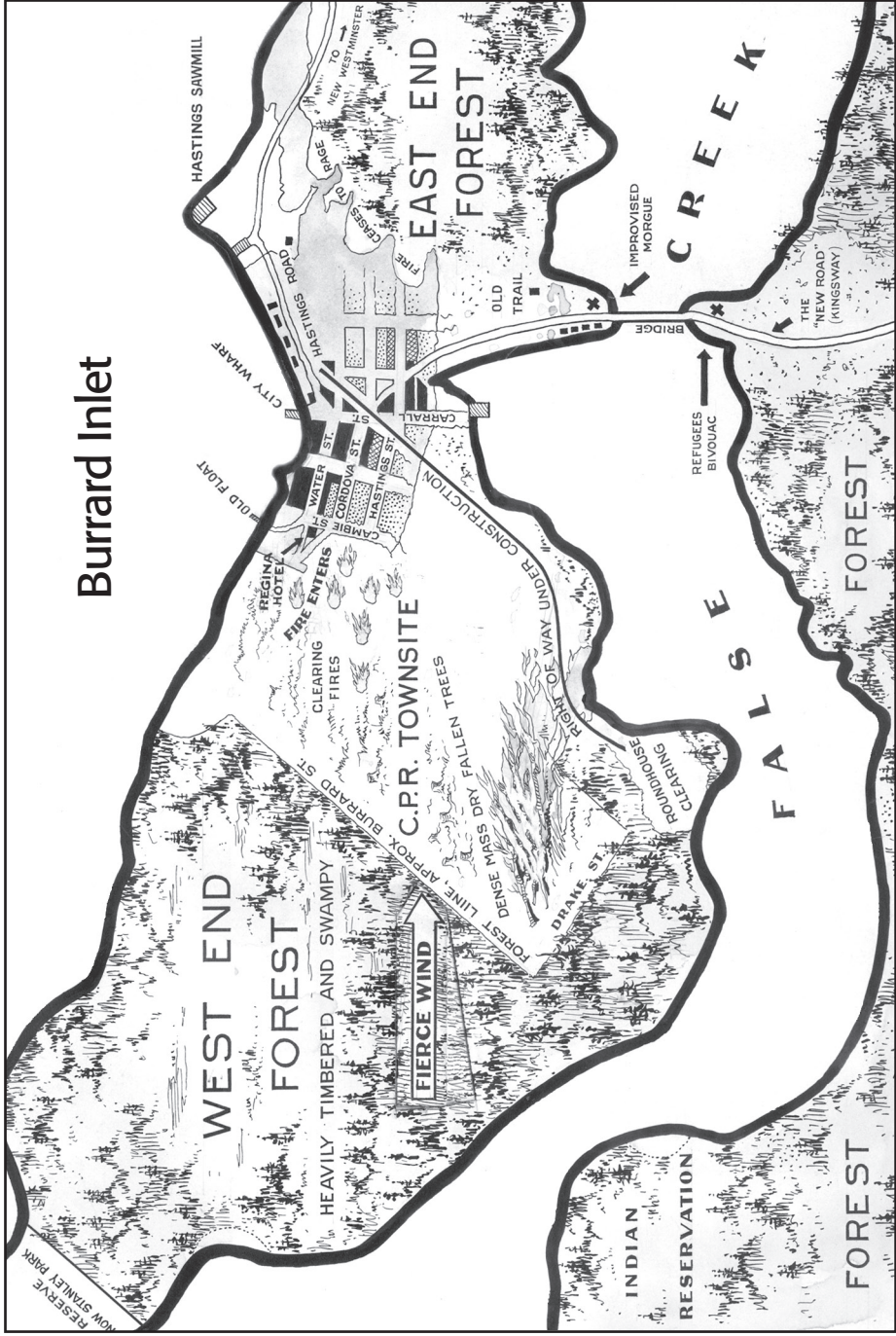


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Map of Vancouver at the time of the Great Fire, 1886.

Tuesday, June 8, 1886



Vancouver is one of the liveliest cities on the Pacific Coast. With its wonderful natural advantages, its glorious climate, enchanting scenery, its unrivalled harbour, no wonder the prediction is freely made that in a few years there will be seen thousands of people where there are now hundreds.

Vancouver Daily Advertiser

Sunday, June 13, 1886



■ 10 A.M.

Vancouver is sweltering. Late spring has been abnormally hot for the past three weeks. Puddles, normally knee-deep along busy Carrall Street, have long since dried up. The few remaining mud holes are blistered and cracked like paint on an ancient canvas. Horses swish their tails in a half-hearted attempt to keep the ever-increasing population of flies at bay. Chickens scratch up small clouds of dust as they scavenge about their backyard enclosures.

Reverend Thompson's deep voice echoes from the rafters of Vancouver's recently completed Presbyterian Church, as he reads from the Bible laid open upon his small pulpit: "And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind,

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and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.”

It is Whitsunday, exactly fifty days after Easter, and the morning’s sermon is all about the miraculous events described in the second chapter of “The Acts of the Apostles.” Reverend Thompson artfully captivates his audience. Parishioners sit transfixed, fanning themselves in the morning heat. The normally full church is emptier than usual today. Many members of the congregation have travelled to New Westminster for the funeral of Canadian Pacific Railway contractor Owen McCormack, killed on the job when the dynamiting of a stump went horribly wrong. Vancouver, newly incorporated city as it is, does not yet have its own official cemetery. Aboard a small wagon, the body of Mr. McCormack had to be transported through twelve miles of near-virgin wilderness for internment in accordance with provincial law.

