

## **Early Vancouver**

### **Volume Four**

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

**2011 Edition (Originally Published 1944)**

*Narrative of Pioneers of Vancouver, BC Collected During 1935-1939.*

*Supplemental to Volumes One, Two and Three collected in 1931-1934.*

### **About the 2011 Edition**

The 2011 edition is a transcription of the original work collected and published by Major Matthews. Handwritten marginalia and corrections Matthews made to his text over the years have been incorporated and some typographical errors have been corrected, but no other editorial work has been undertaken. The edition and its online presentation was produced by the City of Vancouver Archives to celebrate the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the City's founding. The project was made possible by funding from the Vancouver Historical Society.

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Footnote or Endnote Reference:

Major James Skitt Matthews, *Early Vancouver*, Vol. 4 (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 2011), 33.

Bibliographic Entry:

Matthews, Major James Skitt. *Early Vancouver*, Vol. 4. Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 2011.

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### **WESTMINSTER ROAD. GREAT FIRE. DOUGLAS ROAD.**

The day Vancouver burned was Sunday. There was one of our sub contractors (by name McCormack) killed, and was being buried by the Masons at New Westminster, and consequently all or most all of the prominent business people were over at New Westminster when the fire was at its worst. In those days the road was a one way traffic bush road, built by Jno. McDougall with tall timbers on both sides. I was at English Bay when the fire started and only got back to town (when the place was licked up) in the evening. The scene was awful from my point of view, English Bay. Just one mass of rolling cloud half a mile wide and a mile high of black smoke like as though it was half pitch.

### **L.A. HAMILTON.**

I did not know the Stewart you mention unless he was of the firm of Foley Welsh & Stewart. I knew L.A. Hamilton well. Hamilton gave H.F. Keefer the contract to slash the Brighthouse Estate, which I and McDougall did. I have one eye-witness to the Great Fire my brother John Keefer of Rosedale, B.C., who was with me on that date.

*[signed]* Geo. H. Keefer

### **[LETTER FROM GEO. H. KEEFER.]**

Cowichan Bay,  
Aug. 14, 1935.

Dear Mr. Matthews:

In reading over your letters I see where in several places you have mentioned instances and dates in error somewhat. For instance one letter mentions Quote—"The note you that you finished the Right-of-way, June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1885 is wrong should be June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1886."

I am in this letter going to give you a short history of myself which may clear up a lot of things, and which I know to be rather misty from the numerous writings you may have on hand, and probably in which the dates do not coincide.

### **KEEFER FAMILY.**

I was born 1865 and raised in Ontario, County of Dufferin. Am the eldest of a family of eight. Six boys and two girls, everyone of them are living in or around today. On my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, June 23<sup>rd</sup> 1885, I was given a farewell party at my home, at Bowling Green, Ont., prior to my leaving for Victoria, B.C.

I landed in Victoria July 6<sup>th</sup> 1885 after a very pleasant trip across the continent via Northern Pacific. The C.P.R. was under construction at that time through the mountains, and I therefore had to come N.P. to Tacoma, thence by boat to Victoria.

### **JOHN MCDOUGALL.**

A few days after my arrival in Victoria, Hugh F. Keefer arrived in Victoria from C.P.R. construction with an outfit of plan men and horses; to commence operations on the E. & N. Ry., commonly known as the Island Ry. Hugh had secured a three mile contract along Shawnigan Lake, and McDougall and I took the contract of clearing the right-of-way, finishing up the job sometime in November of that year. I was then considered a pretty strong man and a first class axe-man. I had to be strong for I had fought my way through a bunch of tough lads at Orangeville High School, the previous two years.

### **FIRST MAP OF VANCOUVER.**

After completing our work on the Island Ry. I came to Victoria to look around and prepare for Xmas. I used to spend considerable time at Geo. A. Keefers office, where H.B. Smith was at work on that map you have of Vancouver. I used to run errands for the office, bring the mail, post letters, etc., etc. All the talk of the Vancouver extension was going on at that time, and during the winter Hugh Keefer went to Ottawa and secured the contract for same.

### **H.B. SMITH. GEO. BLACK'S.**

Some time after Xmas, and New Years, Geo. A. Keefer, H.B. Smith, Fred Bodwell, Fred Little, and myself, went over to Vancouver (then known as Coal-Harbor) to survey the Capilano Waterworks. We made the Sunnyside Hotel our headquarters, going across the Inlet in two row-boats to the work taking lunch with us. Harry Hemlow was Proprietor then, with Tom Jackman, Bar Keep, and Joe Fortes, Porter. After the job of surveying was through we returned to Victoria, returning to Vancouver in March 1886 to begin operations on the Extension which means from Port Moody to English Bay. This work was pretty well cleaned up by midwinter 1886 and 7. McDougall and I again took the Right-of-way contract, also a mile or two of the grading from Hastings (then know as Geo. Blacks) back towards Hastings Sawmills. McDougall looked after the grading, and I stayed with the Right-of-Way. Men were plentiful, so I started out with a gang of whitemen, putting up a camp about the Second Narrows.

### **INDIANS ON C.P.R. CONSTRUCTION.**

Everyone was clamouring for sub contracts and the whole work was soon let, and I had to hustle with the clearing; this is why I put on 85 Stickine Indians.

