

## Vancouver in the Nineteenth Century

Norbert MacDonald

Numéro 1-75, june 1975

The Canadian City in the 19th Century

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020584ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020584ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

MacDonald, N. (1975). Vancouver in the Nineteenth Century. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, (1-75), 51–54.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1020584ar>

## VANCOUVER IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Norbert MacDonald, University of British Columbia

By 1900 Vancouver was firmly established as British Columbia's leading city. It had long since outdistanced New Westminster in the population race, and in the 1890's had gradually moved ahead of Victoria. Not only did it have a transcontinental railroad connection, but it was also the Canadian terminus of a regular steamship service to the Orient. With a population of 25,000, it had an up to date electric street railway system, was the focal point of the province's lumber and shingle industry, and the range of goods and services available in the city could meet the needs of the region's lumbermen, fishermen, farmers and urban dwellers. Occasionally its businessmen reached as far afield as the Kootenays, the Yukon and the Prairies in their search for opportunities.

Its residents were understandably proud of such achievements, especially since it had only been incorporated in 1886. Yet Vancouver still lacked the size, range, diversity and complexity of a mature city. Thus the overwhelming majority of its residents still lived within a mile of the C.P.R.'s station and wharf near the foot of Granville Street. There was no doubt that the city's business core was concentrated between Granville and Main Streets, that the most desirable residential area was in the West End, or that industry was clustered in the False Creek area and on the inlet. Yet the outlines of these districts were still somewhat hazy and indistinct. Houses, stores and empty lots were sprinkled throughout the city, most people still walked to work, and land further than two miles from the C.P.R. station was largely uncleared.

While Vancouver's urban landscape was still unfolding in 1900, there is no doubt that the city's basic form and character was already clearly outlined. One could for example note the natural barriers to settlement posed by salt water to the west, and massive mountain ranges to the north, and the inevitability of movement to the east and south. The abundance of heavy timber in the region and the absence of large amounts of good farm land explained much of the city's

economic development. Similarly the existence of a British-Canadian political system and the predominance of an English-speaking Protestant population was of importance. The existing technology with its steamships, railroads, electric street car lines and telephones also told much about the city. The impact of each of these factors could be examined at length, but here we will focus only on the role of the Canadian Pacific Railway. For if any single agency can be said to be critical for the development of Vancouver in the nineteenth century it was undoubtedly the C.P.R. Whether one looked at the city's waterfront, street layout, residential districts, parks, tax structure, real estate prices, politics, or social clubs the importance of the railroad was clear cut. As the city grew and expanded the relative importance of the C.P.R. declined, but an appreciation of its role in the 1880's and 1890's is essential for an understanding of Vancouver.

Although logging and lumbering operations had been carried out on Burrard Inlet since the mid 1860's, by 1885 the townsite of Granville was still little more than an isolated village of three hundred persons geared to the needs of the Hastings Saw Mill for its existence. But once it became known that this little community was to be the terminus of the C.P.R. conditions changed dramatically. When the first train arrived on May 23, 1887 the population of the new city of Vancouver had jumped to 5,000 and by 1892 it reached 14,000. Most of these new settlers were migrants from eastern Canada, Great Britain and the United States, but close to half of them were former residents of other parts of the province who had decided to move to the city.

The consequences of the C.P.R. went far beyond the fact that this new rail link ended the city's isolation and facilitated a rapid rise in population. As part of the arrangement under which the railroad agreed to extend its main line from Port Moody to Vancouver, the Government of British Columbia had granted it some 6,300 acres of land in the vicinity of the new terminus. In addition private owners contributed a number of individual lots. In total the C.P.R. received approximately 6,500 acres, or about one-fifth of the land in the modern city of Vancouver, with much of it in the very heart of the city.

The immense task of planning, developing and managing this grant fell largely on L.A. Hamilton, the C.P.R.'s chief surveyor and

later assistant land commissioner. He had to choose the most appropriate location for C.P.R. lines, station, wharf, hotel and freightyards, arrange a street system that would blend in with existing streets to the east and west of the land grant, and last but not least see to it that the entire ten square mile area was developed in the most advantageous way possible.

The placement of the C.P.R. wharf, station and hotel along the Granville Street axis soon made it one of the city's main thoroughfares and pulled the core of the city almost a mile to the west of the original townsite. The city also expanded in an easterly direction along Hastings Street, but many of Vancouver's new banks, offices, hotels and homes were established near the C.P.R. facilities. A break in the alignment of city blocks at Burrard Street set off this commercial and business district from the predominately residential West End. The seventy-five acres of land on the shore of False Creek that were set aside for the railroad's shops and freight yards largely determined the evolution of that area. In time Granville Street was extended into the big land grant south of False Creek, and Shaugnessy, the city's most elite residential area was developed under C.P.R. direction. This big project was still well in the future, and would unfold only after 1908.

As the largest property owner in the city as well as its biggest and most powerful business concern, the C.P.R. played an important role in the city's economic and political life. Its wage scales, real estate prices, hotel charges and freight rates could never be ignored. Relations between city council and the C.P.R. provide an excellent insight into the role of the company. In the 1880's for example; aldermen were cordial, co-operative and a bit deferential in their dealings with C.P.R. officials. For with Vancouver's small population and limited tax base they were in no position to challenge their powerful benefactor. Indeed they were anxious to take any steps that would further the railroad's commitment to the city. The fact that they had to seek out private donations of lots for the construction of a city hall and wharf tells a good deal about Vancouver's limited resources. Similarly the fact that they had to negotiate with the C.P.R. for the purchase of school sites, hospital sites, fire hall locations and parks, and were grateful for any free

gifts, tells us something of the power relationship. While it is not clear whether council divided essentially along pro-C.P.R. and anti-C.P.R. lines, there is no doubt that the railroad was well represented. L.A. Hamilton was a prominent member of council for years and initiated the steps that led to the acquisition of the government reserve at First Narrows and the later development of Stanley Park.

As the city grew and its leaders developed a sense of their own power, relations with the C.P.R. changed. By the 1890's a whole series of issues had to be faced. Was the company or the city responsible for the upkeep of roads to Lulu Island? Who should pay for the construction of protective gates at downtown crossings? Was it essential that a draw bridge be placed in the C.P.R. trestle across False Creek? Did the city have the right to build a road across C.P.R. property so as to provide public access to the waterfront? In all these issues both sides pressed their case strongly. But while the company's earlier dominance was lost, its involvement in the city remained. Whether one considers the C.P.R.'s provision of fast steamships for the Klondike business in 1898, or notes in the 1970's that Marathon Realty, its real estate wing, has played a major role in the construction of a residential complex in Arbutus, a botanical garden near Oakridge, and a major marina on False Creek, there is no doubt that the C.P.R.'s importance for Vancouver has continued.