



# GEN-FIND RESEARCH ASSOCIATES, INC.

## Notes on British Columbia Records and Searching Them

For general enquiries, it is a difficult task to institute an in-depth search without knowing a place-name for your ancestor when researching the Canadian provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Most records are arranged by town minor circumstances we wide indexes that at the least the family name and most of information; at best, a located. This is always first and these index searches are retainer. Your chances at however, if you know a district by which to isolate

If you do know a place-research and additional information you've minimum retainer covers information, a preliminary some basic research strategies and evaluation of those research results in the Report.



Figure 1 - Map of Canada

In some have a few limited province-will give us a distribution of these constitute pre-1900 pioneer ancestor might be priority, to locate the family, covered by the minimum success are much better, town name or provincial the search better.

name, you'll receive some research suggestions based on supplied. In this case, the evaluation of your research plan, implementation of

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

“The capital of British Columbia is Victoria, the fifteenth largest metropolitan region in Canada. The largest city is Vancouver, the third-largest metropolitan area in Canada, the largest in Western Canada, and the second-largest in the Pacific Northwest. In 2009, British Columbia had an estimated population of 4,419,974 (about two million of whom were in Greater Vancouver). The province's name was chosen by Queen Victoria when the Colony of British Columbia, i.e. "the Mainland", became a British colony in 1858. It refers to the Columbia District, the British name for the territory drained by the Columbia River, which has its origins and upper reaches in southeastern British Columbia, which was the namesake of the pre-Oregon Treaty Columbia Department of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Queen Victoria chose British Columbia to distinguish what was the British sector of the Columbia District from that of the United States ("American Columbia" or "Southern Columbia"), which became the Oregon Territory in 1848 as a result of the treaty.



Figure 2 - British Columbia within Canada

The Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast spread throughout the region, achieving a high population density; at the time of European contact, nearly half the aboriginal people in present-day Canada lived in the region. During the 1770s, smallpox killed at least 30% of the Pacific Northwest First Nations. This epidemic was the first and the most devastating of a number that were to follow, other than the *Great Smallpox Epidemic* of 1862 which killed off 50% of the native population in that year.

The explorations of James Cook in 1778 and George Vancouver in 1792-93 established British jurisdiction over the coastal area north and west of the Columbia River. In 1794, by the third of a series of agreements known as the *Nootka Conventions*, Spain conceded its claims of exclusivity in the Pacific. This opened the way for formal claims and colonization by other powers, including Britain, but because of the *Napoleonic Wars* there was little British action on its claims in the region until later.

The establishment of trading posts under the auspices of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) effectively established a permanent British presence in the region. The Columbia District, broadly defined as being south of 54°40' north latitude, (the southern limit of Russian America) and north of Mexican Controlled California west of the Rocky Mountains was, by the *Anglo-American Convention* of 1818, under the "joint occupancy and use" of citizens of the United States and subjects of Britain (which is to say, the fur companies). This co-occupancy was ended with the *Oregon Treaty* of 1846.

The major supply route was the *York Factory Express* between Hudson Bay and Fort Vancouver. Some of the early outposts grew into settlements, communities, and cities. Among the places in British Columbia that began as fur trading posts are Fort St. John (established 1794); Hudson's Hope (1805); Fort Nelson (1805); Fort St. James (1806); Prince George (1807); Kamloops (1812); Fort Langley (1827); Fort Victoria (1843); Yale (1848); and Nanaimo (1853). Fur company posts that became cities in what is now the United States include Vancouver, Washington (Fort Vancouver), formerly the "capital" of Hudson's Bay operations in the Columbia District, Colville, Washington and Walla Walla, Washington (old Fort Nez Percés).

With the amalgamation of the two British fur trading companies in 1821, the region now comprising British Columbia existed in three fur trading departments. The bulk of the central and northern interior was organized into the *New Caledonia District*, administered from Fort St. James. The interior south of the Thompson River watershed and north of the Columbia was organized into the *Columbia District*, administered from Fort Vancouver on the lower Columbia River. The northeast corner of the province east of the Rockies, known as the Peace River Block, was attached to the much larger *Athabasca District*, headquartered in Fort Chipewyan, in present day Alberta.

