

Early Vancouver

Volume Seven

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

2011 Edition (Originally Published 1956)

Narrative of Pioneers of Vancouver, BC Collected between 1931-1956.

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 125th anniversary of the City's founding. The project was made possible by funding from the Vancouver Historical Society.

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[photo annotation:]

Her Majesty the Queen and His Worship Dr. Telford, M.D.

May 29, 1939

Photo by Arthur E. French, manager, Photo Dept., "Post-Intelligencer" Seattle, Wash. Hon. Ian Mackenzie minister of National Defence (tall gentleman).

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August 14, 1931.

The City Archives, Vancouver, 1931.

Known as "The Deserted Chamber"

After many years private endeavor at his Kitsilano home, here in May 1931, Major J.S. Matthews, pioneer, 1898, established the City Archives in this old room in the lower of the former City Hall on Main Street. He left it before Christmas 1932, and on 13 June 1933 was given accommodation in the Temporary City Hall, Hastings St. The old room had been vacant for 30 years; was the dirtiest room in Vancouver, plaster ceiling had fallen and lay on the floor; cobwebs and torn wall paper hung in festoons, and the feathers and bones of a pigeon dead many years lay where it had died. The floor was a thick mass of dried paint of every hue and windows were kept open with any profit available, usually a stick. Major Matthews applied to the Library Board for the use of it, and permission being granted, he himself, in overalls, and with a pall and scrubbing brush from his home, began cleaning and arranging. No one came near for days. With no funds save his own, he furnished it with a discarded desk, a chair held together with wire, a waste paper basket without a bottom, and a card board merchandise carton for a filing cabinet. Bookshelves were created with boards separated between blocks of wood. There was neither heat, electric light, water, janitor service, telephone, typewriter, supplies or salary. Ultimately he was allowed to spend up to thirty dollars per month for purchases. In this room, he remained two summers and one winter. Without light he went home when it got too dark to work, without heat he worked in his overcoat. Visitors were few, about one every two weeks. At his home on Kitsilano Beach was a mass of historical material collected during 33 years since 1898; all about Vancouver and vicinity only, and each morning for 20 months he carried a parcel of it in his hand as he went by street car to his City Archives. The former dirty chamber gradually assumed a humble but attractive appearance, and was comprised of a mass of historical pictures and papers owned by Mrs. Matthews and himself, and who were offering it to the citizens of Vancouver as a gift. The Library Board, on the advice of its Librarian, then formally notified Major Matthews that he could no longer pursue his endeavors under their patronage, but were the Provincial Archivist, Vic- toria, John Hosie, that actually they were putting him aside so that they could continue it themselves. Mr. Hosie promptly sent the letter to Major Matthews. The City Solicitor, T.P. Williams, warned Major Matthews to remove everything, and quickly. During Christmas week, 1932, quietly and unobserved, it was returned to his home. When the Librarian inspected the room and found it empty, immediate demerit was made that he bring it back, or suffer prosecution if he did not. The timely and kindly warnings of Mr. Hosie and Mr. Williams had averted a foul attempt to hypothecate the private possessions of a gracious generous lady, and of a man who had worked in the public weal without any remuneration for years. For 5 months Major Matthews continued his archival efforts at his home. On 1st June 1933 the City Council granted his request for permission to use the title "City Archivist", allotted a small unfurnished room in the Temporary City Hall to his use, gave a gratuity of twenty five dollars, and notified the Library Board of what they had done. It is scarcely credible that a man voluntarily endeavoring to establish so laudable a civic institution, should, together with his gracious wife, have had to endure injustice, insult, and finally a deliberate attempt to take, by force, a private collection which had been in his home for a quarter of a century, and which he generously of his own volition and at his own expense had fallen into the hands of the Library Board. The disgraceful incident was attributed to jealousy. In December 1936 the new City Hall was opened, the "City Archives" was allotted the whole of the ninth floor, still occupied in 1951. Photo by Rowland J. Towers, June 1931. C.V. City N.U.P.3 - City Archives.

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[photo annotation:]

August 14, 1931
Chamber”

The City Archives, Vancouver, 1931. Known as “The Deserted

After many years private endeavor at his Kitsilano home, here, in May 1931, Major J.S. Matthews, pioneer, 1898, established the “City Archives” in this old room in the tower of the former City Hall on Main street. He left it before Christmas 1932, and on 13 June 1933 was given accommodation in the Temporary City Hall, Hastings St. The old room had been vacant for 30 years; was the dirtiest room in Vancouver, plaster ceiling had fallen and lay on the floor; cobwebs and torn wall paper hung in festoons, and the feathers and bones of a pigeon, dead many years lay where it had died. The floor was a thick mass of dried paint of every hue, and windows were kept open with any prop available, usually a stick. Major Matthews applied to the Library Board for the use of it, and permission being granted, he himself, in overalls and with a pail and scrubbing brush from his home, began cleaning and arranging. No one came near for days at a time; he was alone. On the glass pane of the upper half of a plain door, he affixed by the gum of its flap a business envelope on which he had written “City Archives”; the title he chose. With no funds save his own, he furnished it with a discarded desk, a chair held together with wire; a waste paper basket without a bottom, and a cardboard merchandise carton for a filing cabinet. Bookshelves were created with boards separated between blocks of wood. There was neither heat, electric light, water, janitor service, telephone, typewriter, supplies or salary. Ultimately he was allowed to expend up to thirty dollars per month for purchases. In this room, he remained two summers and one winter, without light, he went home when it got too dark to work; without heat he worked in his overcoat. Visitors were few, about one every two weeks. At his home on Kitsilano Beach was a mass of historical material collected during 33 years since 1898; all about Vancouver and vicinity only, and each morning for 20 months he carried a parcel of it in his hand as he went by street car to his “City Archives.” The former dirty chamber gradually assumed a humble but attractive appearance, and was comprised of a mass of historical pictures and papers owned by Mrs. Matthews and himself, and who were offering it to the Citizens of Vancouver as a gift.

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[LETTER FROM J.S. MATTHEWS TO GEORGE FITCH.]

2083 Whyte Ave.,
Kitsilano Beach,
Vancouver, B.C.

31st July, 1931.

Dear Mr. Fitch:

Your reply to my question in our momentary conversation today prompts me to ask if you could consent to approach His Worship to donate to the Vancouver City Library all such interesting historical papers, documents, invitation cards, etc., etc., which he has received during his long term as Mayor of Vancouver. By "all" is meant, such as he would care to part with.

It would seem that there would be a wealth of historical information about men and things, and perhaps he would like to have them placed where they would be treasured and preserved for posterity.

For your private, and unofficial information, may I say that the Library Board granted me the use of a room at the Old City Hall, and I have gathered together there quite a lot of stuff about Vancouver in the old days. If His Worship would care to have me explain what has been collected, and how his treasures would be taken care of, I should welcome the opportunity very much.

Faithfully yours,

J.S. Matthews.

George Fitch, Esq.
City Hall,
City.

Note: Mr. Fitch was Secretary to Mayor Louis D. Taylor at this time. It is interesting to note that this letter was written two years before Major Matthews was appointed City Archivist.

A.W.