

Métis Historical Landmarks and Geographical Locations in BC - Part One

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The Métis first entered the lands now known as British Columbia over two hundred years ago as voyageurs with the great explorers of the North West Company (NWC), Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser and David Thompson. The NWC wished to expand the fur trade west of the Rocky Mountains and to find an overland route to the Pacific Ocean.

With Mackenzie they traveled to the Arctic Ocean in 1789 and to Dean Channel on the Pacific Ocean in 1793. In 1808 Simon Fraser and his men descended the treacherous rapids to the mouth of the river that was to bear his name. David Thompson and his crew found a navigable route in 1811 that would take them to the mouth of the mighty Columbia River with the waves of the Pacific Ocean pounding on the shoreline.

These NWC expeditions saw the establishment of supply depots and forts both east and west of the Continental Divide. Métis employees, with their country wives and children, were sent westward over the years because of the qualities and abilities they possessed. In addition to their activities as voyageurs, fur traders and engagés, many Métis employees acted as guides and interpreters.

Métis men and women had a pervasive influence on significant aspects of British Columbia's pre-colonial and colonial history. They played a vital role in the early development and growth of its communities and commercial and economic activities. Many cities and towns in the Province today evolved from the fur trade outposts and forts that the Métis helped to build for the fur companies.

Early Métis pioneers paved the way for other Métis who over subsequent years would migrate to beautiful British Columbia and would also make it their home. Métis men, women and children have enriched this province with the romantic and colorful aspects that are an intrinsic part of their culture, customs, traditions and heritage which they carry on today.

In recognition of the role of the Métis people in the history of this Province, the Proclamation of the British Columbia Government dated May 26, 1993 perceptively stated:

.... the Métis culture, rich in spiritual beliefs and colourful traditions, is an integral part of British Columbia's multicultural character, and

.... throughout history, Métis citizens have made significant contributions to the development and success of Our Province

1. AMELIA DOUGLAS GALLERY - NEW WESTMINSTER

In 1824 when she was 12 years old, Amelia Connolly's family came to the lands that were to become the Province of British Columbia. Her father William Connolly became the Chief Factor for the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) at Fort St. James.

At the age of 16 Amelia married James Douglas at that Fort. He later became the first Governor of the Colony of British Columbia and is considered the Father of British Columbia. In 1828 his young Métis country wife Amelia, with the help of Nancy McDougall Boucher, saved the life of James Douglas during the Kwah incident. Their actions in saving his life had a major influence on the future history of British Columbia.

Amelia Connolly Douglas, the Métis Matriarch, was later to become the First Lady of British Columbia. In 1864 Lady Amelia was an honored guest at a testimonial banquet in New Westminster on the occasion of the retirement of Governor Douglas.

The name of Amelia Connolly Douglas is remembered today in an eclectic art gallery named the Amelia Douglas Gallery. This Gallery is located at the New Westminster Campus of Douglas College at 700 Royal Avenue.

Two geographical sites in British Columbia have also been named in her honor. They are located in Ballenas Channel off the east side of Vancouver Island between Nanaimo and Parksville, and are:

Amelia Island, and

Douglas Island.

2. BASTION SQUARE & NAMEPLATES - VICTORIA

Fort Victoria was built in 1843 by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) under the supervision of Trader Charles Ross whose country wife was the Métis Isabella Mainville Ross. Roderick Finlayson, the future son-in-law of the Métis Matriarch Josette Legacé Work, assisted in the construction. The previous year Chief Factor James Douglas had chosen the location for this Fort at Camosun Inlet at the southern end of Vancouver Island. Douglas was the husband of Amelia Connolly Douglas who later became the First Lady of British Columbia. One of the servants of the HBC who cleared the land for the Fort was the young Métis John Swanson who was later to become a Master Mariner for the HBC in the coastal fur trade.

After the determination of the border between the United States and Great Britain, Vancouver Island was made a colony in 1849. The HBC moved its western headquarters to Fort Victoria from Fort Vancouver (Washington). Victoria became the capital of British Columbia in 1868.

The site of Fort Victoria is commemorated today as Bastion Square. On Government Street at the entrance to Bastion Square and along the walkway are brick nameplates imbedded in the sidewalk. These nameplates are part of a memorial to some of the early pioneers of the city and the HBC. A number of those named are Métis including some of the Victoria Voltigeurs such as Nicholas Auger, John Lemon, Jean Baptiste Jollibois and others. The following image shows a few of the Métis Victoria Voltigeurs whose nameplates are at this site:



The Métis in British Columbia: From Fur Trade Outposts to Colony, p. 53-54; 96; 183.