Despite the lack of burial facilities, Vancouver is well on its way to becoming “civilized.” In the previous year, CPR General Manager William Van Horne had confirmed that the small collection of buildings formerly known as “Granville” was to become the western terminus of the Canadian Pacific Railway, rather than the Burrard Inlet headwater township of Port Moody. Now, the pace of development is surging forward. New businesses are going up as fast as land can be purchased. Stages and steamers discharge luggage-laden settlers, who find lodging in hotels still smelling of freshly milled cedar. Speculators ponder survey maps carefully spread over rough-hewn tables, while raucous lumberjacks drink away their earnings in smoke-filled saloons along the length and breadth of Water Street.

From the earliest days of settlement on Burrard Inlet’s south



At the corner of Carrall and Water streets, May 1886.

shore, trees have been the drawing card. The indigenous Musqueam, Squamish and Tseil-Waututh peoples lived resourcefully off the land, selectively harvesting the verdant growth of the region for everything from sturdy longhouses and dugout canoes to boxes and baskets of intricate beauty. When an enterprising Captain Edward Stamp established the B.C. and Vancouver Island Spar, Lumber and Sawmill Company on the natural promontory near the seasonal native community of Kumkumalay (big leaf maple trees), trees meant money in the pocket and food on the table.¹ The abundant western red cedars have trunks so wide lumberjacks must mount springboards to reach sections narrow enough to saw through. Douglas firs tower skyward, some reaching three hundred feet or more in height. They are the ideal length for use as sailing-ship masts and spars.

For over twenty years, the steady rasp of the crosscut saw has cut a wide swath into the thick stands of ancient-growth forest

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flanking the inlet. An ingenious system has been developed for speeding up the pace of the work. The tallest of the trees are sawed strategically to knock down partially-axed surrounding trees as they fall, like a giant line of dominoes. Try anything, but “get it down,” is the prevailing mindset.²

After being stripped of all branches, the massive trunks are skidded to the mills over a corduroy road of logs laid side-by-side and greased with dogfish oil. The leftover heaps of slash and debris are burned away, the stumps dynamited, and then the land can be graded for construction to begin. Felling, slashing and burning continue relentlessly from dawn to dusk. At the end of each long day, the powder men apply their torches to the fuses and great, hulking stumps shatter—their deeply embedded roots rocketing skyward. The speed of felling far outpaces the speed of burning, clear up and stumping. A virtual mountain of slash, up to three storeys high in places, has been steadily accumulating on the outskirts of the city. Vancouver residents have long become accustomed to the sounds of industry and the acrid smell of smoke lingering in their nostrils. Such is the price of progress.



Earliest known photo of Hastings Sawmill and townsite, 1872.

VANCOUVER IS ASHES

Plans have been drawn up for the construction of a roundhouse near the southerly end of the future Drake Street to turn the CPR locomotives about-face for their return journey eastward. The branch line to False Creek will provide freight service for the Royal City Planing Mills and other industries soon to occupy the English Bay foreshore. A work party keeps vigil over a small clearing fire at the roundhouse site. Efforts are low-key, partly due to it being Sunday and partly due to the relentless heat—already taking its toll on motivation. Far out on the broad expanse of English Bay, a gentle Pacific breeze wafts its way eastward, causing the previously calm waters of False Creek to slosh rhythmically against the shoreline. The crewmen keep buckets filled with water on standby, ready to deal with the sudden flare-ups which inevitably occur in dry weather.



William John Gallagher

Near the future intersection of Cambie and Smithe streets, another company of workers steadily hack and shovel through the profuse undergrowth of salal and salmon berry. They are hired by “Percival and Gallagher,”³ the company contracted by the Townsite Commission to clear a branch line from the CPR terminus of Vancouver centre, to False Creek. Ontario-born William Gallagher, already well on his way to an enterprising business career at the age of twenty-three, has charge over the rail-bed crew. He strides back and forth, energetically monitoring progress to ensure that every last vestige of root is dug out, well aware that the notoriously prolific salmonberry

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can fight its way back through the thickest layer of gravel. When complete, the rail bed will cut a northeast trajectory across the mile-wide peninsula between False Creek and Burrard Inlet, linking with the main line.

With his own crew working diligently, Gallagher decides to wander down and have a look at the roundhouse clearing site. He quickly discovers that the men have a struggle on their hands. Small flames stirred to life by the offshore breeze are licking hungrily at the ample supply of deadwood. Showers of sparks teasingly dance in the air each time a shovel is rammed down. Wet blankets need fast and frequent re-soaking at the False Creek shore. Somewhat perturbed, Gallagher hurries back to his worksite to ask for volunteers to help. Flare-ups are common at the clearing sites and the unspoken law among crewmen is to provide aid wherever and whenever it is needed. Three men immediately offer their assistance.

■ 12 NOON

The Presbyterian Church congregation has filtered out into the early afternoon sunshine. Small groups of parishioners linger to exchange pleasantries—ladies clandestinely drawing deep breaths of air to offset the discomforts of their tightly-corseted Sunday dresses, business-suited gentlemen idly puffing on cigars. Fifteen-year-old Annie Ellen Sanders tries to keep a wary eye on her younger brothers Joseph and James, while chatting with a group of young men in the crowd. She does not feel particularly flirtatious. Her elder sister Catherine died less than two months previously and the Sanders family are, once again in mourning. Four sisters have died over the past few years and Annie Ellen, last surviving female member of the Sanders children, has found