Fire, Flood, and Fish: A Walking Tour of Steveston B.C.

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Abstract: There have been many struggles surrounding floods, fires, and upheavals in the fishing industry in the town of Steveston, B.C. since the first Caucasian settlers arrived. Throughout these physical, economic, and social struggles the people and the town have persisted to help create the thriving coastal town that Steveston is today. There is a sense of resilience and pride in the history of Steveston, which can be seen through rebuilding after fires, social support during wartime, community persistence in the face of flooding and dyking, and pride and hard work in the fishing and canning industry. This tour script project provides anecdotes, stories, facts, photographs, and research on the community of Steveston and how they responded in times of grief and stress as well as how their persistence is still visible today.

Fire, Flood, and Fish: A Walking Tour of Steveston, B.C.

Steveston, British Columbia has persisted through several disasters and has persevered to become a thriving cultural region of the Lower Mainland full of unique history. The goal of this research project was to create an hour-long walking tour of Steveston with several stops along the way to highlight pieces of this village’s history. This document includes a series of photographs and maps to support the following tour script that’s full of detailed information and anecdotes. The key themes of the walking tour surround fires, floods, and upheavals in the fishing industry that affected Steveston and its citizens as well as the responses taken to mediate those conflicts. Through photographs, an intentional walking route, information, and stories, participants should leave having learned about Steveston, but also feeling proud and impressed that this village persisted through some tough challenges to become the beautiful ocean village that it is today.

Map of Fire, Flood, and Fish tour route stops in Steveston, B.C.
www.steveston.ca
1) The Steveston Museum

**Goal**: Once the tour is ready to begin, the goal at the museum is to provide tour participants with a bit of background on Steveston. This is also the point in time to introduce yourself as the tour guide and to ask the tour participants to introduce themselves as well (ask for their name, where they are from, and how they heard about the tour). Next it is important to explain how the next hour will work (ie. We will be heading out on an hour long walking tour making a few stops along the way to focus on stories, anecdotes, and information of the persistence and resilience of Steveston). Throughout the entire tour script there are several fun or interesting facts that are included. These are not key points because they do not necessarily contribute to the main narrative, but they support the themes and add elements of interest.

**Information to include:**

- Steveston, British Columbia has persisted through several disasters and struggles to become a thriving cultural region of the lower mainland.
- The key themes of this walking tour are fire, flood, and fish and how these themes affected the social, economic and physical environments of Steveston.
- Back in 1889, William Herbert Steves laid the Steveston townsite with the vision of making it a major seaport terminal to rival Vancouver City.¹
- From 1871-82 there were 13 canneries that opened in the Greater Vancouver region, and in 1882 these canneries packed up to 250,000 cases of four-dozen one-pound cans and employed up to five thousand people.² This quick turn of events led to many canneries being built along Steveston’s waterfront in the late 1890’s.
- As we will be talking about the fishing and canning industries importance in the early emergence of Steveston, a fun fact to note is that the first cannery in Steveston was the Phoenix, built by Marshall English.³

² J. Cherrington, *The Fraser Valley—A History*, Harbour Publishing, 1992, 172. This citation comes from an extensive section on the boom days and golden years in the Fraser Valley and the emergence and importance of the fishing and canning industry.
³ D. Stacey, and S. Stacey, *Salmonopolis: The Steveston Story*, Harbour Publishing, 1994, 124. If there is time, the tour guide can include more information regarding this point about Marshall English and how Henry Doyle remembers that Marshall had a Caucasian employee who was a bully to Chinese labourers that worked below him, especially one shy man. When one day the bullying went too far all of the Chinese labourers present stood up for themselves and fought back. The foreman on duty sided with the Caucasian and when he confronted the Chinese an angry mob ensued. This mob was calmed down by Marshall English who investigated the situation and fired the Caucasian worker and the foreman. This led to no more labour issues in English’s cannery and helped create a sense of peace among the labourers.
2) Moncton Street and 2nd

Goal: The goal of this stop is to introduce fire as a form of disaster in Steveston, noting that the most destructive fire was in 1918. It is also important to point out some of the physical and economic impacts that caused over half a million dollars in damage during the 1918 fire. As seen in the figure above the tour stop will be in front of “Mr. Gold’s Pawn Shop” which has been bought out by the “Once Upon A Time” Production. At this point the tour guide will show the old white brick wall still left after this fire, which was part of the oldest building on Brick Block.