Until 1849, these districts were a wholly unorganized area of British North America under the de facto jurisdiction of HBC administrators. Unlike Rupert's Land to the north and east, however, the territory was not a concession to the company. Rather, it was simply granted a monopoly to trade with the First Nations inhabitants. All that was changed with the westward extension of American exploration and the concomitant overlapping claims of territorial sovereignty, especially in the southern Columbia basin (within present day Washington and Oregon). In 1846, the *Oregon Treaty* divided the territory along the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel to the Georgia Strait, with the area south of this boundary (excluding Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands) transferred to sole American sovereignty. The Colony of Vancouver Island was created in 1849, with Victoria designated as the capital. New Caledonia, as the whole of the mainland rather than just its north-central Interior came to be called, continued to be an unorganized territory of British North America, "administered" by individual HBC trading post managers.

With the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush in 1858, an influx of Americans into New Caledonia prompted the colonial office to formally designate the mainland as the Colony of British Columbia, with New Westminster as its capital. A series of gold rushes in various parts of the province followed, the largest being the *Cariboo Gold Rush* in 1862, forcing the colonial administration into deeper debt as it struggled to meet the extensive infrastructure needs of far-flung boom communities like Barkerville and Lillooet, which sprang up overnight. The Vancouver Island colony was facing financial crises of its own, and pressure to merge the two eventually succeeded in 1866.

With the agreement by the Canadian government to extend the Canadian Pacific Railway to British Columbia and to assume the colony's debt, British Columbia became the sixth province to join Confederation on 20 July 1871. The borders of the province were not completely settled until 1903, however when the province's territory shrank somewhat after the Alaska boundary dispute settled the vague boundary of the Alaska Panhandle.

Establishing a labour force to develop the province was problematic from the start, and British Columbia was the locus of immigration from Europe, China, and Japan. The influx of a non-Caucasian population stimulated resentment from the dominant ethnic groups, resulting in agitation (much of it successful) to restrict the ability of Asian people to immigrate to British Columbia through the imposition of a head tax. This resentment culminated in mob attacks against Chinese and Japanese immigrants in Vancouver in 1887 and 1907. By 1923, almost all Chinese immigration had been blocked except for merchants, professionals, students and investors.

Meanwhile, the province continued to grow. In 1914, the last spike of a second transcontinental rail line, the Grand Trunk Pacific, linking north-central British Columbia from the Yellowhead Pass through Prince George to Prince Rupert was driven at Fort Fraser. This opened up the North Coast and the Bulkley Valley region to new economic opportunities. What had previously been an almost exclusively fur trade and subsistence economy soon became a locus for forestry, farming, and mining.”<sup>1</sup>

#### **MAJOR RESOURCE COLLECTIONS:**

**Homestead records** are well maintained, cover predominately the period of 1885 to 1930, and an index will assist those in locating early families to the area. Rarely, will they provide names of all family members though, more often not however, they will generally provide details of settlement, where, when, how they arrived and from where, nationality, country of birth, and former occupations – search elements all important to further extensions of the family forward and reverse. Not all applications for homestead land have survived.

**Vital Statistics**, the registration of births, marriages, and deaths since 1872, are not necessarily complete, especially in the early years when people often failed to comply. There are a few birth/baptism records dating back to 1836 and colonial marriages dating back to 1859. Presently, civil vital record indexes for post-Confederation are available for the following periods: Births - 1872-1903; Marriages - 1872-1934; Deaths - 1872-1989. Dates after these are not open to direct public inspection but may be accessed to some limited extent by written request with the appropriate authorizations. The provinces extracts can be very informative if successful in locating the correct entry.