### **ENGLISH BAY BRANCH. C.P.R.**

The Indians camped near my camp and were soon strung out in gangs with a white foreman in each, and we managed to stagger through by June 12<sup>th</sup> 1886. I lost \$4000 for Hugh Keefer on that job; it was a very hard job to do; all side hill mostly and all timber had to be rolled down to the beach and burned there, when the tide would allow. A most peculiar thing about clearing that R. of W., I ran across all kinds of timber and fossils. Spanish Cedar, Pincel Cedar, Red Cedar, Yellow Cedar, Bamboo, 8 and 10 inch diameter, all sorts of flotsom and jetson and remains of wrecks etc., etc., floated there from all over the Pacific.

### **PORT MOODY TO GRANVILLE.**

The sub-Contractors were starting at the Coal Harbor end. Fred G. Little to Hastings Mill. Some station men had a little work; then John McDougall to Geo. Blacks, then J.B. Harrison from Blacks for a mile or so; then Harkness and McCormack had a mile or so; (the latter McCormack was killed, blasting out stumps and it was his funeral that took place on June 13<sup>th</sup> 1886 the day of the Great Fire); after Harkens and McCormack came McFarland and McGinty from Port Moody to connect up. These fellows were all hustling the work, and you can just imagine how I had to get there with the clearing, in fact, I had to let McFarland and McGinty do part of their own clearing as I could not be every place at once.

However I plugged through, Hugh Keefer paid me wages for staying with the job and we junked the contract.

### **HUGH KEEFER.**

I think Hugh lost \$20,000.00 on that job, but he had made \$200,000.00 up the line, around Lytton, before, but during that summer Hugh bought the Hastings Sawmill property known as "east end," and made some deal with the C.P.R. in which he more than recovered his loss on the extension.

### **CHINESE RIOTS.**

After the Great Fire and things had settled down to rebuilding the town we had another fire scare up Hastings Street, and it looked for a time that everyone was going to be burnt out again but everyone turned out and fought it back. During the winter of 1886 and 87 was the Chinese Riots. There was not much doing and a lot of idle men around and anything like Chinese working was enough. As the Spring of 1887 was well advanced I left Vancouver for Seattle. The Lake Shore road was beginning to move, and I took another contract of 14 miles of Right-of-way from Bear Creek to Snohomish in the state of Washington (then Wash. Territory). Right-of-Way is not very paying work unless one has unlimited fire freedom. So I joined a bridge gang, and we travelled all over the territory, Oregon, and California, building new and repairing old bridges. We lived in cars, dining and sleeping apartments very comfortable. We would be pushed out to some new work and side tracked, until finished then perhaps the next job would be miles away.

## **KEEFER FAMILY.**

I returned to Vancouver the winter of 1889 & 90. During the interval, my father and the rest of the family had moved out from Orangeville to Vancouver, and were living on Mt. Pleasant. On my arrival home there was two ft. of snow on Mt. Pleasant, and a foot or more of slush down town.

My next letter will deal with the first sewer system in Vancouver, which Hugh Keefer had the contract and on which I worked as form builder.

From the foregoing time you will be able, I hope, to place certain dates that may not be so clear to you.

## **GREAT FIRE, 1886.**

McCormack was a mason and had a masonic funeral, all the R.R. contractors were at it as well as most of the business people of town, but its just as well they were away the only thing they might have saved would be their papers or documents etc. The old town burned plenty fast, people were burned to death running away from it.

Yours very truly,

*[signed]* Geo. H. Keefer

I don't know how "Carl Ave" came about or who Carl was, I may find out in Victoria someday.

## **[LETTER FROM GEO. H. KEEFER.]**

Cowichan Bay,  
Aug. 20<sup>th</sup>, 1935.

Mr. Matthews,  
Archivist,  
Vancouver, B.C.

Dear Sir:

To continue a few of my experiences in the early days of Vancouver. Allow me to state the following.

## **HUGH F. KEEFER. SEWER SYSTEM. SEWER PIPES.**

In the winter of 1889 and 90, Hugh F. Keefer, my uncle, secured a contract to put in Vancouver's first Sewer which took in from the height of land in East Vancouver and following westward to (as far as I can remember) the height of land at or near Granville St., and taking in the territory between the harbor front and False creek. I am not sure to just the exact limits, but I know I worked here and there over most of that territory, making the forms for manholes, etc., also tressles over low ground on Water St., to carry the pipes. The pipes were terra-cotta and were about 16 inches in diameter by 3 ft. long, inside measurement, laid carefully with some sort of slicinite on the joints which were shouldered and fitted very neatly. A Mr. Mowan or Mouan was the Engineer on the job, and the ditches were dug by Italians and whites. All blasting was covered with small timbers, in the round, and chained together with log chains at each end. There were not many mishaps during the blasting; a few windows broken by concussion etc. As far as I can remember all lines lead down hill to Cambie or Abbott St., and was then carried out into the harbor, somewhere nearly opposite No. 1 fire hall on Water St. I remember trying to put in a wooden box out into the harbor to lay the outlet pipes in, and what a time I had trying to keep that box under water until the pipe was laid. All places where the pipes were crossing depressions the Engineer would have them houses in a box. This was to allow filling to keep same from freezing etc. Of course, now a days, all depressions "except one" in the surface have been filled in and some sort of solidity prevails. There was a lot of snow fell in Vancouver during this winter, and though it did not last long, it left a very wet kind of digging, and lots of water ran down the ditches especially after a big rain.