First Nations in Northeast False Creek

The City of Vancouver is home to three groups of First Nations: the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh. They are part of a larger cultural group called the Coast Salish. This entire region and 95% of the province are on unceded Indigenous territories as few treaties were signed to grant settlers rights to the land.¹

At the time the first settlers arrived to the Burrard Inlet in the late 1850s, False Creek was five times the present size and included a large tidal mud flat. This ecologically rich site was blanketed with thick eelgrass, plentiful clam beds and countless songbirds.

Archeological evidence and oral traditions record the First Nations use of the False Creek area for over 3000 years². As urbanization grew with arrival of the CPR railway in 1887, the Musqueam and Squamish peoples who hunted and fished these lands for millenniums were moved to reserves in less desirable areas of Vancouver.³

The cultural traditions of First Nations reflect their unique relationship with the natural environment, one that is based on community, spirituality and stewardship—from harvesting oysters on the shore to collecting Devil’s Club plant to make medicine. While the expression of these cultural traditions has changed as a result of colonization and the subsequent removal and displacement of the First Nations from their traditional lands, today Vancouver has the third highest population of Indigenous residents living in a Canadian urban centre. The surrounding area to False Creek is home to many different cultural and service organizations that support and celebrate the diverse First Nations communities.⁴ ⁵

Reshaping the Waterfront

Throughout Vancouver's history, the False Creek waterfront has been shaped by how the water is used. A home for wild animals and plants, it was used by Coast Salish nations for fishing and hunting in the area. In the 19th century, colonization and the search for resources brought explorers west to Vancouver.

False Creek once extended as far east as present day Clark Drive. In 1913, it was filled by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company in return for land. The waterfront became an important industrial location, where there were sawmills, shipbuilding, slaughterhouses, and other uses.

Although a site of considerable economic benefits, the False Creek water was severely polluted. After WWII, politicians presented proposals to fill False Creek in completely so that land mass could be expanded. Environmental and political activists presented new perspectives and ideas. These groups along with citizens, unhappy due to the uncleanliness of the area, advocated to preserve False Creek and the visual aesthetics.

After long debates, it was decided that False Creek's future was as an accessible waterfront area with housing, retail, and leisure activities. This was solidified by a Vancouver city council vote in 1968 to remove False Creek’s industrial designation.

The waterfront’s edges as we know them today began to take shape during Expo86, which reshaped False Creek the location to host the activities. The removal of industry greatly reduced the amount of pollution and Vancouver was able to clean up the water and create a vibrant waterfront area.

To learn more about this project and to watch a short video on this topic please visit:
http://citystudiovancouver.com/projects/history
Canadian Pacific Railroad (CPR)

On May 23, 1887 the first transcontinental train of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) arrived in Vancouver, marking the completion of a railway promised when British Columbia joined Confederation on July 20, 1871.

They became the largest employer in Vancouver in the late 1880s, and played a major role in how the city would develop, particularly around False Creek. The CPR extended its railway line to English Bay and built the Granville Street Bridge in 1889. In 1886, they built the Kitsilano Trestle Bridge, which was demolished in 1982 because it did not swing open for tall ships to pass through. The CPR also built the Cambie Street Bridge in 1891. These important transportation links helped foster the growth of rail and sea facilities and industry in False Creek.

Over time, the eastern portion of False Creek, was filled by the Canadian Northern Railway Company to create land for the railways and for Pacific Central Station.

While the CPR allowed Vancouver to build and expand itself into the urban center that it is today, its support of rapid growth resulted in both good and bad. Though industry flourished, False Creek experienced environmental degradation and the displacement of local indigenous people who had resided here for generations.

Today, the history of the CPR is etched on the landscape of Vancouver’s shoreline and visible in legacy buildings like the Pacific Station, Waterfront Station, and the Roundhouse.

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Vancouver’s Chinatown took root in the late 1880s, as largely male residents immigrated without their families in hopes of earning a higher wage in North America. The newcomers established an active community that allowed them to maintain their culture. Though over one hundred years of settlement, Chinatown residents stood strong thanks to their strong community. Their unity was essential in battling racism, exploitative labour (notably dangerous railway construction work), the Head Tax, violence, and opposition like the Anti-Asian Riots in 1886 and 1907 that called for an end to Asian immigration and labour.¹

Despite the challenges, Chinatown’s location was maintained. From the early twentieth century, residents and business owners stood their ground in refusing unfair offers for their property, preventing Chinatown from being pushed further east.²

In 1967, Chinatown’s residents initiated protests against a proposed freeway that would have cut through the Vancouver districts of Strathcona, Chinatown, and Gastown.³

As Vancouver moves forward with the redevelopment of False Creek, one must not forget this place holds a vivid past and has many stories to tell. As Chinatown evolves, there will be more questions that arise, old and new, with the goal of presenting a community narrative that tells a story of survival and unity.


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In the 1960s the City of Vancouver launched a twenty-year urban renewal plan to revitalize city housing and modernize transportation systems. Wanting to create more efficient access between the suburbs and main highway, the City planned to build an elevated freeway linking the two.

