

## **Early Vancouver**

### **Volume Two**

**By: Major J.S. Matthews, V.D.**

**2011 Edition (Originally Published 1933)**

*Narrative of Pioneers of Vancouver, BC Collected During 1932.*

*Supplemental to volume one collected in 1931.*

### **About the 2011 Edition**

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—Courtesy H. T. Devine.  
 Looking from present City Hall towards present C. P. R. station. White tent, owned and erected by well-known pioneer, George R. Gordon, stood on corner of Cordova and Carrall streets and within which seventeen men slept on the night of June 14-15, 1886. Stump in foreground still exists—on C. P. R. crossing soon to be removed—within fifty yards of present City Hall. Regina Hotel on southwest corner Water and Cambie streets in background.

**REGINA HOTEL  
 COR. CAMBIE & WATER STS**

**TENT ON CORNER  
 CORDOVA & CARRALL STS**

**STUMP STILL  
 STANDING**

*Vancouver after fire  
 Copyright applied for*

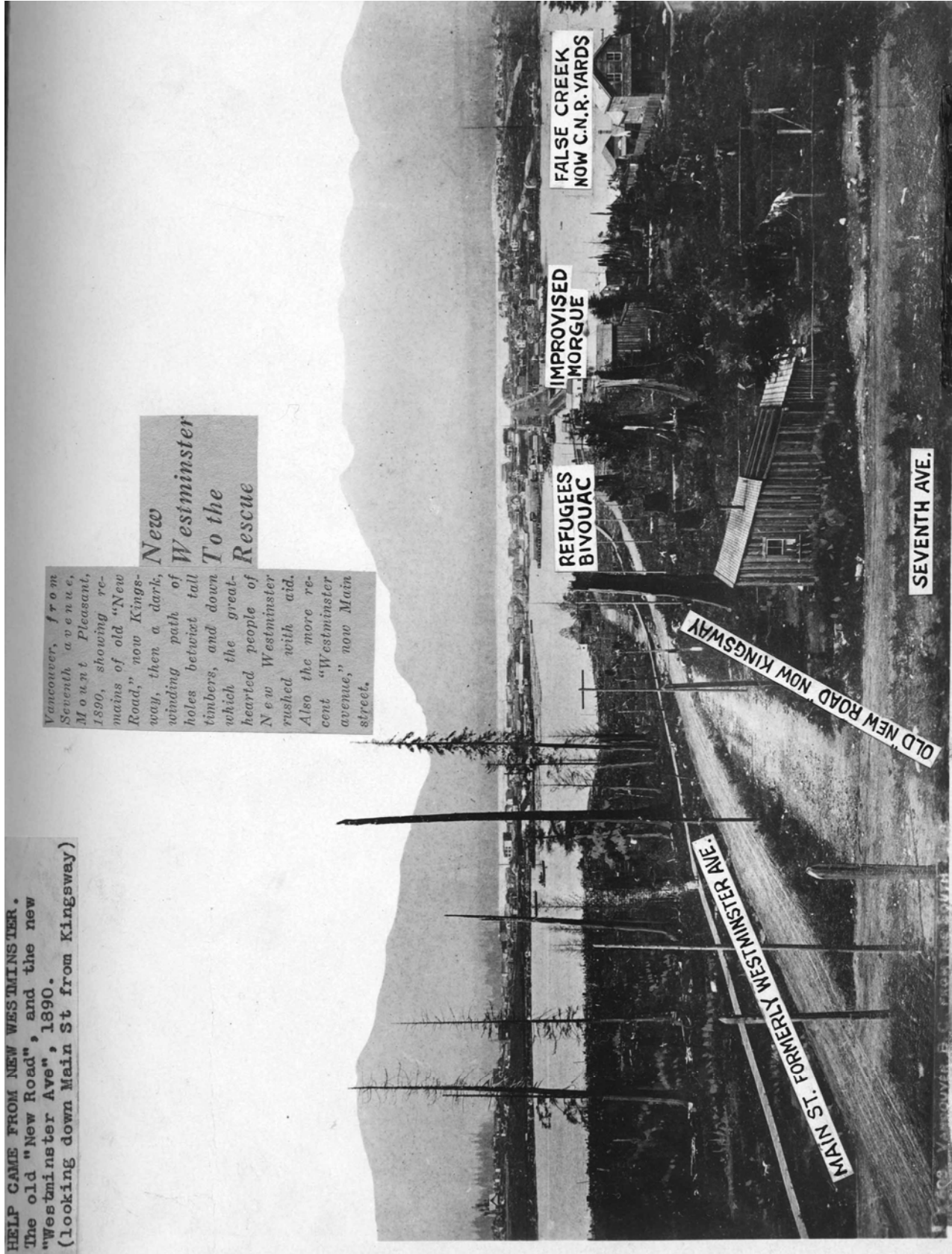
*This stump, on 1887,  
 still stands—on C.P.R.  
 right of way, east side,  
 half way bet. Water & Carrall  
 streets, COR. 2044 St*

