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Newcastle Island's turbulent past

by E. Joyce White



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Totem near the boat dock on Newcastle Island. The pole is one of two by Snunéymux^w artist Noel Brown and shows an eagle and a bear, traditional harbingers of the return of the salmon to the river. The poles were raised in May 2000. Two Kwakiutl poles carved by well-known native artist Mungo Martin once stood on Newcastle Island, but these were returned to their traditional territory in the early 1990s. The poles were funded by the Newcastle Island Society, Weyerhaeuser Canada, who also provided the wood, and the provincial government.

For Gabriolan history buffs there is, laying just a ferry and boat ride away, a treasure-trove of the past at Newcastle Island Provincial Park. This island has enjoyed—and endured—a varied and colourful history. According to legend, there is even a ghost who haunts Kanaka Bay.

The first known inhabitants of the island that we now call “Newcastle” were the Snunéymux^w, who spent winters, from September to April, fishing for salmon and herring. The Snunéymux^w villages on the island were at Midden Bay on the northwest side facing Departure Bay, and at Mark Bay in the southeast, adjacent to the present boat dock.¹ A 1971 archaeologist’s report cites the discovery in the area of the pavilion of 410 artifacts; including stone, bone, pieces of antler, ochre, tooth, shell, wood, metal, and glass.

Around the time of the arrival of Europeans, the Aboriginal people were using the island principally for burials. Bodies were wrapped in cedar bark and placed in wooden boxes before interment in caves on the north end of the island. The deceased’s personal possessions were also placed in the cave.

Spanish explorers were the first Caucasians to visit this part of our coast, arriving during the last decade of the 18th century. They came on voyages of exploration and to establish naval bases, but did not settle.

¹ Elders of the Snunéymux^w recall the names of three of their villages on Newcastle Island, *lhapqum*; *qulastun* (Clostun), meaning “facing the other way”—a reference to the shape of the bay; and *saysetsun*, meaning “training place for athletes”.

The first permanent settlers on Newcastle Island were miners. The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) hired them in England and, following a gruelling voyage by sea around Cape Horn, they arrived in Nanaimo. These miners named the island after their own mining town of Newcastle-on-Tyne in northern England.

The first coal shaft was sunk in 1853 by English and First Nations miners working together. Later they were joined in the mines by Chinese and Hawaiian labourers.

The HBC soon realized that they were not destined to become coal barons and, in 1861, sold the entire Vancouver Island coal holdings to the Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company. Coal mining continued intermittently on Newcastle until 1900, with varying degrees of success. Today two shafts are marked on the island, one on the east side at Shaft Point and another a short distance away at Kanaka Bay. This latter shaft, sunk in 1898, was only ever used for ventilation. By the time it was completed coal mining on the island was winding down.

Kanaka Bay is noteworthy for another reason. This is where, it is rumoured, the ghost of Peter Kakua haunts. "Kanaka" was the name given to the Hawaiian Islanders who were among the earliest non-Aboriginal people to settle on the coast. The Kanakas, some of whom were formerly in the fur trade, worked for the HBC in the mines and stores, or came as crew members aboard whalers and merchant ships.

One December night in 1868, in a fit of drunken rage, Peter Kakua axed to death his wife (Que-en also known as Mary), their infant daughter, his wife's mother (Shil-at-ti-nord), and his wife's father (Squash-e-lek), when he came home late one

night and discovered his recently-estranged wife and her father together in bed.²

Three days after the murder a search party found Kakua hiding in the bush near a small bay on the east side of Newcastle Island. Taken to Victoria, he was duly tried for murder, and was found guilty.

Kakua was returned to Nanaimo and hanged on Gallows Point in March 1869. Because he was non-white, the authorities in Victoria would not allow his body to be buried in the graveyard and, as a non-Indian, he could not be buried in the Indian burial grounds either, so he was buried near the bay on Newcastle Island where he was found.³

Around about the time of the Kakua murder trial a new industry opened up on the island. The HBC were aware of the fine quality of the Newcastle Island sandstone; they had been using it for years in their office fireplaces, but they had never mined it commercially.

Joseph Emory, a contractor in search of sandstone for building the San Francisco Mint came to Newcastle Island. He had learned of this flawless sandstone with its unusual strength and weather resistant qualities from an 1860 report by geologist

² A 1982 Ministry of Lands, Parks, and Housing brochure, *Ghosts of Newcastle Island*, gives a rather less lurid, but inaccurate, version of this story, and includes a supposed sentencing speech of the trial judge, of which there is no trace either in the official trial records (BCARS GR419, Box 7, File 1869-2) or in contemporary newspaper accounts (*British Colonist*, February 17 and 19, 1869). A full account of this tragedy is given by Bill Merilees, *Newcastle Island—A Place of Discovery*, Chapter 7, Heritage House, 1998. Another good detailed account is given by Tom Koppel, *Kanaka—The Untold Story of Hawaiian Pioneers in British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest*, Chapter 10, Whitecap Books, 1995.

³ In 1899, his remains were inadvertently dug up by miners, and he was reburied in an unmarked grave.

