

GOLD RUSH SPARKED AMERICAN INTEREST IN B.C.



As thousands of miners flocked to the glittering shores of the Fraser River, the United States set its sights on the coastal territory

BY JEAN BARMAN

The year 1858 is the single most important year in British Columbia's history. A gold rush beginning that spring unleashed a chain of events that culminated a dozen years later in British Columbia joining the new Canadian Confederation. Without 1858, it is very possible there would have been no British Columbia, but rather an American state. Without 1858, Canada today would not extend from sea to sea.

A treaty concluded a dozen years earlier with the United States gave the future province to Britain, but apart from declaring Vancouver Island a colony in 1849 and handing it over to the fur trading Hudson's Bay Company to administer, nothing much ensued. From the perspective of Britain with its vast empire, today's British Columbia counted for little. It was too far away and of too little value to interest the mother country.

The future British Columbia's settler population had stagnated at under 1,000, whereas change was in the air south of the border. Ever since Lewis and Clark looked upon the Pacific Ocean in 1805, Americans were determined to cross the continent. Beginning in the early 1840s, settlers poured west over the Oregon Trail. In 1848, the United States acquired California from Spain. Nearer to the international boundary with Britain, military forts were established at strategic points, and indigenous people unwilling to surrender their land violently suppressed. By 1858, about 50,000 whites lived in present-day Washington and Oregon, and many believed it was only a matter of time until the United States extended its reach north to Russian America, the future Alaska.

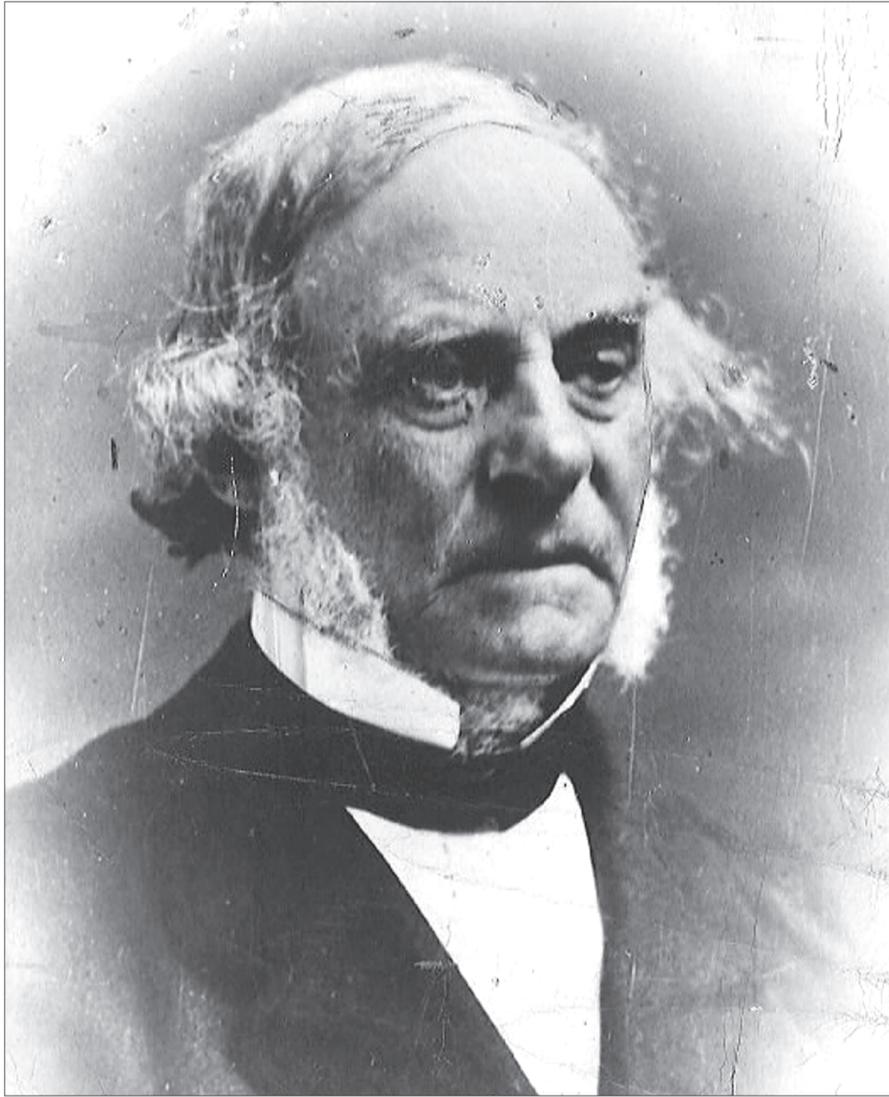
There matters stood when news leaked out of the discovery of gold in sandbars in the Fraser River on the British Columbia mainland. The first arrivals in the spring of 1858 were mostly experienced miners from the California gold rush of 1849. Some estimates put the total coming that year at 30,000.

Events seemed to be going America's way. Miners began passing resolutions able to become the pretext for asserting sovereignty. The United States rushed a special commissioner to the gold diggings to protect its citizens from supposed harsh treatment by the Hudson's Bay Co. His report to the U.S. Congress declared it was only a matter of time before the territory came under American control. Indeed, he considered that outcome so certain no special effort need be made in that direction.