Item # EarlyVan\_v2\_072

HELP CAME FROM NEW WESTMINSTER.  
 The old "New Road", and the new  
 "Westminster Ave", 1890.  
 (Looking down Main St from Kingsway)

Vancouver, from  
 Seventh avenue,  
 Mount Pleasant,  
 1890, showing re-  
 mains of old "New  
 Road," now Kings-  
 way, then a dark,  
 winding path of  
 holes betwixt tall  
 timbers, and down  
 which the great-  
 hearted people of  
 New Westminster  
 rushed with aid.  
 Also the more re-  
 cent "Westminster  
 avenue," now Main  
 street.

**New  
 Westminster  
 To the  
 Rescue**



Item # EarlyVan\_v2\_073

## **THE GREAT VANCOUVER FIRE.**

In Memoriam—William F. Findlay, pioneer, journalist, sportsman, whose unfinished narrative of the Great Fire is here completed by a lifelong friend, Major J.S. Matthews.

“Fire! Fire!” Those terrorizing shouts of men; ineffaceable even after forty-six years from pioneer memories. No time to think, only to run; to grasp, perhaps, some frightened child, and fly, suffocating, before the raging, racing blast. Vancouver did not *burn*; it was consumed by flame; the buildings melted. Pioneers measure the years by “The Fire”; all that has happened in Vancouver has occurred “before” or “since.”

It was Sunday, the thirteenth. A June dawn broke calm and beautiful on what promised the silent restfulness of God’s holy day, and with the rise of the sun, cool zephyrs from English Bay rustled through the forest beyond Burrard Street—the West End. Midday saw the holocaust; one great flame of fire impelled by fierce wind descended from the heavens and licked all, clean to the soil, into its awful maw. Black night saw the lights of dying embers twinkling in the darkness of a blacker desolation. Another dawn; and—men spoke softly as they moved around a long rude table upon which lay parcels of charred human flesh.

### **OLD GRANVILLE, LITTLE VANCOUVER.**

The Royal Engineers, “Navy Jack,” a few of the earlier pioneers cleared the forest off old Granville; a ragged square boxed in by tall forest walls, and bounded by what is now Cambie, Hastings and Carrall streets—a fourth side was the shore. In the “hollow” nestled our baby city, just rechristened “Vancouver,” nine weeks old, and growing like mad; mostly buildings of bright lumber, but including a shabbier few, a hotel, a saloon, a general store, a tiny church, and a cabin jail, about nine in all, erected in the ‘70s, and ranged crescent shaped along the curve of the muddy beach; once the older “Gastown.” The atmosphere of little Vancouver was one of excitement, hope, energy, eagerness; the wonderful railway was coming, over the high mountains, from Canada; there was going to be a “big town.”

Off to the west, “up on the hill” (above Victory Square) and as far as the forest’s edge (Burrard Street) was the new clearing, the “C.P.R. Townsite,” a dark jungle three months back, but now a disheveled litter of stumps, stones, debris and clearing fires. Closer in (Hastings Street) pyramids of blown roots piled high by honest sweat—no donkey engines in those days—stood ready for burning, and some were already alight. In the distance, flanking Granville Street on both sides as far as Davie Street, a wild disarray of fallen trees, cut down by the “bowling pin” method, the larger sweeping down the smaller, ten acres at a time, in one great grand crash, lay tumbled one on another in a vast impenetrable mat many feet thick, and dry as tinder after days in the hot summer sun; an ideal setting for a gigantic fire.

To the eastwards, a fringe of semi-clearing stretched a short distance from Gastown to Hastings Mill; all else was wilderness; Kitsilano, Fairview, Mount Pleasant, Hastings, all lay beneath a green carpet of primeval forest.

