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## 1858: How a violent year created a province

By JUSTINE HUNTER

*In April, the trouble began. A gold rush attracted American miners, who clashed with local natives. Headless corpses floated in the Fraser River. Letters from the period detail a lawless land that, months later, calmed down enough to become British Columbia*

On a Sunday late in April of 1858, the governor of Vancouver Island stepped out of church in Fort Victoria and learned that the gold rush was on.

The U.S. steamer Commodore had just arrived in the harbour from San Francisco, delivering 450 passengers bound for the Fraser Canyon.

The miners were driven by a "mania for gold" and soon would find themselves at war with local native populations, and confronting the will of a scheming politician with great ambitions for the wild and lawless territory that is now the mainland of British Columbia.

"It will require I fear the nicest tact to avoid a disastrous Indian war," the governor, James Douglas, warned his political masters in London in a June 15 dispatch. By the time the letter arrived, U.S.-based militias were already charging through the Fraser Canyon, intent on killing every Indian they could find.

Tomorrow, B.C. marks its 150th anniversary as a political entity, and today's politicians will cavort with actors in period costumes at Fort Langley, where the proclamation establishing the colony was signed.

Meanwhile, historians at the University of Victoria have offered a virtual gift: A new window on the tumultuous year that led to the creation of the Crown colony has been made available on the Internet for the first time.

"It's remarkable, what a slender thread British authority hung by," UVIC history professor John Lutz, who helped give birth to the new website, [bcgenesis.uvic.ca](http://bcgenesis.uvic.ca), said in an interview.

With 30,000 mostly U.S. miners flooding across the 49th parallel and up the Fraser River, Governor Douglas found himself with no legal or military force against "the present danger of a collision between the settlers and the natives" that would soon ripen into a deadly war.

## THE WAR WORSENS

It's April, 1858.

Governor Douglas writes to British politician Henry Labouchère, Secretary of State for the colonies, to warn of the friction over gold prospecting. The natives in the Fraser Canyon are "extremely jealous of the whites and strongly opposed to their digging the soil for gold."

The arrival of the Commodore in April would be just the beginning.

"Boats, canoes, and every species of small craft are continually employed in pouring their cargoes of human beings into Fraser's River, and it is supposed that not less than one thousand whites are already at work, and on the way to the gold districts," he adds in an update later that month.

"I am now convinced that it is utterly impossible, through any means within our power, to close the gold districts against the entrance of foreigners, as long as gold is found in abundance, in which case the country will soon be over-run."

In June, having heard no encouragement from London to confront the "foreigners," Governor Douglas has little more than bluster on his side to keep the peace.

"The white Miners were in a state of great alarm on account of a serious affray which had just occurred with the native Indians, who mustered under arms, in a tumultuous manner, and threatened to make a clean sweep of the whole body of miners assembled there."

The quarrel arose out of a series of provocations on both sides, he concluded, so he "lectured them soundly about their conduct."

Sir Edward Lytton is oblivious to the current state of the conflict, thanks to the slow mail service, when he sits down on July 31 to pen good news to Governor Douglas.

"I expect shortly to have the honour of transmitting to you an act passed by the Imperial Parliament authorizing the establishment of a regular Government in the Territory West of the Rocky Mountains."

But he warns Governor Douglas of the political perils should the native population feel disadvantaged.

"I have to enjoin upon you to consider the best and most humane means of dealing with the Native Indians. The feelings of this country would be strongly opposed to the adoption of any arbitrary or oppressive measure towards them."

By the time his letter is steaming across the Atlantic, the miners have already taken up arms against the native population.

On Aug. 17, a San Francisco reporter, H.M. Snyder, leads a company of 52 men up the Fraser River to make peace with the Indians "by peaceable means if we could, and by force if we must."

He finds the native population willing to negotiate, but his group soon ran into other militias with their own approach. "They wished to proceed and kill every man, woman and child they saw that had Indian blood in them," Capt. Snyder wrote in his report to Governor Douglas. "To such an arrangement I could not consent to."

Letters and diaries written by miners working along the Fraser that year offer more detail.

"The Bostons [Americans] and Indians have been fighting for the last ten days and has been a great many killed on both sides. The Indians have stopped the miners from going up through the Canyon," George Wesley Beam reported in a letter dated Aug. 20.

His diary, the next day, noted, "Down at Union Bar, they got five men out of the River that was shot by the Indians. They had their heads cut off. All well in camp."

Major John Hawkins, the commissioner marking out the boundaries that would form the B.C.-Washington State border, was pressed into action to try to quell the unrest.

"It is reported that in consequence of the naked and headless bodies of two white men, supposed to be Frenchmen, having been picked up floating down the stream, a large body of Frenchmen, said to number about 120, had organized themselves and had determined upon immediate retribution," he wrote.

