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# Introduction

The area of Vancouver now known as Dunbar has been home to the Musqueam First Nations people for over 3,000 years. *The Story of Dunbar* records the history of a period that is little more than one hundred years, a period when Dunbar became home to people from all over the world and all walks of life. This short period saw the transformation of a forest at the mouth of the Fraser River into a middle-class suburb of 21,000 people located at Vancouver's western edge. Here are the stories of people who fished the river, cleared the land, started farms, and worked and lived in Dunbar through a century wracked by two world wars, the Great Depression and continuing changes in the life of the community.

The Dunbar/Southlands neighbourhood lies on the southern half of the Point Grey peninsula from 16th Avenue to the north arm of the Fraser River, east to Mackenzie Street and west to Camosun Street. From the perspective of geologic time, this land as recently as 15,000 years ago was buried under a sheet of glacial ice. Boulders that had been driven by the ice and deposited when it melted can still be seen on the beaches of Point Grey. Similar large rocks had to be dealt with as settlers cleared the land, which is formed of glacial deposits compacted in layers impervious to water. These layers and the streams that ran over them provided a source of water for early settlers. They also provided a challenge in clearing the land and in constructing the huge sewage conduit, the High-bury Tunnel, in the early 1960s.

About 11,500 years ago, a bog formed on top of one of these compacted layers of glacial till. It became an area where the Musqueam

◀ Map 1: Dunbar/Southlands, c. 1877–1962. Map by Louise Phillips, based on extensive preliminary work by Ron Simpson

trapped elk, deer and birds, and later where children floated on home-made rafts and skated in winter. Point Grey was covered with a forest of ancient Douglas fir, cedar, hemlock and spruce intersected by Native trails that led from the Musqueam village to a seasonal camp at Locarno Beach.

In 1858, a brief gold rush in the Fraser Canyon left some disappointed miners to look for other means of earning a living. The government of the mainland Colony of British Columbia enticed these newcomers with offers of inexpensive land to settle in the Fraser River delta. At the time, the colony's centre was New Westminster, then just a collection of wooden stores, sheds and tents. An 1860 law allowed settlers to "pre-empt" parcels of up to 160 acres if they would clear and farm the land.

The first such settlers on the north arm of the Fraser River were two prospectors from Ireland, brothers Samuel and Fitzgerald McCleery. Nearby, lots were snapped up and settled south of what was to become Dunbar by E. John Betts and Henry Mole. These farmers supplied dairy products, meat and vegetables to the mainland colony's sawmills and Point Grey residents until the 1920s.

The majority of the settlers were from the British Isles, living alongside the Musqueam, whose reserve was established in 1864. In 1877, Chinese farmers were brought in by the federal government to raise vegetables on the fertile delta soil on land leased from the small First Nations band. In the 1890s a Japanese community was established on the river's edge at Deering and Celtic Islands after fishermen were encouraged to come from Tottori, Japan, to help harvest the huge Fraser salmon runs.

In 1885 the Canadian Pacific Railway announced that it would build its western terminal in "Granville," the future City of Vancouver. This decision unleashed a flood of development, although it would not reach Dunbar for several decades. The City of Vancouver was incorporated in 1886, but by 1892 the city's southern boundary still extended only to West 16th Avenue. The area south of that, extending eastward to Burnaby, was part of the municipality of South Vancouver. Both McCleery and Mole served on its council and were active in building roads on the south slope.

After 1900, the sprawling municipality began to differentiate into several distinct neighbourhoods. Labourers and artisans had moved onto small lots in the eastern area of South Vancouver and were unwilling to pass money bylaws for improvements, while the more affluent men of the future Point Grey wanted the area serviced and laid out for development. However, there were still on this western edge a large number of lower wage earners who could afford the new 33-foot lots in Point Grey, where many hand-built their own homes. A story was told of a Dunbar man employed at the downtown peninsula's Hastings Sawmill wheeling barrowloads of salvaged lumber all the way home to Dunbar to use in building his house.

