

What's in a Name • Village of Queen Charlotte • A Brief History

Presented by Leslie Johnson, December 8, 2021

[1 – Title Page]

I've been asked by the village council to give a brief history of our town, Queen Charlotte. I'm not a history professor, nor do I have deep family roots here, but I do love to study history, and to learn about where I've made a life these past 42 years.

I'm grateful to the work of Kathleen E. Dalzell and draw heavily from her books, *The Queen Charlotte Islands Volumes 1 & 2*. I also thank Joy LaFortune, Gwen Squires, Terry Husband, Darlene Squires and Joanne Yovanovich for sharing their knowledge with me. Credit is given to the Haida Gwaii Museum for many of the photos. As well, thanks to Simon Davies for the use of his artwork and John Broadhead for technical support.

Tonight, I will be looking at the history of this area; any errors are mine alone and any opinions expressed are also mine and not a reflection of our village council.

[2 – collage of Queen Charlotte & Dixon's ship]

History is full of dates and places and names. It can be quite dull, but what makes it interesting are the stories and context in which the people live, and who is telling the story. Our history here on Haida Gwaii, in the Village of Queen Charlotte, is the story I'm going to tell tonight, though I would like to acknowledge that the perspective of others may be quite different.

Haida Gwaii was given the name 'Queen Charlotte Islands' by the British sea captain, George Dixon, in 1787—named after his ship and for his Queen—Charlotte—wife of King George III.

What is now known as the Village of Queen Charlotte began in 1891—130 years ago—when grants for 703 acres along the north shore of Skidegate Inlet were sold by the Crown for \$1.00 an acre to Thomas Gore, James McKenzie, and James Shields.

[3 - Douglas History map of BC]

To set the stage, just 20 years earlier, in 1871, the colony of British Columbia and the Colony of Vancouver Island had joined the

Confederation of Canada, becoming the Province of BC. The Lieutenant-Dependency of the Queen Charlotte Islands, as it was known in colonial circles, was included in the provincial designation.

The Indian Act and all that entailed was made law in 1876, with the Skidegate reserve designated in 1882. Smallpox and other diseases had already taken its toll on the Haida, with Skidegate having a population of only about 200 people at the turn of the century, according to Dalzell.

[4 - sawmill taken from Premier Creek]

The newly formed provincial government was promoting land to any British newcomers (yes, you had to be British to get land) and resources went to whomever was willing to develop them. By 1891 an American Syndicate, the North American Timber Holding Company, already had a 30-year lease on 90 square miles of forest land around Skidegate Inlet. They just needed a site to build a sawmill.

Enter Gore, McKenzie, and Shields. Mr. Gore persuaded his partners to join him in a townsite company, providing the site for the sawmill

right here at the community hall, with the Townsite (that's what it was called) developing around the milling operation, called the Moresby Island Lumber Mill. The mill and town were built where the *Gidins* Eagle village of *Daajing Giids* once stood. According to the late Solomon Wilson, the Chief's house was right about where the playground is now.

[5 - town plans]

The first plans for the Townsite were drawn up 19 years later in an office far away from here. The first portion of town, from Premier Creek west, was registered in 1908, with the eastern portion, ending around Sergius's house, in 1911. And that is how we ended up with the small lots over creeks and cliffs and planned roads where few could be built.

The company didn't have time for names, so all the streets were numbered: 1, 2, 3, etc. As the development moved east from Premier Creek, they added streets such as Alder, Balsam, and Cedar, but the town was still just called The Townsite.

At this time, Daniel ‘Windy’ Young was hired to promote the sale of the lots. Ever the promoter, it was he who changed the name to Queen Charlotte City. He named the place after the islands; I think in the hopes that it would become the *de facto* capital. He then started a newspaper and promoted everything from town lots to fish oil and timber.

[6 - Bay Street, 1910-11]

The first commercial buildings were on what is now Bay Street. There was a hotel, drug store, grocery store, Windy’s newspaper office, and a two-storey building which had an undertaker’s parlour on the first floor and a hall and school upstairs. The Beattie’s and Joliffe’s ran the pharmacy and grocery store for many years after the original owners had moved on. The Queen Charlotte Post Office opened in 1909 in Beattie’s store and a new school was built in 1910, the same year as the Premier Hotel.

