

Context:

Gabriola, history, Snunéymux<sup>w</sup> First Nation

Citations:

Poulton, Lynda, An old fence—how Indian reserves came to Gabriola, *SHALE* 5, pp.24–27, December 2002.

Copyright restrictions:

Copyright © 2002: Gabriola Historical & Museum Society.

For reproduction permission e-mail: [nickdoe@island.net](mailto:nickdoe@island.net)

Errors and omissions:

Reference:

Date posted:

December 7, 2012.

---

# An old fence— how Indian reserves came to Gabriola

by Lynda Poulton

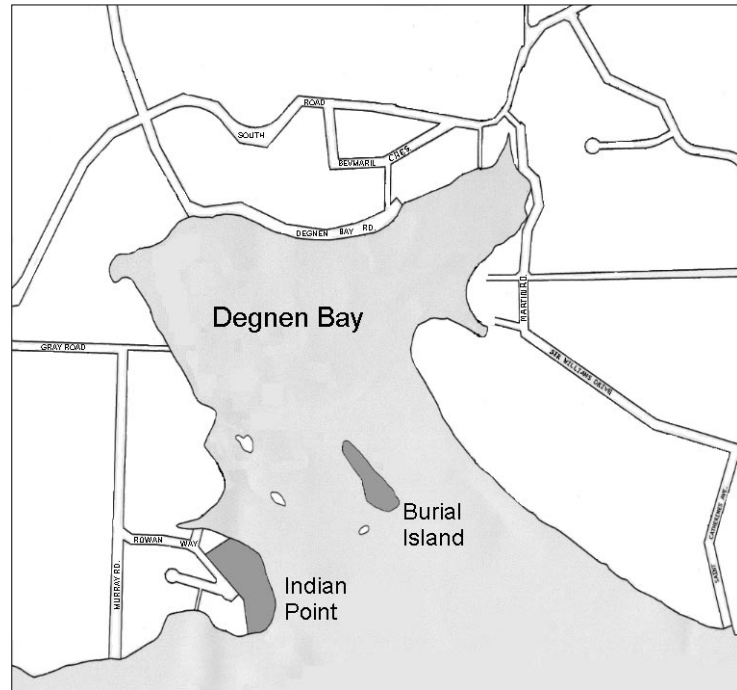
Gabriola Island has just two small Indian reserves. Both are in Degnen Bay—Gabriola IR5 (Indian Point) and Gabriola IR6 (Burial Island). Gabriola IR5 was once a fishing station for the Snunéymux<sup>w</sup>. There are two known names for this reserve: *t'hit'h<sup>w</sup>utqson*, which means “fine gravel point”; and *xwqi' thulp*, which means “ironwood place”.<sup>1</sup> Gabriola IR6 is *male'q<sup>w</sup>e'* or “burial site”.

In former times, the Aboriginal population of Gabriola was more than a thousand, but at the time that the reserves were being allocated, there were few Aboriginal people left. Introduced diseases, alcoholism, and warfare had depopulated the island, and most of those that survived had become residents of Nanaimo. As a consequence, Gabriola was very nearly left with no reserves at all, in spite of there being several Snunéymux<sup>w</sup> village sites here, including one major one at False Narrows.

After British Columbia joined Canada in 1876, a Joint Indian Reserve Commission (JIRC) was set up. Members of the JIRC were appointed by both the provincial and federal governments. The JIRC travelled around BC and met with Indians to allot reserve lands. The following is an extract of

---

<sup>1</sup> Ironwood or oceanspray is a very hard wood that was used to make digging sticks. Loraine Littlefield, *Coast Salish placenames on Gabriola, SHALE 2*, pp.21–26, March 2001.



Adapted from RDN GABRIOLA ISLAND Legal Base Map

a letter from the JIRC, written by Mr. Gilbert Sproat, to Mr. Elliot, the BC Provincial Secretary.<sup>2</sup> It is dated Nanaimo, December 20, 1876. The contents of this letter describe in some detail how the Indian reserves on Gabriola came into being.

The part of the letter of interest begins:

“...Before leaving Nanaimo, an old Nanaimo Indian asked us to visit the south end of Gabriola Island, where he said there were Indian houses in one of which he

---

<sup>2</sup> BC Provincial Secretary records (1876–78), Sproat correspondence BCA GR 0494: B11011.

lived.<sup>3</sup> We were disinclined to favour the making of a small reserve so far from the others, but as the Indian begged us to go, and said that a white settler had come to the place lately, and had knocked down the Indian fences and as our inquiries at Nanaimo seemed to make a visit desirable, we promised to visit the scene of the dispute as soon as possible.

“Captain Wake of Valdez Island<sup>4</sup> also visited our camp at Nanaimo, with reference to questions between him and the Li-ick-sin [Lyackson] Indians.

“We heard also of other questions that awaited our decision in the district to which we were to proceed from Nanaimo—namely the district of Chemainus including the larger outlying islands in the gulf. There were 20 to 25 places within this district which the Commissioners would have to visit, and it therefore was necessary to select an encampment from which the different places could be reached conveniently without shifting the Camp. Horse Shoe Bay was the place selected. The Commissioners arrived there on the 21st December.<sup>5</sup> Next morning they went to Valdez [now Valdes] Island to begin work among the Li-ick-sins, and while there ran up in the steamer to the south end of Gabriola Island to settle the question above mentioned as existing there between some of the Nanaimo Indians and a white settler.