The freeway was proposed to run through the southern edge of Strathcona and continuing straight through Chinatown and Gastown, the freeway would eventually link up to the waterfront near the current day SeaBus, and follow a bridge over Burrard Inlet to North Vancouver. The freeway would result in the demolition of historically significant neighbourhoods and the relocation of their residents.

For many families relocation was not an option. In addition to lack of wealth, many had laid roots in their neighborhoods and were proud of the foundations they had established. Local resident Mary Lee Chan began door to door canvassing in attempt to mobilize neighbours and protest freeway plans. Chan was unaware that her grassroots operation to stop the demolition of her home would unfold into a city-wide protest to prevent freeway construction and lead to the green and walkable city we know today.

Look around, what do you see? Houses, parks, playgrounds, sidewalks, bike lanes, shops, cafes, restaurants, markers of Vancouver’s heritage, and sights that make it a uniquely livable city. Unlike the neighbouring cities of Seattle and Los Angeles that are marked by huge freeways running through their cores, Vancouver’s landscape remains open and diverse.

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Hogan’s Alley

British Columbia has been home to Black residents since the middle of the 19th century. In the late 19th to early 20th centuries, many Black men came to Vancouver while working as porters for train companies.

The combination of proximity to the train station and racism that restricted Black workers from renting in many parts of the city led to the formation of a community known as Hogan’s Alley. It became the heart of Vancouver’s unique Afro-Canadian community and a booming arts and culture hub from 1910 to the early 1970s.

The talents of musician and entrepreneur Ernie King and legendary guitarist Jimi Hendrix were cultivated there, and local businesses hosted a thriving jazz music scene with the most memorable performances at the Harlem Nocturne, Vancouver’s only Black-owned nightclub. Hogan’s Alley was also host to famous traveling musicians such as Nat King Cole, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald and Count Basie, who often made late night visits after shows to Vie’s Chicken & Steaks (formerly at Main and Union) for a bite and a raving good time into the early morning hours.

Despite the tight community that congregated and lived here, Hogan’s Alley was widely viewed as a slum. Urban renewal in the early 1970s sought to beautify the area, which ultimately led to the destruction of Hogan’s Alley for the present Georgia Viaduct.

Today the site is remembered as an important historical site. Local advocates are working to restore Vancouver’s displaced Black culture and memorialize the spirit and energy of the former Hogan’s Alley.

To learn more about this project and to watch a short video on this topic please visit:
http://citystudiovancouver.com/projects/history
Industrialization

False Creek’s evolution from a buzzing industrial centre to a livable community followed a tumultuous timeline of industry, economic declines, unsustainable levels of pollution, societal reformations, and modern city planning. What is now one of Vancouver’s most livable neighbourhoods was once home to lumber mills, gas plants, labourers, smoke chimneys and polluted tidal flats.

The 1914 completion of the Panama Canal improved shipping access to the world’s markets for Vancouver, a remote city at the time. However, following the roaring success of the 1920’s, the Great Depression heavily impacted the coal, gas, steam, iron and lumber industries. A brief resurgence during World War II temporarily quelled the decline, in particular propping up the shipbuilding industry.

Following World War II, Vancouver’s ever-expanding population brought the city centre closer to its less attractive (and no longer booming) industrial outskirts. Air, noise, and visual pollution had made the city difficult to live and work in. Public pressure made False Creek’s future an important campaign issue of the 1950 civic election. The government-commissioned Bartholomew Report would conclude that the industrial area was “an eyesore, and a menace to health... nothing more than a filthy ditch in the centre of the city.”

Ultimately, heavy industrial operations were phased out of False Creek during the mid-20th century and replaced with livable neighbourhoods and sustainable light industry. The green spaces, skate parks, businesses, family homes, bike lanes and rowing clubs are a testament to False Creek’s redevelopment.

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Hosted from May 2 to October 13 1986 the Expo 86 World Fair attracted more than 22 million guests.\(^1\) The 173 acre site, located in the False Creek area, was divided into six coloured zones which were the home to entertainment, 65 pavilions, and food from around the world.\(^2\)

The event has been credited with restoring Vancouver’s economic confidence after a difficult start to the 1980s, and with changing Vancouver from a sleepy coastal city into one known around the world.\(^2\)

Though most of the pavilions were temporary and moved to different locations after the fair ended, Expo 86 required the construction of several permanent pavilions. These reminders of Expo86 can be seen in Science World (Expo Centre), The Plaza of Nations (BC Pavilion), the China Gate, Canada Place (Canada Pavilion), BC Place, and the Expo Line.\(^3\)

Nevertheless, Expo 86’s legacy is not all positive. For many residents of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, Expo is associated with forced evictions in order to make space for tourists.\(^4\) The resulting influx of foreign investment is considered partially responsible for the city’s high cost of land.

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\(^{4}\)Nicholas Blomley, Unsettling the City (Routledge: New York, 2004), 52.