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A History of Vancouver

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Introduction

Vancouver is a city shaped by a rich tapestry of histories, cultures, and natural forces. Nestled between the mountains and the sea on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples, its story stretches back thousands of years before it became known to the world by its contemporary name. This book, *A History of Vancouver*, offers a comprehensive account of the city's journey from ancient Indigenous societies through to the bustling, cosmopolitan urban centre it is today.

The land that is now Vancouver has always been a place of abundance and gathering. Long before it became the focus of European explorers, traders, and settlers, the region was home to sophisticated Indigenous civilizations. Their relationships with each other and their environment laid the groundwork for the area's distinctive culture, stewardship, and sense of place. Even as waves of change swept through the Pacific Northwest in the form of fur traders and gold seekers, these foundations endured, sometimes adapting, sometimes resisting, but always present.

The birth and explosive growth of Vancouver as a modern city were both sudden and dramatic. Spurred by the forces of industry, the promise of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and the opportunities of the trans-Pacific trade, a once-remote settlement rapidly transformed into a vital transportation and economic hub. It faced early challenges—most notably the catastrophic fire of 1886—yet rebuilt with resilience and ambition. In less than a generation, Vancouver emerged as a major Canadian metropolis, attracting immigrants from near and far, and developing a unique urban character that reflected both its colonial roots and its diverse population.

Throughout the twentieth century, Vancouver's fortunes rose and fell alongside the tides of war, boom, and depression. The city led Western Canada in commerce, adapted to waves of new arrivals, and weathered periods of social and economic upheaval. The historical shadows of discrimination, displacement, and protest are an integral part of its narrative, as are seminal moments of progress and innovation. Each chapter in Vancouver's story has been marked by struggle and vision—by the competing desires to preserve, transform, and imagine the city anew.

In more recent decades, Vancouver has achieved global prominence. Hosting world events such as Expo 86 and the 2010 Winter Olympics, it has also become known for its progressive urban planning, commitment to sustainability, and evolving multiculturalism. Yet with opportunity and recognition have come new challenges: rapid growth, sky-high housing costs, and the urgent need to seek reconciliation with Indigenous communities. These are the complexities that continue to define

Vancouver's identity and future.

- A History of Vancouver* seeks to illuminate the threads that have woven this city's remarkable story. From ancient villages to modern skyscrapers, from resource-based booms to a post-industrial knowledge economy, Vancouver's past is alive in its streets, its people, and its continuing struggles and dreams. In the chapters that follow, we invite you to explore Vancouver's history in all its depth and diversity, to discover how this vibrant city came to be, and to reflect on the directions it might take in the years ahead.

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CHAPTER ONE: Indigenous Foundations: Time Immemorial

Before the arrival of the first European ships, before the scramble for gold or the laying of railway tracks, the land that would one day be known as Vancouver was already home. Not just visited, but inhabited, stewarded, and deeply understood by peoples whose histories stretched back further than any written record could capture. For countless generations, this territory, defined by the meeting of mountains, forests, rivers, and the vast Pacific, had been the ancestral and traditional lands of the $x^w m \theta k^w \acute{a} y \acute{a} m$ (Musqueam), $S k w x w \acute{u} 7 m e s h$ (Squamish), and $s \acute{a} l \acute{I} l w \acute{e} t a \acute{t}$ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. Their connection to this place was not merely residential; it was foundational to their identities, their cultures, and their very existence.

The timeframe of Indigenous inhabitation is measured not in centuries, but in millennia. Archaeological evidence, painstakingly gathered from ancient village sites and middens scattered throughout the region, points to continuous presence for at least 3,000 years. Some estimates, based on the deepest layers unearthed, suggest permanent settlements date back as far as 5,000 years. This astonishing span of time means that Indigenous societies had witnessed profound environmental changes, adapted to shifting climates and ecosystems, and developed complex ways of life long before any European stepped foot on the continent. Their history is etched into the very landscape, if one knows where and how to look.

These were not nomadic wanderers simply passing through; they were established societies with sophisticated structures and deep knowledge of their environment. The Musqueam, whose name is derived from the $h \acute{a} n \acute{q} \acute{a} m \acute{I} h \acute{a} m$ word for the grass that grows on the Musqueam Creek estuary, had principal villages located strategically along the Fraser River delta, capitalizing on the abundant resources it offered. The Squamish, whose territory encompassed Burrard Inlet, Howe Sound, and the Squamish River watershed, expertly navigated the intricate network of waterways that defined their realm. And the Tsleil-Waututh, People of the Inlet, were masters of Burrard Inlet and Indian Arm, their lives intricately linked to the tides and marine life.