Information to include:

- In Steveston’s early days people feared fire as there was no organized fire department and they had to wait for fire engines from Marpole.\(^4\)
- There were many small fires, but the largest fire known to Steveston was the fire of 1918 that caused over half a million dollars in damages. The headline of the Weekly Gazette on May 18th, 1918 read “Fiery Doom of Old Steveston”.\(^5\)
- This fire burnt down 3 canneries (the Star, Steveston, and Lighthouse), 3 hotels (Star, Richmond, and London), along with most of Brick Block, which had been built in 1910.\(^6\)
- The white brick wall next to Mr. Gold’s Pawn Shop, is where the fire ceased burning along Brick Block. This white wall persists as a physical reminder of the city Steveston once was before the fire of 1918. This wall once stood next to the oldest building on Brick block, and the formation of that building still stands resembling the building of 1918 as you can see by comparing the two photographs. This wall demonstrates physical persistence and resilience in the town of Steveston.
- Fun Fact: In 1908 there was a fire in Steveston’s Eastern section, known as the Steveston Chinatown that caused over $35,000 in damages.\(^7\)

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\(^4\) D. Cleland, *Steveston Boom Days ... Fire*, Richmond Nature Park Committee, 1972, 10.
\(^6\) Cleland, *Boom Days*, 11.
\(^7\) Stacey et al. *Salmonopolis*, 141.
3) Moncton Street across at Marine Garage

![Image](image_url)

Walker Emporium on Fire, 1918.
City of Richmond Archives 1977 23 2

**Goal:** At this stop the tour should continue the conversation of the Steveston 1918 fire while sharing anecdotes about the fire rescue and stories of persistence.

**Information to include:**

- A fire engine had been called from Marpole to help mitigate the fire of 1918 in Steveston, but it broke down along the way, and therefore canneries smoldered for days making popping sounds when the cans of fish exploded from over heating.\(^8\)
- At the time of the 1918 fire, Steveston was still dependant on their voluntary bucket brigade, which was called into action upon noting the fire of 1918.\(^9\)
- The Marine Garage, where we are standing now, used to be the Walker Emporium. The “Walker Emporium on Fire” photograph demonstrates what the fire engines that had to be called from Marpole looked like in 1918.
- Fun Fact: After the canneries had burnt down there were tons of cans left floating in the ocean and it became quite a feat for young folks to jump in and salvage the cans so that they could be sold.\(^10\)

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\(^8\) Stacey et al. *Salmonopolis*, 141.
\(^9\) Cleland, *Boom Days*, 10.
\(^10\) Ibid, 12.
4) Gulf of Georgia Cannery

**Goal:** At this stop it is important to point out the heritage sign at the Gulf of Georgia Cannery. This is also when the tour guide can introduce the importance of the fishing and the canning industry as a social and economic resource as well as a livelihood in Steveston. Fishing and cannery life was not only the life of original caucasian settlers, but many Japanese and Chinese men and women worked as fishermen or in the canneries.

**Information to include:**

- The Gulf of Georgia cannery, also known as the “Monster Cannery” or the Malcom and Windsor Cannery, was built in 1894 in Steveston and remained the largest in BC until 1902.\(^{11}\)
- Before this cannery was even built the origins of the fishing industry in Steveston resided with the First Nations people of the region. It was in the mid 1890’s that Aboriginal net licenses diminished to be only 43% of the net licenses on the Fraser River, which further reduced to 12% in 1901-04.\(^{12}\)
- Although Steveston’s boom days were winding down in the early 1900’s, in 1907 Japanese fisherman were bringing their wives and families to Steveston, boosting the population and creating a stronger, united, and diverse community.\(^{13}\)
- This cannery was declared a historic site in 1978, and provides insight on the importance of preserving the history of the canning industry in Steveston.\(^{14}\)
- This cannery signifies evolving history and it celebrates the roots of West Coast Fishing.

\(^{11}\) Yesaki et al., *Cannery Row*, 35.
\(^{12}\) Stacey et al., *Salmonopolis*, 124. While aboriginal net license numbers were diminishing, licenses belonging to Caucasian men and Japanese were increasing. In the 1880’s Caucasians held 37% of net licenses and then 44 percent in 1901-04.
\(^{13}\) Stacey et al., *Salmonopolis*, 143.
\(^{14}\) *Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site Management Plan*, Canadian Heritage Parks Canada, 1994. The historic site was acquired by Parks Canada in 1984 and now remains undeveloped for public use.
5) Old Site of the Star Cannery

Star Cannery, Steveston, ca. 1900.  
City of Richmond Archives 1985 4 202

Scottish Canadian Cannery and Pilings, copied 1977.  
City of Richmond Archives 1977 1 242

**Goal:** The themes of this stop are about fire devastation and social dynamics of multicultural industries like the fishing and canning industry in Steveston. This is the point to talk about dates and causes of fires in Steveston as well as the physical land effects of fires. The guide can also introduce what life in the cannery bunkhouses were like and stories about the lives of the Japanese and Chinese cannery workers in Steveston.

