

**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 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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**Contact Information**

City of Vancouver Archives  
1150 Chestnut Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6J 3J9  
604.736.8561  
archives@vancouver.ca  
vancouver.ca/archives



**THE VANCOUVER SUN MAGAZINE SUPPLEMENT, 1 MAY 1948.**

ALDERMEN'S UMBRELLAS SAVED CITY ARCHIVES.

By Albert Foote.

Vancouver is far too youthful to have any very old buildings, but one of its oldest, the old City hall, still stands. Sadly bedraggled by the march of time, she is resigned in her old age to the sneers and taunts of horrified pseudo art lovers who shudder at her ugly architectural lines.

Even so, the building on Main Street is surely a beloved link to the glorious past in the hearts of old-timers.

Just who it was that drew the plans for the ancient pile of red brick I do not know. I suspect that the architect, if still living, would prefer to remain anonymous. He had dire possibilities in mind, evidently, when he worked out his ideas, for he flanked both front corners with bastions.

Not satisfied with the bastion effect, he crowned the whole affair with the touch of a master when he added a two-decker wooden tower on the roof. This tower was removed some years ago and has not been missed. Just what useful purpose it served in earlier days is unknown, but for a time, at least, it served Vancouver well, for it helped to keep alive the feeble flame of public interest in what today has developed into our city archives.

Vancouver, usually generous in her impulses and aware of the value of her splendid short history, has been woefully amiss in her appreciation of the untiring, loving devotion lavished upon the preservation of documents and data of her early-day life by our city archivist, Major J.S. Matthews. Lately she has made some amends for this neglect, but not nearly enough.

The history of the birth and growth of the city archives is closely associated with that tower, formerly perched on top of the old City Hall.

Major Matthews, for many years a collector of Vancouver historical data, by pure chance happened to meet E.S. Robinson, our city librarian, on the steps of the library and asked him if there wasn't some place in the building where his archives could find a resting place; his collection had outgrown the space available at home.

Mr. Robinson was very sympathetic towards this project, and the archives were removed into the library basement, but soon this place became too cramped. It was then the much-worried major was offered the sumptuous quarters in the wooden tower atop the City Hall.

Great festoons of cobwebs hanging everywhere gave the tower a truly archival appearance. The effect was further heightened by the bare laths exposed in their pristine nudity by unsightly patches where the plaster had fallen away. Major Matthews was ashamed of the bedraggled place and never asked anyone except collectors and experts to view his beloved treasures so unsuitably housed.

For two winters the archives reposed in the crazy tower on the City Hall, two such terribly wet winters as we have just come through this year. The roof leaked in many places. Rain could do little damage to the furniture, an old desk, a cardboard filing box and two bar-room chairs, but rain and damp weather worked terrible havoc on the archives, and the major did not propose to see his valued documents turned into soggy pulp by the copiously weeping winter skies. Something had to be done at once and the major did it.

Men were not considered sissies who carried umbrellas in those days, and most men carried them. Just below the tower was the council chamber and just outside the entrance to this impressive place there was a rack for the parking of aldermanic bumbershoots. The sight of this rack on morning, when the usual rain had turned into a deluge, gave Major Matthews his big idea. It dawned on the archivist that these umbrellas could be put to a far better use in protecting the

archives than shedding rain off the heads of aldermen. He further reasoned that umbrellas were cheap and most aldermen could afford to buy a new one.

Hardly was the idea born that it was translated into action, and miraculously the umbrellas disappeared from the rack. The archives were saved. The major slept peacefully at night as the terrific gust of rain beat down on his roof and lulled him to deeper slumber, for he realized his archives were roosting under the aldermanic umbrellas. He slept on untroubled by qualms of conscience over the matter. After all, borrowing a few umbrellas in the interests of so vital a cause was justified by the ends achieved.

The umbrellas finally wore out after long and faithful service, but the thrifty archivist skinned the wornout covers off them and saved the sticks.

These umbrella sticks he tied into a bundle, stood them in a corner and promptly forgot the whole affair. The fame of the major and his archives was rapidly growing, and kindly folks began to send in contributions to the collection. All these added exhibits took up space, and space was at a high premium in the skimpy quarters allotted to the archives. No doubt a few things not really grading as archives got mixed up in the confusion of the over-crowded tower. So it must have been with the umbrella sticks.

Came the time when the entire City Council was entertained by Major Matthews with a formal inspection of the whole collection of Vancouver's prized relics. As the city fathers milled about the crowded tower, peering at the homely artifacts and curious documents of pioneer days, one of them happened to notice the bundle of umbrella sticks standing half hidden in a dark corner. This man became curious over the queer exhibit and asked the major if these relics had come around the Horn in the old SS Beaver. The embarrassed archivist tried his best to distract his guest from the umbrella exhibit, but suddenly one of the aldermen grabbed a stick and held it high in the air, shouting:

"This umbrella handle belongs to me. Last time I saw it was about two years ago when I left it in the rack outside during a council meeting. My initials are carved on it—there can be no mistake. Just explain to me how it ever got in here among these relics?"

The major was not stuck for an answer, for he calmly replied, "Those umbrellas served a far better purpose than shedding rain off an alderman." The major had won the argument on points and that ended the matter.

It was during one of those rainy days when the umbrellas were in use protecting the treasures, rain pouring through the roof by the bucketful, that a distinguished visitor called to inspect the collection.

This man was no less a personage than Sir Henry Myers, a director of the British Museum and an outstanding world authority on matters of this nature. As he stood there in the crowded tower atop the old city hall, rain running down his neck, his feet awash and his clothing bedraggled, he glanced about the place with a look of deep appreciation, and, turning to Major Matthews, merely said: "What astounds me about this collection is the appalling difficulties under which you labor."

The great man, no doubt thought the umbrellas were a part of the municipal plan for preserving the city documents. The major said nothing.

(Note in pencil—"Pure rubbish—quite untrue." JSM)