3. CHARLOTTE SMALL & DAVID THOMPSON STATUE - INVERMERE



Statue by Rich Roenisch
Courtesy of Windermere Valley Museum and Archives

In 1799 at Île-à-la-Crosse the great explorer David Thompson married, according to the custom of the country, a young Métis girl named Charlotte Small. Charlotte accompanied David on the epic expedition of 1807 west of the Rocky Mountains into the lands now forming part of British Columbia. Their three young Métis children accompanied them on this expedition. These children were Fanny, Samuel and Emma whose ages were six, three and one respectively.

During their marriage Charlotte traveled over 12,000 miles with her husband David Thompson. They eventually had 13 children and both were loving, thoughtful parents. David and Charlotte were married for over 57 years, dying within months of each other.

A monument with a larger-than-life statue commemorating both David Thompson and his Métis wife Charlotte Small has been erected by the Windermere Historical Society at the entrance to the town of Invermere.

The Métis in British Columbia: From Fur Trade Outposts to Colony p. 11; 28; 63-64.

4. DEASE LAKE POST– NORTH WEST BRITISH COLUMBIA



Dease Lake Post was built on the east side of Dease Lake by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1838. This Post was named after the Métis Peter Warren Dease who was the Chief Factor of Fort St. James in New Caledonia in the 1830s. His Métis brother, Chief Trader John Warren Dease, married the widowed Genevieve Beignet, the grandmother of the Métis martyr Elzear Goulet who played an important role in the Red River Resistance.

Although the Post was subsequently abandoned, the gold rushes of 1864 and 1872 revitalized the area. It became a stopover along the mining trail. Today there is a town named Dease Lake (near the site of the original Fort) that is known as the Jade Capital of the World. It is located at the junction of the Telegraph Creek Road and the Stewart-Cassiar Highway.

5. FORT GEORGE – (PRINCE GEORGE)

JUNCTION OF THE NECHAKO AND FRASER RIVERS

Fort George was built by Métis and French-Canadian voyageurs of the North West Company (NWC) in 1807 at the junction of the Fraser and Nechako Rivers under the supervision of Simon Fraser. This area had previously been explored by Alexander Mackenzie and James McDougall some years earlier.

In 1808 Simon Fraser put together an exploratory team consisting of John Stuart, Jules Quesnel, 19 Métis and French-Canadian voyageurs and two Indians. The Métis Jean Baptiste Boucher (Waccan) was a member of the crew as were LaChappelle, Baptiste, D'Alaire, LaCerte, LaGarde, Gagne, and Bourbonnais.

This team departed from the junction of the Nechako and Fraser Rivers on May 28, 1808 on their expedition in search of the Pacific Ocean. They reached the Pacific Ocean on July 2, 1808. They did not linger and quickly left for Fort George, arriving there five weeks later on August 6th.

Placer miners came to the Fort George area in 1861 to pan for gold on the nearby rivers. Named after King George III, this Fort was the origin of the present day vibrant city of Prince George that has been called “BC’s northern capital”.

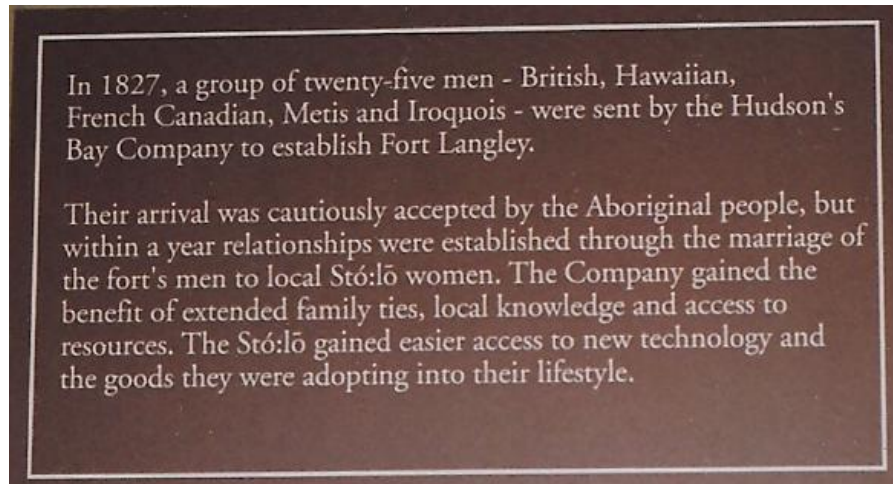
For several days in November 2008, the City of Prince George recognized the significance of the Métis Community in this area by flying the British Columbia Métis flag over City Hall including Louis Riel Day on November 16th.



The Métis in British Columbia: From Fur Trade Outposts to Colony p. 24-25; 41-42; 157.

6. FORT LANGLEY – FRASER RIVER

In 1827 Fort Langley was built on the banks of the Fraser River under the leadership of James McMillan by, among others, Métis employees of the Hudson's Bay Company. Today Fort Langley is designated as a Canadian National Historic Site. One of the plaques on the wall of the Visitor Centre at the Fort reads as follows.