All of the **District Indexes** to these civil records up to the dates noted are open to public inspection onsite at the Provincial Archives of British Columbia (Victoria), or at Latter-day Saints Family History Libraries and via the Internet at the following address: [http://www2.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca:80/textual/governmt/vstats/v\\_events.htm](http://www2.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca:80/textual/governmt/vstats/v_events.htm). For copies of the actual original documents, however, you will need to contact British Columbia Vital Statistics Agency, 818 Fort Street, Victoria, B.C. V8W 1H8. Remember that there are regulations on who can access copies of these documents and these are strictly followed.

---

<sup>1</sup> 'British Columbia' in *Wikipedia – The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British\\_Columbia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Columbia) extracted 8th April 2011.

Before 1872, when the province was known as part of the Oregon Territories, **church registers** may be the only viable source for baptism and marriage information as well as some burial information. Finding church registers in British Columbia is not a straight-forward task: A) religious affiliation must be determined, B) then the name of a local church the family may have attended, C) next whether the church still exists, and D) where its registers are now located. Registers may remain at the original church, they may have been lost, or they may have been sent to another local church or to a church archives. It takes some historical research to reach a likely objective. In some cases the records we want may only be at a distant archive. Some historical church records have been housed at the Provincial Archives though this is not a comprehensive collection for any of the ecclesiastical bodies. The vast majority of church records in Canada are held at the local church level, though some have been deposited with their respective ecclesiastical archives. Although church records here have been kept from the time each congregation was formed, not all records have survived. If the church has closed, these records may have been sent to the nearest church where the congregation now worships. Some denominations send yearly summaries of baptisms and marriages to diocese headquarters, while older records may be deposited in the denomination's regional archives. For the various church bodies one may need to consult elsewhere as well.

There is an important marriage collection, originally held by the Colonial Secretary, of **Pre-Confederation Marriages** for British Columbia, and these run from 1859 to 1872 which are openly available for inspection. Further, an important collection of **Colonial & Post-Confederation Baptisms** dating from 1836 to 1888 is also worth investigating for those early ancestors into this area.

The first totally complete (or as complete as possible) **census** for the province was 1881. However, returns for earlier periods, though location specific, are available for inspection. The census, unlike other research sources identifying individuals such as city/business directories and voters lists, was intended to capture information about every individual in British Columbia. Although attempts were made to include returns for the native and Chinese population, this was not a systematic enumeration until 1901 when the native population was, for the first time, enumerated by the government "Indian Agency" or now called the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. Presently, the 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911 enumerations for the province are now microfilmed and fully indexed. No further federal census returns are available currently past 1901 other than a 1940 National War Registration Census which provides excellent detail information on those persons enumerated however it is not open for public inspection. Should you know place of residence where the subject was at the time of the enumeration in 1940, Statistics Canada (Ottawa) will search the return for you for fee and provide you with an abstract of that entry. Some of the major communities also have listings of civic censuses' taken for their areas and these should be investigated in local archives or at the Provincial Archives or more local repositories. Many of these date prior to entry into Confederation (1871) and some well into the 1990's. In addition, you will find incomplete collections of British Columbia Surveyor of Taxes (Assessment Rolls) from 1865 to 1948 (arranged by taxation district) and Voter's Lists (arranged by provincial electoral district) dating from 1874 to about 1980 (with gaps), for public access. Local governments and archives should also be checked for these collections.

Never forget as well the importance of **will & probate** Records. For the most part one will need to know the applicable British Columbia Supreme Court – Probate Registry District where the documents would have been filed, however assistance on this can be obtained either through the Will Registry & Succession Duties Department Office in Victoria who has a master index list of probates for the entire province. Some of these may date to about 1861, however this will be rare. To 1981 are available openly while the later case files will need to be accessed through the respective Supreme Court of British Columbia District offices.

Lastly, of great importance, there are thousands of small cemeteries in the province many of which have had their **monumental inscriptions** (including headstones) transcribed. The local/regional/provincial genealogical societies have conducted the majority of this work and they should be consulted for more details on possible inscription recordings. A great number of the city cemeteries have not been recorded, however, and in both cases you should

consult the local government body for interment register details on the subjects of interest. Remember, that most records of this nature of less than 25 years are generally not released to the public and it is at the discretion of the cemetery board to do so or not.