**Information to include:**

- One of the first recorded fires in Steveston was in 1897 and began in the Star Cannery; luckily the owners were persistent and rebuilt it just in time for the fishing season of that year.\(^{15}\)
- Then on May 14\(^{th}\), 1918 the most devastating fire in Steveston’s history originated in the Star Cannery once again. It originated in the China house where people were pre-occupied with gambling and failed to notice an overturned coal oil lamp.\(^{16}\) The lamp, along with wind blowing, spelled disaster, and this time the cannery was not rebuilt.
- The lives of the Japanese and Chinese immigrant workers were not always easy. Although many of them came to Steveston to work in a familiar trade of fishing, the Japanese and Chinese bunkhouses were so close together that they were prone to fire and flooding. At the same time these living quarters were also conducive to creating a close knit community between those living there. Mrs. Obayashi, a female worker in the Nelson Bros. Cannery in 1938, stayed in the bunk houses and didn’t think they were too bad, although they were not very clean, and were quite small.\(^{17}\)
- The Japanese community was forced out of Steveston during the second World War and on May 18\(^{th}\), 1942 the Nishii family was given 8 hours notice to travel.\(^{18}\) Mrs.  

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\(^{16}\) Cleland, *Boom Days*, 11.

\(^{17}\) City of Richmond. The City of Richmond Archive. Mrs. Obayashi Oral History.

\(^{18}\) City of Richmond. The City of Richmond Archives. Frank Nishii Oral History. I read this oral history looking for anecdotes and stories to portray persistence and resilience of Japanese fishermen in Steveston, and I found that although the Japanese of Steveston were forced to leave, some did still
Obayashi did not notice discrimination while living and working in the canneries, and she noted that post WW2 the canneries helped the Japanese when they came back from internment during the war because they had lost everything (the had no boats and no homes).  

- On December 8th, 1942, the navy began impounding boats and confiscating licenses. The custodians sold Japanese homes and some of the money was used to cover funds of internment. Although this was a rough time for many citizens of Steveston, there were still instances of perseverance and community support. Nishi recounts how he got help from Mr. Olofson in disposing of his property before he was sent inland.

6) **Fisherman’s Warf**

![Storm on Steveston Waterfront, 1951](image1.png)

![Fishermans Warf](image2.png)

**Goal:** At this point it is important to introduce flooding and upheavals in the fishing industry as disasters that affected Steveston. The goal is to discuss issues, policies, and strikes that affected the early fishing industry. It is important to note natural and man-made struggles that affected this industry and the social and economic dynamics and outcomes of these events.

**Information to include:**

- A physical issue in June 1892 was that there were rising waters that took out Garry Point Cannery, as well as 70 feet of warf and buildings in Steveston.
- A few years later in 1894 there was a flood that originated from heavy snow, a cold winter, and sudden warming in May, which caused the Fraser River to rise at Hell's return to the community in which they had once thrived. Although many Japanese did not return after the war, Frank did, and his bilingualism helped him secure a job in Canada post World War 2.

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19 Ibid.  
21 Ibid, 112.  
22 City of Richmond Archives. Frank Nishii Oral History.  
23 Stacey et al., *Salmonopolis*, 138.
Gate by 90 feet and changed the course of the river.\textsuperscript{24} An upside was that the flood helped produce rich mud for farming and agriculture, which became another important industry in Steveston and Richmond.\textsuperscript{25} 