In 1908, the new municipality of Point Grey, including Dunbar/Southlands, was formed, which remained a separate municipality until 1929. Long-time Dunbar resident Bob Jones remembered going with his mother in the early 1920s to pay taxes at the Point Grey Municipal Hall, which stood at West 42nd Avenue at the present site of the Kerrisdale Community Centre. Development in the new municipality came in all shapes and sizes: a large farmhouse on 10 acres at 40th and Johnson Road (now Blenheim Street), fine houses built on stone foundations in Dunbar Heights, and log cabins built as early as 1910. This was the start of a building boom that was to last only two years.

Charles Trott Dunbar, a developer from the United States, lost his \$50,000 investment in lots on the hill even after he had paid B.C. Electric \$35,000 to run a shuttle between the 41st Avenue streetcar and the line to the north at 10th Avenue and Crown. Although Dunbar Heights is probably named for C.T. Dunbar, there is no evidence that Dunbar Street is named for him. Street names in the area commemorate European battles, including the battle in 1650 at Dunbar, Scotland. In 1909 the new municipality laid out its main thoroughfares half a mile apart, running north-south as well as east-west. That was also the year that the municipality of Point Grey issued its first tax notices and passed bylaws to borrow funds for local improvements and road building. Until then there were no municipal water supplies or services such as sewage, lighting or finished roads.

In 1922 Point Grey municipality enacted Canada's first zoning bylaw, restricting building to residences only, thanks to the advisory work of Frank Buck, a Point Grey resident and professor who did the initial landscape design for the University of British Columbia. In 1925 alderman Warner Loat, a resident of the area, extolled the advantages of Dunbar Heights as a residential district, writing in an article published in the *Point Grey Gazette*: "An earnest invitation is extended to the man or woman who appreciates the beautiful, to locate among us out here on the Dunbar Highlands, where the sun seems to shine a little brighter than anywhere else, where the folks seem a little bit more friendly toward the newcomer."

By 1925, when Helen MacDonald's family moved to Blenheim Street to be near the newly established university, more than 90 homes were available for sale. This may have been because of the entrepreneurial spirit of Jack Wood, who built the first real estate office in Dunbar at 29th Avenue. In 1926 the Point Grey Town Planning Commission was established with Frank Buck as chairman, further advancing Point Grey's vision of becoming a city "in which the best type of home could not only be built, but also adequately safeguarded from the encroachments of undesirable types of development." Point Grey was firmly a single-family district and Dunbar was still a part of Point Grey.

The Point Grey planners had done much groundwork by the time a consulting firm from Missouri was asked to draft for Vancouver what was to become known as the Bartholomew Plan. It was completed in 1928 and revised in 1929 to include the newly amalgamated districts South Vancouver and Point Grey. This plan, although never formally adopted by the City of Vancouver, influenced city planning for years to come, and many of its recommendations for parks and other amenities were realized. Numerous provisions in the bylaws of the Point Grey municipality were respected as well, including Point Grey's single-family zoning.

Citizen participation in town planning was one provision in the Point Grey bylaws that was not adopted by the City of Vancouver. The Bartholomew Plan was entirely professionally developed, whereas the Point Grey Zoning By-law No. 727 (1927) had explicitly acknowledged the right of citizens to have a say. In the coming decades there would frequently be tension between town planning as envisioned by qualified professionals, the desire of local citizens to have a greater role in shaping their neighbourhoods, and the continuing efforts of developers to increase the housing stock in the area. This gave rise to the formation of "ratepayers' associations," which rallied against unpopular development proposals, and also to a series of municipal plans shaping the futures of communities. Dunbar, fiercely defensive of its right to maintain its distinctive character, was one of the first Vancouver neighbourhoods chosen to develop a *Community Vision* document.

Beneath the tree-lined streets and comfortable single-family homes of Dunbar, the vestiges of logging and farming and the courses of underground streams are still present. They are featured each spring during the history walks and talks of the neighbourhood's month-long Salmonberry Days festival. Natural habitats are being painstakingly restored in Camosun Bog and on the north arm of the Fraser River, thanks to the efforts of environmentalists. Like the layers of glacial till that make up Dunbar's geology, Dunbar's character reflects the contributions of many different people over time. Alongside the original residents of the peninsula, these people have come, settled, and enjoyed the abundance that the land and the community have to offer, leaving traces that enrich the lives of those who come after them.