Life in this region was governed by the rhythms of nature and the bounty it provided. The rich ecological diversity of the coast, the rivers, and the inland forests supported a vibrant economy based on harvesting and trade. Salmon, returning annually in vast numbers to the rivers, was a cornerstone of sustenance and culture. Different species ran at different times, requiring precise knowledge and timing for their capture using nets, weirs, and spears. The harvested fish were not just eaten fresh but were expertly preserved through smoking and drying, ensuring food stores lasted through the lean

winter months.

But salmon was just one part of a vast larder. The sea provided an incredible array of resources: halibut, cod, herring, eulachon (oolichan), seals, sea lions, and even whales were hunted and gathered. Shellfish, particularly clams, mussels, and oysters, were abundant along the shorelines and estuaries. Places like False Creek, today a busy urban waterway, were historically vital ecological sites, teeming with life, including extensive clam beds that were carefully managed by Indigenous peoples.

The land offered its own wealth. The forests provided essential materials, most notably the Western Red Cedar. Revered as the 'Tree of Life,' cedar was used for everything from constructing large, sturdy longhouses capable of housing multiple families, to carving majestic totem poles and swift canoes. Its bark was harvested and skillfully woven into clothing, mats, and baskets. The wood was used for tools, boxes, and countless other necessities. The knowledge of how to use cedar, and how to harvest it sustainably, was passed down through generations.

Beyond the coast and rivers, the inland areas provided berries, roots, and other plant foods, each harvested according to seasonal cycles. Hunting for deer, elk, and smaller game supplemented their diet. The landscape was not just a source of food and materials; it was intricately woven into their spiritual beliefs and oral traditions. Every mountain peak, river bend, and island held stories, names, and cultural significance, reflecting a deep, reciprocal relationship between the people and their environment.

Governance within these societies was complex and varied, involving intricate systems of leadership, laws, and social protocols. Hereditary chiefs held important roles, but leadership was often distributed and consensus-based, informed by the wisdom of elders and the needs of the community. Laws governed everything from resource use and access to marriage and social conduct. Systems of reciprocity and redistribution, often formalized through ceremonies like the potlatch (a complex system of feasting and gift-giving), reinforced social bonds and demonstrated wealth and status.

Trade networks extended far beyond the immediate territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh. They traded goods like dried seafood, cedar products, and canoes with neighbouring nations. Highly valued items, such as oolichan grease from the north or obsidian from inland sources, were exchanged, connecting coastal communities to the interior and demonstrating the economic sophistication of these societies. These trade routes were also pathways for the exchange of ideas, stories, and cultural practices.

Daily life involved a clear division of labour, often along gender lines, but with cooperation being key to survival and prosperity. Men typically focused on hunting, fishing, and canoe building, while women were skilled gatherers of plants and shellfish, preservers of food, weavers, and caretakers. Children were integral members

of the community, learning skills and cultural knowledge through observation, participation, and formal teaching by elders.

The spiritual world was deeply integrated into their daily lives. Beliefs centered on a connection to the natural world and the spirit realm. Animals, plants, and natural features held spiritual power and significance. Ceremonies, songs, and dances were performed for various purposes: to honour the salmon, to mark rites of passage, to seek spiritual guidance, and to maintain balance with the world around them. The concept of stewardship was inherent in their worldview; they understood that the health of the people was directly linked to the health of the land and water.

Settlements were often strategically located for access to resources and protection. Winter villages, typically consisting of large longhouses, were built in sheltered locations. As seasons changed, people would move to smaller, temporary camps closer to specific resources being harvested, such as salmon fishing sites or berry patches. This seasonal mobility allowed for efficient use of the environment and prevented over-exploitation of any single area.

Place names in the hən̓q̓əmi̓n̓əm̓ and Skwxwú7mesh sníchim languages tell the story of the land from an Indigenous perspective. Names describe the features of the landscape, commemorate historical events, or denote specific resource sites. Stanley Park, for example, known today primarily by its colonial name, was and is a place of immense historical and cultural significance to Indigenous peoples, used for millennia for resources and as a gathering place, bearing names like Chay-thoos and Skalsh. Understanding these original names offers a window into the deep history and Indigenous relationship with the territory.

The societies of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh were dynamic and resilient. They had complex social structures, sophisticated technologies for harvesting and preserving resources, intricate systems of governance and law, and rich spiritual traditions tied intimately to the land and sea. Their knowledge of the local ecosystems was profound, allowing them to thrive in this environment for thousands of years, managing resources in ways that ensured their availability for future generations.

While this chapter focuses on the time before European arrival, it is crucial to understand that the history of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations did not end with contact. Their presence in this territory is unbroken, their cultures have endured, and their connection to the land remains as strong today as it was in time immemorial. Their history is the foundational layer upon which all subsequent histories of Vancouver are built, a testament to their longevity, adaptability, and profound relationship with this remarkable corner of the world.

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