### **A CITY OF FOUR BLOCKS.**

Vancouver had no streets; just half a dozen planked roads and some dirt trails. Water Street was largely trestle bridge over a cove of the sea; Cordova Street was corduroy; the new street, Hastings, not long since a sinuous trail impassable in parts for wagons, was now four blocks long (Main to Cambie). The “Old Road” along the shore (Hastings Road, now Alexander Street) west from the Maple Tree to Hastings Mill, Hastings Townsite, and on to the Royal City; the “New Road,” a glorified bridle track, now Kingsway, trailed off from Carrall Street, crossed Columbia Street diagonally, and squirmed through the stumps to a narrow wooden bridge, our only bridge, crossing False Creek (Main Street).

That the Great Fire started in the C.P.R. clearing is well known; it matters little where, and then, too, opinion is so very diverse. Listen, whilst those who saw, tell the story.

“Cordova Street was not really stumped before the fire,” relates a venerable pioneer of ‘84, “between Abbott and Cambie Street a few shacks and a pigsty hid in the bushes. They had been blowing stumps up on the ‘C.P.R. hill.’ At quitting time the powdermen of the blasting gang applied their torches to the fuses; quite a sight followed; roots skyrocketing, and noise! Just like a bombardment; we used to stand on Water Street and watch.

"The morning of the fire you could see nothing for smoke. The whole of the hill above Cambie Street had been on fire for weeks before that; I spent the Sunday morning fighting the fire above the corner of Cambie and Cordova streets; it was gaining on us, so I went down to the saloons and suggested that the men had better come out and help.

"The wind increased. Chunks of flaming wood as big as my leg were flying clear over us. We did our best, but at last it crossed Cordova Street, where the Sterling Hotel is now; there was no time to lose. I gathered up a mother and two children from a shack in the lane behind, and started east, but all Water Street was ablaze, so we scurried west, down to the old float, the Moodyville landing" (below Spencers Limited) "and waded out in the water. The tide drifted a raft near me; I grabbed it. The frantic mother said something about throwing her child in the sea, that she would rather see it drown than burn; the flames were coming right over us. Then a brave little tug came right in and towed us out; gallant men they were. The hulk *Robert Ker* finally sheltered us."

#### **A NEW THEORY.**

But some say this is not the whole story; that all invisible behind its own screen of smoke, a greater fire, a mile away, was being driven under the combined forced draft of windstorm and terrific upward suction of air common to bush fires, into a fury, and was dropping flaming brands into the tinderous debris "up on the hill"; the fiery attack on the hapless town was coming from front and flank.

"The fire broke away down near Drake Street before ten o'clock; I was there and saw it," asserts a pioneer eye-witness. "We were building the road bed for the railway from Carrall Street to the proposed roundhouse site, and the ground above the site was being cleared. I saw the fire was getting dangerous, and immediately put some of our men—they volunteered—to help fight the fire, cautioning them that, if it got away from where it was semi-cleared, they were not to attempt to fight it, or they would lose their lives."

#### **FIRE SWEEPS DOWN (NOW) GRANVILLE STREET.**

"Shortly after noon the fire got out of control; it gained such momentum as to completely obscure the sky; the air was just one mass of fiery flame driven before a southwest gale. We never heard again of our three gallant volunteers; sterling men of splendid character; they must have perished; their bodies were never found. The remainder of our men were forced out of our camp on the shore just west of the present Cambie Street bridge, and driven into False Creek, where some Indians in canoes rescued them.

"I hurried down to our little office where the North Vancouver ferry now stands, and had been there but a few moments when a rabble of people rushed by. I walked a few yards up to 'Gassy Jack's,' but before I got there the 'Sunnyside' across the street was a mass of flame, and before I could get back to the office I had just left that too was afire; I saved nothing.

"I waded out into the water between Carrall and Columbia streets. The heat was so intense we gasped for breath. Close to the surface of the sea was a cooler strata of air; we held our mouths close to the surface, and breathed that; it saved us."

#### **FIRE JUMPS "MAPLE TREE SQUARE."**

"One huge flame, a hundred feet long, burst from the Deighton Hotel, leaped 'Maple Tree Square,' and swallowed up the buildings where now stands the Europe Hotel; the fire went down the old 'Hastings Road'" (Alexander Street) "faster than a man could run. Two iron tires and some ashes was all that was left of man, horse and cart which perished in the middle of Carrall Street."