Besides these records, there are a host of other important sources that are available to the public which should be consulted further. The most important of these are the following, though the list is certainly not exhaustive:

- 1). Land Records (Crown Grants, Petitions, Abstracts, Deeds, School Land, CPR Land, Municipal Land, Grants to Veterans of NWMP/Boer War/WWI/ NW Rebellion/Métis – about 1851-1930)
- 2). Funeral Home Records
- 3). British Columbia Immigration Programs
- 4). City/Provincial Business/Telephone Directories & Local Histories (from 1860)
- 5). Crockford's Anglican Clerical Dictionary (from 1868) & Clergy Lists (from 1882)
- 6). British Columbia Government Gazettes (1863-1980)
- 7). Municipal Records (after 1893)
- 8). District Papers (Pre-1940's)
- 9). Ships' Passenger Lists from 1865 (Chronological, not Indexed)
- 10). British Navy (from 1806) and Army/Militia Lists (from 1789)
- 11). Mercantile Navy Lists & Maritime Directories (1857-1957)
- 12). Canadian Expeditionary Forces Battalion Lists (1914-1918)
- 13). Hudson Bay Company Record Collection (1873-1930)
- 14). Newspaper Collections & Manuscript Material (from c. 1878)
- 16). Education and School Records
- 17). Divorce Records (ca. 1867 - present)
- 18). Health and Social Service Records
- 19). Immigration and Naturalization Records
- 20). Employment Records
- 21). Association and Union Records
- 22). Business and Trades Licensing Record Collections
- 23). Election Records
- 24). Legal & Court Documents (1849's-1980's)
- 25). Railway Records and Related Collections
- 26). Provincial Police Records (1858-1950) and Coroner's Reports (1859-1970)
- 27). Non-Textual/Photographic Collections
- 28). Family Histories and Biographies

Information concerning British Columbia preferred known to start a search:

- A). Approximate Date of Immigration into Canada & Arrival into the Region
- B). Name of Subject
- C). Name of Subject's Parents or Children (or both, if known)
- D). Approximate Dates of Birth, Marriage, & Death of either Subject, Parents or Children
- E). Place of Residency and Periods of Occupation
- F). Forms of Employment or Occupation (if known)



**SUMMATION:**

Pre-1872 information in British Columbia will sometimes be difficult to obtain but is always worth trying for. Some information prior to this period will come from federal records and prior to 1872 most success in information will be by way of basically the Hudson Bay Company Record Collection, Land Records, Will & Probate Records, and Early Colonial Settler Lists, as many of the early settlers in these earlier years were connected to the mining & fur-trading aspects.

However, the province has also an excellent collection of earlier records of various types for public inspection though most are not extant nor comprehensive. It must also be remembered that the British Columbia coast saw an ever-increasing immigration from Asia and the Washington & Oregon Territories, of which it was a part of the latter for a time.

Of course, much of your success in any genealogical research will depend upon how prolific your ancestors were in documenting their existence from locality to locality.

For a more in-depth discussion of the available Alberta source records, please obtain a copy of the article by Brian W. Hutchison, CG, FSA Scot, titled "How to Begin Your Research in Canada - Part II – British Columbia" printed as part of a series for the now-defunct magazine "*Family History Newsletter*" (Oshawa: Parr's Publishing, 1997). A copy of this publication may be purchased online from GEN-FIND Research Associates, Inc. by consulting our online GEN-Store site. Also, please consult GEN-Store for other wonderful publications for sale that we feel are exceptionally relevant to your search in this area. They will provide more background information on many of the resources and repositories covered herein as well as many others not addressed in these notes.

GEN-FIND would be happy to work with you privately on your custom search needs of these and other records in simplifying your project objectives. Please contact us today to further discuss those interests!

**GEN-FIND RESEARCH ASSOCIATES, INC.**

#101 – 5170 Dunster Road, Suite #521

Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada V9T 6M4