[7-QC Hospital]

The first hospital was built by folks from Charlotte and Skidegate in August 1909. The building is still there today beside City Centre. As

we all know, there's a great tradition of everyone coming together to support the hospital through the annual Hospital Day, which as of 2019 was on its 111th celebration. This began when a day was set aside to cut the yearly supply of firewood. It grew into a fun, annual fair that raised cash to purchase additional equipment for the hospital.

Edna Picket, who's family the Beavan's came here in the early 1920's, told me of one event where the single women would make picnic baskets which would be auctioned off to the highest bidder, whereupon they'd go off to enjoy a lovely picnic together. You probably couldn't do that today, but in its time, it was a very successful fundraiser.

[8 - view from porch of McLellan home on Lina Island]

Lina Island, which today is part of the Village of Queen Charlotte, also had settlers. There were eight families living there, with some homes built next to the house pits of a Haida village. In the photo taken from the porch of the McLellan home you can see a monumental pole standing near the water's edge.

Mr. McLellan was the manager of the gold mine at Mitchell Inlet. He was obviously well off as they had a landscaped yard including a tennis court. The settlers had hoped for a bridge to be built at Lina Narrows with a road along the south side of the island. That never materialized and the properties were eventually sold and abandoned.

[9 - Skidegate Landing with Ship, 1911]

The first pioneers to settle on Haida Gwaii though, came in 1876 to manage and work in the new dogfish rendering plant in what today is known as Skidegate Landing.

The plant and growing community were built over the site of the ancient Haida village of *Guhlga* in what was later called Sterling Bay, named after one of the men to start the oil works. A company formed in 1879 called the Skidegate Oil Company's Steam Oil Works. By 1882, the plant consisted of four wooden buildings, the main one with an area of 2,000 square feet on the ground floor. A clam cannery was also developed. Soon a hotel, post office and store followed. The place became known locally as the Oil Works.

The gazetted name for the area was Skidegate, the early post office, established in 1897, was called Skidegate. Even though a new townsite called Graham City was registered in 1910, the post office didn't change its name. You see, Skidegate reserve, had applied unsuccessfully numerous times to have a post office. The Landing was able to get the post office though, under the name of Skidegate and they didn't want to jeopardize it by trying to change the post office name to Graham City. The Haida community of Skidegate, around the corner, then became known as Skidegate Mission.

[10 - plan of Graham City]

To quote Dalzell from *Volume 1*, “The ‘hub city’ of the Charlottes for years was Skidegate Landing, which probably had more names in the course of its history than any other Island point; Gontha [sic], Sterling Bay, Oil Works, Skidegate, Graham City and is today known locally as Skidegate Landing.” And now we can add Village of Queen Charlotte to the list of names.

The developers of Graham City thought this was going to be the centre of commerce and designed a town to reflect their ambitions. The

centre of the surveyed site included a provision for a park, called Kings Park. Streets had names such as Grey, Laurier, Skidegate, McBride, and Graham. The avenues going up from the beach were Bay, Toronto, Charlotte, Vancouver, Victoria, King, Rupert, Queen, Columbia, and Ontario. Even smaller lots than Queen Charlotte City were surveyed and up for sale.

[11 - Skidegate Landing houses, 1908]

John Mathers ran the store and post office and his daughter, Agnes, born in 1903, was the first child to be born to settlers at Skidegate Landing. The Mathers family moved to Sandspit, and Agnes went on to become a teacher there. The school is named after her.

In 1908, Mr. William Leary, grandfather of current resident Joy LaFortune, was the manager of the oil works. It was Mr. Leary who organized the first meeting of residents to petition the province for the return of some part of what they considered ‘the enormous revenue’ being collected at the time from coal and timber licences. The meeting included dinner and dancing, with music provided by various local musicians including the Skidegate Brass Band. So, you can see, we

have a long history of coming together over food and dancing to protest a distant government's actions.

[12 - Skidegate Landing, 1907 dock scene]

On October 9, 1909, the about to be formed town of Graham City was promoted in a Prince Rupert newspaper. “The town is now being surveyed and as soon as the work is completed, lots will be put on the market. A site will be given for each denomination of church, and in addition, lots will be set aside for a hospital. The name of the townsite will be Graham City.”