"They proceeded up the river to a considerable distance above Fort Yale ... shooting every Indian they met with."

Governor Douglas finally ventured into the Fraser Canyon late in August with a military force of 35 men, "in hopes that early measures will be taken by Her Majesty's Government, to relieve the country from its present perilous state," the governor wrote.

In fact the peril was largely over - at least in terms of the Fraser Canyon battles.

Oct. 12 would find Governor Douglas back in Victoria, getting ready to assume control over the new colony. His account of his journey was detailed, but left out much.

The killings on both sides got no mention. Instead, he spoke of the "complaints" from the native population, for which he blamed "the improper use of spirituous liquors." So he proclaimed it a penal offence to sell or give liquor to the Indians.

On Nov. 19, 1858, the Crown Colony of British Columbia was created. Ten days before he became the first governor of the new colony, Governor Douglas spared the Home Office in London any of the details of roving foreign militias that had, throughout the summer, vastly outnumbered the British in their newest colony.

"Some trouble had arisen between the Miners and Indians, which was however fortunately arrested after a loss of several lives on both sides."

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## **TURNING 19TH-CENTURY FLORID HANDWRITING INTO 21ST-CENTURY ONLINE TEXT**

The original correspondence surrounding the creation of what is now the province of B.C. is bound in thick leather volumes buried in archives in London and in Ottawa.

The stories they contain captivated a University of Victoria history professor, James Hendrickson, in the 1980s.

For seven years, he laboured to transcribe the florid handwriting and to piece together some kind of narrative of the correspondence between the fledgling colonial government of Vancouver Island, and later British Columbia, and the handful of apparatchiks in London who ran the colonial office.

Then Mr. Hendrickson retired. His work languished in a now-obscure software language on the university's last IBM mainframe.

His few printouts were a hot commodity for researchers who knew about them. But when the university decided to shut down the last mainframe, a former student of Mr. Hendrickson's spotted the 7,000 files.

It's taken a year for computer experts and historians at the university to save the files and translate them into a usable format.

Recently, they launched a website that makes those documents accessible to the public. Digital copies of all the documents, as well as transcripts of the 1858 correspondence, are available at [bcgenesis.uvic.ca](http://bcgenesis.uvic.ca).

The site also tries to make sense of the spinoffs, with biographies of key players and links explaining the many notes the officials in the colonial office made in the margins of the original documents.

The next stage of the project will be to get the remaining years of transcripts posted, as well as to track down the 150 original maps that accompanied the dispatches but were squirreled away in different files in the British Archives.

Victoria lawyer Murray Rankin said the site is a great resource, particularly for lawyers involved in land claims. "It's hard to believe in this era of computers that one could be affected by handwriting, but [the documents] have been inaccessible because people couldn't read them," he said. "This was a labour of love by the historians and they will be a rich resource for understanding B.C.'s role in Canada."

Donald Hauka, an author and historian who is trying to bring those years of early contact with B.C. natives to life through the New Pathways to Gold Society, said the documents are a great resource. But he notes it is a one-sided version of history.

"Sometimes, what's most significant is what James Douglas leaves out of his dispatches. He's in the middle of the Canyon War, there are armed militias torching native villages, and what's he going to say to his boss? As little as possible."

*Justine Hunter*

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## **Moving the mail**

Sometimes he wrote daily. Vancouver Island's governor, James Douglas, was tasked with sending reports to the colonial office in London of anything of importance in his territory. And in 1858, as he tried to quell Indian wars, set up courts, build roads, assess taxes and keep land swindlers at bay, Douglas had a lot to write.

By the time his mail reached London, and the response had come back, he'd have penned another 100 or more instalments in what is now the best historical record of the establishment of B.C. as a colony.

By 1858, the turnaround time for a letter between Fort Victoria and London was typically six months. At the time, Douglas wasn't complaining - the advent of steamships had dramatically reduced the waits in his lifetime.

Starting in 1842, the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company transported mail twice monthly from Britain to Barbados, with stops at New York and Halifax. It expanded service to Panama, from which mail would make its way to California via canoe and mule train, then up the coast.

The U.S. postal service from New York was much quicker, and Victoria soon became dependent on it, although British postal regulations forbade its use.

In February, 1854, Douglas begged permission to use the U.S. service officially. "The transmission of intelligence by the Panama Mail route is so much more expeditious and certain that I trust your Grace will excuse me for recommending that mode of conveyance in preference to any other for the communication of Her Majesty's Government."

The Fraser gold rush in the spring of 1858 improved communications further, as steamships bringing miners to Victoria from San Francisco also brought mail directly to Victoria for the first time.

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