The following year in 1828 Archibald McDonald was made a Chief Trader and placed in charge of Fort Langley. He was joined there by his Métis country wife Jane Klyne and their Métis children. The family moved there from Thompson's River (Fort Kamloops). As the wife of the Chief Trader, Jane Klyne McDonald became the leading lady of Fort Langley.

Fort Langley soon played a significant role in the Pacific Slope fur trade on the Fraser River, Puget Sound and Vancouver Island. With the depletion of fur-bearing animals in the area, Fort Langley's function changed from that of furs to provisions. With the help of its Métis employees the Fort grew as a trading center and it soon diversified into other fields of endeavor. Fish, farm produce, cranberries, and lumber became the focus of activities.

These activities constituted the embryonic beginnings of a number of commercial enterprises that today power the economy of the Province of British Columbia.

7. FORT ST. JAMES – NORTH CENTRAL BRITISH COLUMBIA



Fort S. James Historic Site

Courtesy Fort St. James National Historic Site

Fort St. James (originally called Stuart's Lake Fort) was built by the North West Company (NWC) on the shores of Carrier Lake (now Stuart Lake). James McDougall, an assistant to Simon Fraser, had previously arrived at this location during the winter of 1805-06. Simon Fraser's 1806 journey west of the Rockies with the Métis Jean Baptiste Boucher and other Métis and French-Canadian voyageurs led to the establishment of Fort St. James on Stuart Lake in that year. It was here that Fraser named the entire area New Caledonia and Fort St. James later became the administrative center of the fur trade in New Caledonia.

Jean Baptiste Boucher ("Waccan") was a member of the epic NWC Expedition of 1808 to the Pacific Ocean led by Simon Fraser. After this journey Boucher was posted to Fort St. James, where he was to spend most of the rest of his life. He served in the fur trade as an interpreter, voyageur, and intermediary and enforcer.

James Douglas, who was to become the first Governor of the Colony of British Columbia in 1858, served as a clerk at Fort St. James from 1826 to 1830. In 1828 his young Métis country wife Amelia Connolly with the help of Nancy McDougall Boucher (Métis country wife of Waccan and daughter of James McDougall) saved his life during the Kwah incident that occurred at Fort St. James. By saving the life of a young James Douglas, these intrepid country wives had a significant impact on the future history of British Columbia. Amelia Connolly Douglas was later to become the First Lady of British Columbia.

Today memories of the fur trade and Métis presence in this area live on in the restored Fort that has been designated as a National Historic Site by the Government of Canada.

8. FORT ST. JOHN – PEACE RIVER

Fort St. John (originally called Rocky Mountain Fort) is the oldest non-Native establishment on the British Columbia Mainland. It was founded by Alexander Mackenzie for the North West Company (NWC) in 1794 and was located on the Peace River upstream from the Moberly River (originally called the Old Beaver River) and southwest of present day Fort St. John.

The original Fort was closed in 1805, and over the years it was relocated and renamed a number of times. An early NWC fur trader on the Peace River was Alexander Roderick McLeod, who may have directed the building of Fort St. John in 1806. While in this area he married a Métis woman according to the custom of the country and had a number of Métis children by her.

Significant archeological findings have been located in this region of British Columbia. The oldest find (located seven kilometers north of present day Fort St. John) is the Charlie Lake Cave that dates back approximately 10,500 years. Another archeological dig (located 100 kilometers north of Charlie Lake) is at Pink Mountain where there was an Indian settlement inhabited over 3,000 years ago.

Today there is a thriving Métis community in Fort St. John which carries on many of the customs and traditions of their ancestors.

9. FUR BRIGADE TRAIL – NEW CALEDONIA

Starting in the 1790s, the North West Company (NWC) established supply depots and forts both east and west of the Continental Divide. Before long the NWC constructed many additional forts, houses and posts throughout the lands west of the Rocky Mountains.

These establishments were connected by a network of fur brigade trails that the NWC developed. Over the years many of the Métis and French Canadian voyageur employees formed the fur brigades during their day-to-day duties with the NWC and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC).

After the merger of the NWC and the HBC in 1821, the HBC fur trade brigades took over the transportation of furs from New Caledonia to the HBC shipping depots. This was done by a combination of pack horses, canoes and bateaux. At their destination the furs were unloaded and the brigade picked up provisions, goods and supplies to take to various posts in New Caledonia. The round trip took approximately four months.

Examples of fur brigade trails in New Caledonia which are found in the book *The Lifeline of the Oregon Country: The Fraser-Columbia Brigade System* by James R. Gibson are:

Fort St. James to Fort Alexandria – Map p. 65

Fort Alexandria to Fort Kamloops – Map p. 83

Fort Kamloops to Fort Okanagan – Map p. 94