James Hector, who was with the Palliser expedition. In 1869 the North-western Construction Company of San Francisco established a full-scale working quarry, located on the western side of the island. By 1870, about 1000 tonnes of Newcastle Island stone, to be used in the construction of the Mint, was shipped by schooner to San Francisco. The six pillars supporting the Mint's portico were each 8.4-metres long (27½ ft.) with a diameter of 117 centimetres (a little under 4 ft.).

Tragedy struck the project in February 1872 when the three-masted sailing ship *Zephyr*, outward bound from Nanaimo to San Francisco with two of the columns and more than a hundred sandstone blocks, struck the rocks on Mayne Island in a storm. Captain Hepson and his crew were drowned and the columns and blocks remained submerged on the ocean bed for 115 years.

New columns and blocks were quarried and shipped, completing the Mint in 1874. This building withstood the great San Francisco earthquake and the ensuing fire, even though the surrounding buildings were destroyed. It still stands today, although it is no longer used as the Mint.

In the fall of 1987, in a joint project of the Underwater Archaeological Society of British Columbia, the Nanaimo Harbour Commission, and the Ministry of the Environment and Parks, the massive columns and several of the blocks that went down with the *Zephyr* were raised off the ocean floor. One of the columns now lies on Newcastle Island, near the spot where it was quarried; the other is at the Vancouver Maritime Museum.

The Newcastle Island quarry operation continued until 1932. Its stone was also used in the construction of the Post Office, Court House, and Bank of Montreal in

Nanaimo, the Bank of British North America, Nelson Elementary School, British Columbia Permanent Trust in Vancouver, and the BC Penitentiary in New Westminster. St. John's Church, the Oddfellows Hall, and the Esquimalt Graving Dock in Victoria were also built of Newcastle stone.

Other uses were found for Newcastle Island stone. In 1923, the McDonald Cut-Stone Operation started cutting "pulp stones" in a quarry on the eastern shore at Mark Bay. These stones, used in pulp and paper plants along the coast, replaced the imported stones in use at that time. The cylindrical blocks, weighing between two and four tonnes, were cut with a large steel cutter. This cutter, a cylinder slightly larger than the finished stone, was slowly rotated forcing the steel to bore through the rocks. It took about three hours to cut each stone. Holes were drilled in the rock at the bottom and small charges of gunpowder introduced. When the stone broke free it was lifted out with a derrick. Stones were shipped from Newcastle Island to pulp grinding mills in Canada and the United States until 1932, when the operation was moved to Gabriola Island.

The abundance of herring in the area brought a new industry in 1911. Japanese families established a settlement at the northwestern tidal marsh, building a cannery and a saltery. The herring were packed in salt, placed in huge wooden boxes, and shipped to the Orient.

The next decade also saw the start up of a shipbuilding and repair business. The fishing, salting, shipbuilding and repairs continued until 1941, when the custodian of Enemy Alien Property took possession of all the Japanese assets, sending the owners to internment camps in British Columbia's interior.



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The former Mint in San Francisco constructed with stone quarried on Newcastle Island.

During the war, the Navy used the shipyard as a repair depot for small vessels. When World War II ended, the whole operation was sold for \$3500 with the proviso that the buyer was to clear the area and sell the buildings and equipment. Those not sold were deliberately destroyed by fire.

The history of the Canadian Pacific Railway on Newcastle Island was happier. Nanaimo residents had used the southern part of the island from the late 1800s for recreation; but it was not until the CPR bought land in 1931 that other British Columbians were also able to enjoy the private beaches and clean water.

The CPR built a dance pavilion, teahouse, change houses, soccer field, wading pool and caretaker's residence on the southeast section. Electricity, running water, and flush toilets were also installed. The *Charmer*, a CPR ship, was tied up at the Bay and used as a floating hotel; the ship *Princess Victoria* later replaced the *Charmer*.

Sunday picnics were popular, with ships bringing as many as 1500 people a day from

Vancouver. The return fare for adults was \$1.50, half-price for children. Large company picnics would bring their own orchestras for the tea dances in the pavilion.

With the onset of World War II, the company picnics, tea dances, and sporting events ended. After the war, the CPR sold the property to the City of Nanaimo for \$150 000. Six years later, it was again sold, this time to the province of BC for one dollar on the condition that it be used as a park.

Gabriolans going to Newcastle Island today can step back in time by visiting the site of the former Snunéymux^w villages, exploring the remains of the pulp and sandstone quarries, finding the sandstone column that lay on the ocean bed for 115 years, and seeing the saltmarsh where there was once a thriving Japanese settlement. On special occasions, it is still possible to dance in the pavilion to the big bands, but more often it is used for slide shows and nature talks. Although tea is once again served at the teahouse, today's menu is more likely to be hot dogs and hamburgers rather than the toasted buns, strawberry jam, and Madiera cake of the 1930s' menu.

Once touched by exploitation, murder, storms at sea, and racial prejudice, Newcastle Island is now a peaceful place for hiking, fishing, swimming, camping, or just relaxing and watching the ferries pass by.

Author E. Joyce White lives on Gabriola. ◇