- Harold L. Steves, a member of the first Caucasian settling family, remembers that 5 feet of water came over the dyke on No. 5 road, but no water was on the west side of Lulu Island because it had a natural barrier of logs and brush.\textsuperscript{26} 
- In the photograph “Storm on Steveston Waterfront” you can note how close housing and canneries were to the water, and therefore how susceptible they were to flooding and water damage. 
- There was another flood in Steveston in 1905. A Steveston citizen, Archie Blair remembers: “Wooden side-walk[s] on 2\textsuperscript{nd} avenue w[ere] floating and areas behind the canneries were flooded”.\textsuperscript{27} 
- July 8\textsuperscript{th} 1900 the valley fishermen staged a strike against the Fraser River Canners Association because they were seeking control of salmon prices and wanted to cap the number of fishing boats allowed in the water.\textsuperscript{28} This strike lasted 23 days and affected over 1,700 Japanese fishermen and the canning industry.\textsuperscript{29} This was therefore the year that an enormous amount of fish escaped the nets of fishermen. 
- The next year in 1901, one of the largest Fraser River salmon runs ever recorded, took place.\textsuperscript{30} 
- George Mackie noted that the last “big salmon run” was in 1913, before the obstruction at Hell’s Gate.\textsuperscript{31} He said that the fish prices were low and boat limits were at 200 fish before the blockage. 
- The 1913 fishing season was also anticipated to be a “big year”, and again resulted in a strike where the terms of 25 cents per fish was agreed, but then dropped to a price of 15 cents per fish, which resulted in many men refusing to fish.\textsuperscript{32} During the strikes, prices of fish continued to be negotiated, rejected, or accepted by some. Canners then relied upon fish traps and shore workers, but they too stood firm, and did not process the fish.\textsuperscript{33} This is an example of a community standing up for proper treatment of employees and for respect of the region’s fishing livelihood.

\textsuperscript{24} Cherrington, \textit{The Fraser Valley}, 185. 
\textsuperscript{25} L. Ross, \textit{Richmond: Child of the Fraser}, Richmond ’79 Centennial Society and the Corporation of the Township of Richmond, 1979, 131. The entire chapter on ”Harvesting the Land” demonstrates how the delta soil and land was very fertile, and if it could be cleared and drained then it could be cultivated; Prof. Dr. R. Ludwig and Prof. Dr. H. Sterr, \textit{Flood Hazards and Flood Protection Strategies for the Lower Fraser River, Canada}, Diplomarbeit zur Diplomprüfung inn Fach Geographie, 2007, 3.2.1. The flood began on May 24\textsuperscript{th}, 1894 and lasted until June 9\textsuperscript{th}. On May 22\textsuperscript{nd} the Fraser River rose 20 to 30 cm per day which was a cause for concern. 
\textsuperscript{26} City of Richmond. City of Richmond Archives. Oral Histories, H.L. Steves. 
\textsuperscript{27} Ross, \textit{Child of the Fraser}, 46. 
\textsuperscript{28} Cherrington, \textit{The Fraser Valley}, 209. 
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{31} Cleland, \textit{Boom Days}, 10. 
\textsuperscript{32} Stacey et al., \textit{Salmonopolis}, 130. 
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid. This was also one of the last large salmon runs of the Fraser River for quite some time because of the obstruction at Hell’s Gate.
In 1914 a large obstruction of rock fell into the Fraser River at Hell’s Gate canyon after the Canadian Pacific Railway was built in close proximity. This blockage affected the Fraser River salmon run, as the fish could not make it over the obstruction. The next two years were spent trying to clean up the rocks, so that in 1915 the river was pronounced clear. The continuous issue is that following the clearing there still seemed to be issues with the fish migration patterns in following spawning seasons.

Fun Fact: Although fishing and canning may have been crucial in the political and social senses, it did cause some environmental degradation. One of the most non-environmentally friendly practices that the canneries did was dumping their fish offal into the Fraser, and the incoming tide swept the decaying matter into sloughs and over lowlands affecting/contaminating pasture lands and water supply.

7) Top of Dyke Road

Goal: At this stop the goal is to inform tour participants about the 1948 flood as well as dyking and drainage in Steveston. This is the point to share interesting facts about Steveston’s soil, dyking commission, and flood management issues and successes. The tour guide can also share stories about the people of Steveston aiding others through flooding issues and how Steveston persisted through struggles to become a safe and supportive community.

Information to include:

- Interesting fact: In 1883, the No. 2 Road ditch had been forged across Lulu Island, which had been petitioned for by 20 residents of the area and by 1891 municipal funding of dyking had increased many times over.
- At this point, the tour guide can point out the information panels at the top of Dyke Road as shown in above photographs. Point out that the waterfront region they are looking at used to be the headquarters and home to the B.C. Packers in the Imperial

35 Ibid.
36 Cherrington, The Fraser Valley, 199.
37 Ross, Child of the Fraser, 45.
Cannery, one of the provinces largest and most important industrial companies. There was a booming fishing industry in the 1890’s and then intense competition and rivalry come 1900. Although the canning industry no longer persists in Steveston, BC Packers and the canneries left in Steveston still define the community that it is today.  

