

A Brief History of British Columbia

British Columbia may seem like a young place, and in many ways it is, but in reality, some of its cultures are among the oldest on earth.

Here's a timeline:

First Peoples

British Columbia is one of the longest inhabited places on earth: there is evidence of habitation in some regions since the retreat of the great glaciers over 10,000 years ago.

It is also thought that BC's coastal region, prior to European contact, may have been one of the most densely populated areas in North America, home to about 300,000 people.

European Contact

In 1774, Spanish sailors venturing north from Spanish America were the first Europeans to set eyes on the British Columbia coast, though their ship did not land in BC at that time. Many of the islands in the Strait of Georgia — Galiano, Valdes and Quadra, for example — bear their names.

When British naval explorer Captain James Cook reached the west coast of Vancouver Island, he was eager to trade with the Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka) people. The first known Caucasian man to set foot in today's British Columbia, he came ashore at Resolution Cove, Nootka Sound, in March 1778. He and his crew met Chief Maquinna, the most influential leader of the Nootka people of Vancouver Island's west coast.

In 1792, British Captain George Vancouver and Spanish Commissioner Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra sailed to the coast and were the first to chart the area in detail.

Fort St. John, established in 1794 on the Peace River in Northern BC, was the first European settlement on the mainland. In 1805, the North West Company opened trading posts at nearby Fort Nelson and Hudson's Hope.

In the wake of these early explorers, waves of European settlers arrived, carrying smallpox and other diseases that decimated Aboriginal populations in the late 1700s and into the 1800s.

Victoria, the capital of British Columbia, was first established in 1843 as Fort Victoria, a Hudson's Bay Company post. Company agent James Douglas named the new settlement for Queen Victoria of England.

Gold and Government

In 1858, gold was discovered on the sandbars of the Fraser River, and then in 1859 at Horsefly River in the Cariboo. This led to the Cariboo Gold Rush, which drew thousands of people to the interior of British Columbia. It was soon followed by the Klondike Gold Rush of 1896 in the Yukon, which helped open up northern areas of the province.

These two gold rushes brought a rapid influx of prospectors, merchants and pioneers to BC starting in the 1860s. They came from around the world, arriving from as far away as China. It was a time of rapid economic expansion; sleepy hamlets became bustling cities, and new roads, railways and steamships were constructed.

The mainland was declared a Crown Colony in 1858 and named British Columbia by Queen Victoria. In 1866, the Crown Colonies of British Columbia and Vancouver Island were united and, in 1871, on the

promise of a rail link to the rest of the country, British Columbia became the sixth province to join the Dominion of Canada. That link was completed in 1885, when the last spike of the Canadian Pacific Railroad was driven in Craigellachie, in the Monashee Mountains west of Revelstoke.

On April 6, 1886, Granville townsite, a small shanty town on Burrard Inlet, incorporated as the City of Vancouver. It burned to the ground just two months later, but was completely rebuilt and growing rapidly by the time the first transcontinental passenger train rolled in May of 1887.

The railway, together with Canadian Pacific's fleet of clipper ships, quickly made Vancouver one of the west coast's leading ports. Tea and silk from China flowed through Vancouver to eastern North America, while BC's natural resources flowed out to world markets. Immigrants swept in, expanding the population to over four million today.

Not everyone benefited from the boom times. During this 1860s, the Aboriginal peoples lost most of their ancestral lands and, in 1876, First Nations populations were made subject to the federal Indian Act, which regulated every aspect of their lives.

Modern Times

Transportation and development marked another period of rapid economic expansion during the 1950s and '60s. Massive building projects changed the shape of the BC landscape. Expansive damming projects turned rivers into lakes, giant turbines powered dozens of new pulp mills and smelters, the Trans-Canada Highway was completed and an expanded ferry service opened once-isolated coastal and island communities.

In 1986, Vancouver's centennial year, the city hosted the 1986 World Exposition, better known as Expo '86. Twenty-two million people attended what was regarded as one of the most successful world's fairs ever. To this day, Vancouverites enjoy several legacies of the fair, including the Skytrain rapid transit system, Canada Place convention centre and cruise ship terminal, and a revitalized False Creek waterfront. Also in 1986, the Sechelt Indian Band was the first Aboriginal group in Canada to attain self-government.

In 2000, the Nisga'a Treaty came into being. The Nisga'a Nation, who has lived in the Nass Valley area since time immemorial, negotiated with the provincial and federal governments to achieve BC's first modern-day, constitutionally protected self-governance agreement.

In February 2010, Vancouver hosted the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.