#### **"NEW WESTMINSTER FOREVER."**

"The greatheartedness of the people of New Westminster is an imperishable recollection. Young men on horseback raced up and down the streets of the Royal City shouting that Vancouver had been destroyed, and its people without food and covering. Housewives hurriedly put up food; the Hyack Fire Brigade collected it. Towards sundown came a galloper through a slit in the forest, the 'New Road'—the 'Old Road' was blocked by fire—saying that help was following. His Worship Mayor MacLean sent messengers to where the people were huddled together for the night that they were to assemble at the south end of the False Creek bridge." (Near C.N.R. Depot.)

### **A SAD SPECTACLE.**

“Then followed what was probably the sorriest procession Vancouver ever saw. No tears, no whimpering, only the stern visages of hungry men, women and children who had lost all, garbed in such as they wore when they first ran, with faces black with sweat and charcoal, straggling in groups through the darkness of that rough old bush trail along the shore.

“At midnight two wagon loads of eatables arrived; fried eggs between slices of bread, or hard boiled in a soda can for protection. By the feeble light of lantern or candle, the weaker were served first; the men got what was left; at dawn another wagon arrived.”

### **GOD BLESS THE SAILORS.**

“Many persons were burned; of bandages there were none. A single telephone ran from New Westminster to Onderdonk’s camp at Port Moody, and by it went the news. Four sailors from some ship, with splendid acumen, immediately set out in a rowboat with medical supplies, and reached the bivouac after midnight, hungry and exhausted after their long pull. All eatables had been consumed, but amongst the debris of empty boxes a missed parcel was found. Between the sandwiches was a little note in a woman’s writing, saying that it was ‘very little, but all I have.’ The sailorman turned to the east, and with hand raised in supplication, implored the Almighty to bless the people of New Westminster, and never suffer upon them such tribulation as surrounded him; a sort of thing you don’t expect from a rough sailorman, and in the middle of the night.

“A few boards made a rude table in a shed at the other end of the bridge, and into this improvised morgue, feebly lit by candlelight, the procession of distracted in search of their loved ones, the bearers with their dead, sorrowfully came and went. At sunrise, twenty-one parcels of charred fragments—not bodies—each with a pinned note telling where it was picked up, lay on that table.”

### **NUMBER WHO PERISHED NEVER KNOWN.**

“The fire occurred at a time when families were scattered. It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon; the midday meal was over, the children at Sunday school, youth abroad seeking pleasure, older folks, many of them new arrivals exploring their future home. Then, with relentless swiftness, and the fury of a blast furnace, a great tongue of flame swept down on a people directly in its path; each person flew for his own life. One building escaped, the Regina Hotel.” (Southwest corner of Water and Cordova streets.)

“How many perished will never be known. Two weeks later, a building operations disclosed, beneath a part burned mattress, the remains of one poor fellow who had sought its protection; his grave is on Hastings Street, near the City Hall. Three bodies, evidently strangers, father, mother and child, were recovered, their clothing unharmed, from a shallow well of water near the present Police Station; they had suffocated. A skeleton found two decades later was identified, by a watch, as of the fire. It was the burning gum and pitch, with its bitter black smoke as suffocating as burning oil, which made the fire so terrible; death by suffocation was the awful fate of some.”

“I was a girl then,” recalls a lady, “the fire was coming at a terrific rate; I raced to my skiff, and hurried home, but had scarce got as far as Deadman’s Island when all was gone. It was a grand but awful sight.”

The embers of our first city were still smouldering when the present one arose. Sunday saw ruin; Monday the yellow scantlings stood a harmonizing colour in a black desert; “Raised from the Ashes in Three Days” read the sign on the old “C.P.R. Hotel” (afterwards Northern) on Hastings Street.

Historic Gastown vanished; nothing remained save its soul; save the spirit of resolute men and courageous women. How was it rebuilt? By faith, and the character of its people. Out of the dust of “the village at the entrance” (to Burrard Inlet)—Col. Moody so alludes to it in 1863—rose our world port; a metropolis of beauty and of culture, of gallant men and graceful women, of green lawns and monumental edifices, the beautiful well governed home of an enlightened and humane people.

What good purpose; it must have had some great purpose; the Great Fire served, what grave lesson it taught—perhaps steeled by ordeal to speed us on to better things—none may know save He who knoweth all; even when a sparrow fall.