagoon was used by the Royal Navy and referred to as Royal Roads. Coburg Peninsula was used for many decades by the military as a firing range. Several small summer cabins were in use along Coburg Peninsula by the 1920s. The Wilson family lived in one during World War II, and recall the air force practicing bombing skills by dropping bags of flour on the lagoon bridge. Local farmer Fred Buxton built the Dugout Pub and Café there in the 1930s. When the original burned down, he built a new one, taken over by the Defence Department during WWII.



Royal Canadian Naval College cadets pulling cutters over the spit during training exercises, ca 1945. *Courtesy of RRU Archives.*



Dugout Pub and cabins on Coburg Peninsula 1935. *Image I-32945 courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives.*



Detailed topographic map of the area produced by Royal Engineers in 1887. The Belmont Tannery ●, rifle range ● and other early features can be seen around the lagoon. Coburg Peninsula ● and Gotha Pt. ● were named for Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. *Courtesy of Parks Canada/Fort Rodd Hill.*



In 1934 Emily Carr took her caravan "the Elephant" on sketching trips to Esquimalt Lagoon. While camping here she painted *Above the Gravel Pit and Lagoon at Albert Head.* *Image B-09610 courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives.*

Archaeological excavations in this area revealed semi-subterranean houses, hearth features and many artifacts dating back thousands of years.

You can help protect Esquimalt Lagoon by:

- ✧ Staying on the designated paths and off the sensitive dune vegetation
- ✧ Keeping your pet on a leash and picking up droppings
- ✧ Taking only photographs, leaving only footprints

## Pre-European Contact

As glaciers retreated approximately 13,000 years ago, a huge chunk of melting ice created a depression which later formed Esquimalt Lagoon. Glacial sediments deposited around the block formed the barrier spit now known as Coburg Peninsula.

Oral history and archaeological evidence shows a long and rich history of resource use and habitation by the ancestors of the Esquimalt and Songhees First Nations.

During construction of the pump station on the peninsula, archaeologists found a rare "wet site" with 3,000-year-old basketry, and bone, wood and stone artifacts, including this miniature whalebone club.



*Photo courtesy of Millersville Research Ltd.*

*Esquimalt Lagoon background photo by Kevin Oke kevinkoephotography.com*



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## 1700s

1787: Capt. Charles Barkley on the Imperial Eagle entered a strait he named Juan de Fuca

1790s: Manuel Quimper and his crew on the Princesa Real were likely the first Europeans to see Esquimalt Lagoon

1792: Spanish explorers Galiano and Valdes sailed into Esquimalt Harbour en route to the Salish Sea. In the same year, British Captain George Vancouver arrived and together they circumnavigated Vancouver Island, exploring and charting much of the region.



## 1800s

1840s: European settlement starts, land is cleared and farms established

1843: Fort Victoria established by Hudson's Bay Company

1846: First survey of Esquimalt Harbour and approaches showed Esquimalt Lagoon as "Salt Lake" and the peninsula as "Coburg Island"

1850: Douglas Treaties signed with First Nations family groups in the region

1854: Naval base established at Esquimalt Harbour; Coburg Peninsula reserved later as a firing range

1858: Colony of British Columbia formed; dramatic increase in population following gold rush in BC's interior

1860: Figard Lighthouse built

1863: Sawmill opened by John Gilmore at Colwood Creek

1871: Belmont Tannery replaced sawmill, BC joins Dominion of Canada

1890s: Fort Rodd built

## 1900s

1906: First bridge built at lagoon

1909: Hatley Castle completed at Hatley Park

1920s: Gravel mining operation started at Royal Bay

1930: First road bridge built

1931: Esquimalt Lagoon Migratory Bird Sanctuary established

1930s: Emily Carr camped and painted at Esquimalt Lagoon

1940: Department of National Defence purchased Hatley Park and established a military college

1939-1945: During World War II, military degaussing range established to test build-up of magnetic field on ships' hulls.

1950s: Belmont Park military housing built

1958: Fort Rodd Hill designated National Historic Site

1962: Fort Rodd Hill National Historic Site opened to public

1985: City of Colwood incorporated

1995: Royal Roads University established. Hatley Park recognized as National Historic Site.

## 2000s

2001: Esquimalt Lagoon Stewardship Initiative formed

2004: Sewer pump station and public washrooms built

2006: Coburg Peninsula Interim Management Guidelines adopted by Colwood City Council

2007: Colwood purchased northern half of Coburg Peninsula from Canadian government for park

2007: Gravel mining operation decommissioned at Royal Bay

2008: Hatley Castle turned 100

2009: Accessible Art Space created near public washrooms

2010: Canadian Naval Centennial celebrated

2011: Parks Canada Centennial celebrated