- After the 1905 flood, landowners established a local dyking commission where a floating dredge was used to dig a 33-foot wide canal so that sand and gravel could be packed on the dyke as a form of protection from flooding.\(^{39}\) This “body had the authority to request tools, men and materials to build or repair dykes, as well as power to assess owners or occupiers of land for any expenses incurred in construction or repair work”.\(^{40}\)

- On a larger scale, one of the most extensive floods to affect the Fraser Valley was the flood of 1948.\(^{41}\) This flood affected many regions of the valley, but did not physically affect Steveston. Although Steveston did not end up under water because of its effective dyking system, it was still socially and economically impacted as fundraising and donations were made to regions affected by the flood. The Richmond Review noted on June 7\(^{th}\), 1948, that all male residents of the municipality of Richmond were being called to provide their services in dyke protection to municipalities in need, therefore showing the social impact that the flood had on Stevestons residents.\(^{42}\) Harold L. Steves also remembers the men of Steveston congregating to go help with dyke breakage in Queensboro (just East of Richmond, near New Westminster) after the 1948 flood hit.\(^{43}\)

- Steveston was prone to flooding especially because it had originally been marshland and in the early real estate the Dominion Trust Real Estate Company bought land and offered it in lots “so many feet deep”, many sold under water, but eventually the marshland was drained to foster easier building and farming.\(^{44}\)

- Fun Fact: Muskrats used to colonize the dykes, which heightened the chance that dykes will fail; therefore farmers put a ten-cent bounty on muskrats to attempt to solve the issue.\(^{45}\)

- Fun Fact: Even with draining efforts, early life in Steveston required a pair of gumboots, and people brought along slippers when going to visit friends.\(^{46}\)

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\(^{38}\) This is all visible on the signage at this stop, more information is also provided on the panels if the tour participants are interested in reading more.

\(^{39}\) Ross, *Child of the Fraser*, 46.

\(^{40}\) Stacey et al., *Salmonopolis*, 23.

\(^{41}\) Ludwig et al., *Flood Hazards and Flood Protection Strategies*, 3.2.2. This flood did not exceed the record of the 1894 flood, but it had a greater impact because southwestern B.C. was by then highly populated and industrialized.

\(^{42}\) City of Richmond. City of Richmond Archives. Reference Files: Floods.

\(^{43}\) City of Richmond. City of Richmond Archive. Oral Histories, H. L. Steves.

\(^{44}\) Cleland, *Boom Days*, 7.

\(^{45}\) Stacey et al., *Salmonopolis*, 23.

\(^{46}\) Stacey et al., *Salmonopolis*, 24
Richmond Rejoices in Deliverance From Floods such as have Devastated the Rest of the Fraser Valley.
City of Richmond Archives. Richmond Review June 16th, 1948.

8) Conclusions back at the Steveston Museum

**Goal:** This is the time to summarize the themes of the tour and to leave the tour participants with an understanding of how Steveston is a community built from resilience and persistence.

**Information to Include:**

- The physical layout of Steveston has changed through the impacts of fires, floods, and the fishing and canning industry. These changes can represent perseverance such as the immediate rebuilding of the Star cannery after the fire of 1897, while they can also represent new beginnings such as rebuilding Brick Block after the devastating fire of 1918. There are monuments that represent persistence of infrastructure and livelihood such as the white wall on Moncton Street and the Gulf of Georgia Cannery, and there are also buildings missing such as Garry Point Cannery because of natural and human impacts.
- The town of Steveston has encouraged diversity from many perspectives. There were instances where the built community and economic stability could not necessarily function without the Aboriginal, Chinese, and Japanese people.
- Steveston’s early economic development was centralized on the fishing and canning industry. This industry had internal politics and was affected by policies, strikes, and the size of the salmon run. The Steveston economy was at a fine balance between man and nature.
- Socially, Steveston was and still remains a diverse and unique sea-port town. The community shows examples of struggling through difficult times such as the Japanese internment during WW2, but still emerged with stories of support, success, and ultimately resilience.
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5) Prof. Dr. R. Ludwig and Prof. Dr. H. Sterr, *Flood Hazards and Flood Protection Strategies for the Lower Fraser River, Canada*, Diplomarbeit zur Diplomprüfung inn Fach Geographie, 2007.


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5) City of Richmond. City of Richmond Archives. Reference Files: Dykes and Drainage.

6) City of Richmond. City of Richmond Archives. Reference Files: Fires.

7) City of Richmond. City of Richmond Archives. Reference Files: Floods.

8) City of Richmond. City of Richmond Archives. Reference Files: Steveston.