What the Americans did not count on was that the gold rush forced Britain's hand. This distant part of the world was not as useless as it had seemed to be.

James Douglas, a fur trader who governed Vancouver Island, acted on his own initiative to keep the gold rush from spinning out of control, but he could do so for only so long. On Aug. 2, 1858, Britain declared the mainland a separate British colony, named British Columbia, with Douglas in charge. Over the next months and years, Douglas acted forcefully to maintain order and provide access to the gold fields.

These actions did not stem American interest. The international boundary ran through the middle of the channel separating Vancouver Island from the mainland, but no one knew precisely



Sir James Douglas was a fur trader who became the first governor of British Columbia.

where it was. A fracas on San Juan Island located near the Vancouver Island capital of Victoria gave the military commander south of the border the opening he sought. He sent in his forces and reported optimistically to the commander-in-chief of the U.S. army.

"The population of British Columbia is largely American and foreigners; comparatively few persons from the British Isles emigrate to this region. The English cannot colonize successfully so near our people; they are too exacting. This, with the pressing necessities of our commerce on this coast, will induce them to yield, eventually, Vancouver's Island to our government. It is as important to the Pacific States as Cuba is to those on the Atlantic."

An uncertain future

While the escalating confrontation between the American military and the Royal Navy was soon referred to arbitration, the events signalled the future province was up for grabs.

By the mid-1860s, the gold rush had run its course. The good times were over and the number of miners was falling dramatically. The mainland colony had run up a huge debt from building roads to the gold fields. To save money, in 1866 Britain folded the Vancouver

Island colony into its British Columbia counterpart.

The long-term future of the United Colony of British Columbia became much debated. Most of those of British background favoured the existing situation. Arrivals from within British North America looked to entry into the new Canadian Confederation, created in 1867 out of the four British colonies of Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Others sought annexation to the United States.

American expansionism again came to the fore. In 1867, the day after Britain confirmed the Canadian Confederation, the United States purchased Alaska from Russia, which renewed its interest in the intervening land mass. The American Secretary of State was convinced that "our population is destined to roll its restless waves to the icy barriers of the north." The U.S. consul in Victoria reported enthusiastically that "the people of Vancouver Island, and of British Columbia, are almost unanimous in their desire for annexation to the United States."

Britain may have been momentarily tempted to give in to American desires. At the time of the Alaska sale, it was negotiating with the United States over reparations for having permitted the Confederate South to build warships on

British territory during the recently concluded Civil War. The U.S. secretary of state proposed to take British Columbia in settlement. Britain demurred. It did so not out of love for its remote colony but because the Royal Navy had recently moved its Pacific coast headquarters north from Valparaiso, Chile, to Esquimalt, just outside Victoria and near to coal deposits that could service its steamships. To give up British Columbia would inconvenience the Royal Navy.

Pro-Americanism

The American initiative was not yet thwarted. In August 1869, the U.S. secretary of state made a personal reconnaissance to Victoria. Back home, he reported confidently that British Columbians were getting up petitions addressed to Congress in favour of annexation. In the end, two petitions were dispatched, containing 104 signatures. Most of the signatories were Victoria merchants who had come north from California during the gold rush, suggesting that economic stagnation may have played as large a role as did pro-American sentiment. While causing a flutter in Congress, no further action ensued and the surge abated.

In the meantime, Britain took

B.C. at 150

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the initiative. It continued to be interested in colonies only so far as they benefited the mother country, and this a struggling British Columbia seemed unlikely to do. From Britain's perspective, the best course lay in joining its remote possession to Canada as soon as possible. In 1869, a new governor was appointed to cajole the colonial legislature to set demands for entry into Confederation.

Since 1858, commitment to British Columbia as a distinct entity had taken shape. That commitment expressed itself in different ways. Exasperated with British indifference, attorney-general H.P.P. Crease toyed with a declaration of independence.

"What do you say to a large English Kingdom here west of the Rocky Mountains ... If they despise us at home ... [can] we be the worse off as an entirely separate Country? ... All the armies in the World cd not get into the Country if we defended the only passes ... I can readily imagine a great future."

The most fervent proponent of Confederation, future premier Amor de Cosmos, expressed the general sentiment during the debate on terms of entry, "I stand here not as a Canadian, but as a British Columbian; my allegiance is due first to British Columbia." The terms negotiated for entry into Confederation included a transcontinental rail line and payment of the colony's large debt.

The sequence of events beginning in the spring of 1858 concluded on July 1, 1871, with British Columbia becoming a Canadian province. The excitement of the gold rush followed by the proclamation of the colony of British Columbia had not assured the future, but they made it possible. British Columbia in 1871 was still a very fragile place. While large in size — over twice Washington and Oregon combined — its settler population was minute, at one-tenth their 110,000. BC150 provides a powerful reminder not to take our province for granted, be it yesterday, today, or tomorrow.

Jean Barman is the author of BC 150 Years: The Spirit of the People, forthcoming from Harbour Publishing. Her general history of British Columbia, The West Beyond the West, recently appeared in a third edition.

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