“The settler, Mr. Martin was not at home, but he had been there an hour or two before

we arrived.<sup>6</sup> He had built a good log house, and had cut and was burning the trees near it. The place was a narrow point and the Indian houses, four in number, were close to a beach at the end of it. Four Indian men, three women, and two children lived in the houses. Behind the houses was a good patch of land running across the point, showing traces of having been cleared and cultivated by the Indians. Portions of a fence were lying on the ground, and near the prostrate fence were cuts in old stumps, showing where the fence had once been erected. Farther back was Mr. Martin’s house partly surrounded as above said, by evidences of vigour and industry in the shape of felled and burning trees.

“Not being able to see Mr. Martin, the Commissioners wrote a letter to him asking for the favour of an interview and Captain Wake who was present kindly offered to deliver the letter to Mr. Martin. The statement of the old Indian Kwak-yum-men was then taken down as follows:

‘I am a Nanaimo Indian with a wife, a girl, and a boy. I am old, and not strong and cannot work land much. I am a fisherman, and I get food and clothes for my family by catching fish and selling them. I have been here since I was a boy, and my father and grandfather were here too, and are buried on that little island. I like this place because it is a good place for catching fish. I go to Nanaimo river to catch the winter salmon. These other men do the same but this is our place. One of these men’s wives is buried on that island. What I say is true; you can see that the houses are old, and you can ask the white people about me. I do not want much land. I want you to say that I may have the houses and a small piece for potatoes. I have grown potatoes here & I cut down trees, and that fence was mine and was put up across

<sup>3</sup> There is a photograph, albeit not a good one, of houses on the reserve (Gabriola IR5) in the 1930s, in *SHALE* 2, p.25, March 2001.

<sup>4</sup> There is an article on Captain Wake of Valdes in this issue of *SHALE*. See pp.3–13.

<sup>5</sup> One day later than the date of the letter. This portion was obviously appended later.

<sup>6</sup> There is also an article on the Martin family of Gabriola in this issue of *SHALE*. See pp.22–23.

there. A short time ago, a white man came and began to cut down trees and when I asked him what he meant to do, he said he was going to build a house. He built that house and burned trees, and then knocked down my fence. I said I would speak to Dr. Powell.<sup>7</sup> The white man said that Dr. Powell was no chief; he was all the same as an Indian. Dr. Powell told me to wait for the Commissioners. You can see that my fence is old wood. I did not use my gun because I know the law, and I waited. I do not know the white man's name. He was working here near his house when your steamer came.'

"The Commissioners returned next day, going twelve or fourteen miles in the hope of finding Mr. Martin, and he awaited them at the beach, when they arrived.

"The statement of the Indian was read over to him in the presence of the Indians. He said that he had cut down trees and had knocked down the old fence, and did not think he was doing wrong, as he had been told at Nanaimo that there was no Indian reserve at this place. This little point was very good land, and he wished to have it. The Indians he said, did not always live in their houses. He had not used any disrespectful language with regard to Dr. Powell; he had not been long in the country and could not speak Chinook well and the Indians must have misunderstood him.

"The Commissioners, having carefully examined the ground, formed an opinion that it was an old Indian settlement, and as such, could not be legally pre-empted or occupied. They explained to Mr. Martin the degree of protection afforded by the law to Indian settlements which are not recorded as reserves and pointed out to him the very serious position in which he had apparently

placed himself by his high handed proceedings. At the same time, the Commissioners offered to postpone their decision, if Mr. Martin wished to place any evidence before them which in his opinion might give a different colour to his acts. Mr. Martin said he wished a summary decision be given. He had acted on misinformation. He had no papers for his claim, as the neighbouring claims had not been 'proved up'. He was a squatter. The settlers wished a road to the water at this point of land.

"The Commissioners would probably not have exceeded their duty, nor done injustices, had they caused Mr. Martin to remove his house and reported him to the Indian Department as an encroacher upon an Indian Settlement, but they endeavoured to arrange a compromise that would satisfy the Indians, as well as the views of the white settlers, and at the same time give Mr. Martin an opportunity of making a homestead without transferring from his occupancy the whole of the good soil on the small point of land.

"By this time, the old Indian had larger views. He not only wished Mr. Martin removed but wished for a tract of land for cattle. The Commissioners reminded him of what he had asked for the day before, and stated that they had given lands to the Nanaimo Indians at Nanaimo, and that this must be a fishing station, or nothing.

"They decided to give the Indians the land from the point back to where their old place had been. This included their beach, their houses, well, and cultivated ground, and it left a piece of good land for Mr. Martin, and room for the proposed road to reach the place of shipment which Mr. Martin pointed out. In order to get wood for the reserve, the simplest way would have been to have drawn the back line of the reserve farther back from the point so as to include

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Israel Wood Powell, a Victoria medical doctor, was a resident superintendent of Indian affairs in British Columbia.

woodland but as this would have caused the sacrifice of Mr. Martin's labour and cut off his house, the Commissioners added a longish strip of woodland on one side of the point. The whole reserve is only 2½ acres, of which half an acre is clear land. Additionally the Commissioners made a

reserve of a small rocky islet, used as a burial ground. They walked finally over the ground, and showed the boundaries to the Indians and to Mr. Martin. This finished the allotment of reserves for the Nanaimo Indians...." ◇



A Snunéymux<sup>w</sup> Lodge at Nanaimo, Vancouver Island.

A photograph by Fredrick Dally who lived in Victoria between 1862 and 1870.

Photograph 58962, Neg.D-141. Courtesy BC Provincial Archives