Three months later, Windy Young had an article in his paper headlined, “Poor Old Skidegate is Dead! Nothing remains to greet the eye except a few dilapidated empty buildings, an ancient wharf, store, and P.O. – and the odor from the empty oil works situated on the side of a mountain. Wonders will never cease. We are told that after struggling for over 20 years the old name was an utter failure and that the sidehills are to come out with a brand new name—Graham City.” You can see how he earned his nickname *Windy*. When the Rupert

paper reprinted the article they added their own caption, “Queen Charlotte City takes a fling at Neighbour.”

[13 - The Oil Works 1900]

Whether it was Windy’s actions or economic misfortune, the oil works didn’t last, the remains of the dock pilings are all that are left. The name Graham City didn’t stick either and the area became known as Skidegate Landing when the ferry started running to Alliford Bay.

As the economic fortunes faded at Skidegate Landing and settlers moved away, properties were bought by Haida people who were not able to live on reserve due to loss of ‘Indian status,’ as identified through the Indian Act. Many also moved into Queen Charlotte, but it was the Landing that really became a satellite community of Skidegate.

It wasn’t until the law changed many decades later in 1985, restoring Indian status to women who had lost it through ‘marrying out’ that Haida families were able to live on reserve and move back to Skidegate once again. It was through the efforts of Queen Charlotte

resident and Haida matriarch, Ada Yovanovich, along with many other Indigenous women across the country, that this racist, sexist, federal law was changed. Ada was also a founding member of the BC Association of Non-Status Indians and was an activist all her life.

Neither Graham City nor Queen Charlotte City were incorporated as municipalities. The initial settlements were encouraged by the new provincial government and based around the development of resources, with revenue returning to provincial coffers. People worked mainly in logging and fishing, services grew, governments set up offices, and over the years a community was created.

[14 – collage of people]

Every generation since the early 1900s has seen people come and go. The population tended to be transient with a core group staying from each generation. Many arrived following WWII and into the 1950s and 60s, as industrial logging and fishing picked up pace. Then there was the hippie invasion in the '70s, followed by Gen-Xers and Millennials.

As often happens, people would come for a visit or a short work stint, fall in love with the place (or with someone) and decide to stay. Vera Gladstone came as a nurse in 1927, marrying Ernie Gladstone and living her long life in Skidegate, nursing at the hospital here in town for over 40 years. She was so dedicated that she served both communities without pay for years, as the United Church didn't allow married women to work at the hospital.

Gwen Squires, who recently celebrated her 94th birthday, also arrived to work as a nurse at the second new hospital in 1958. She met her future husband Ted when he was a patient. Sixty-three years later she's still here, and so are her children and grandchildren.

People who settled here tended to be independent minded. They didn't want anyone telling them what they could and couldn't do. They worked hard and minded their own business. They did what needed to be done in the community (and still do)—whether it was building roads, community clubs, supporting the hospital, running the Legion or fire department and ambulance—they got the job done.

It was Eric Ross that helped start the Skidegate Inlet Credit Union over 70 years ago. When it grew too big for shoe boxes, an office was set up, with regular hours, at Mrs. Roberts' house on the waterfront. Eric served on the board for many years and guided the development of what is now Northern Savings Credit Union. He was awarded the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal in 2002 for his service to our community and served on the inaugural village council from 2005-2008.

There are few families left here today that were part of that original settlement. Descendants of the Leary's, deBucy's, Husband's, Ross's, Bruce's, and the Mathers family over in Sandspit. I hope I haven't missed anyone. Sergius deBucy, Jimmy Carmichael and Ted Bruce have died in recent years, and Eric Ross is living with family in Campbell River, but his son and granddaughter are here.

The Bruce sisters —Lou Cowpar and Linta Husband—were born in the hospital across the street over 94 and 92 years ago respectively. They still live here today, along with many of their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Joy LaFortune, daughter of

Doris (Richardson) Leary and granddaughter of William Leary, was also born here and continues to live here along with her extended family. These remaining few are the inter-generational knowledge keepers of our town.

[15 - collage of BC, Haida Nation, NCRD & VQC logos]

Governance wise, there have been several iterations. Because we weren't incorporated, we were part of rural Graham Island, Electoral Area D, of the Skeena Queen Charlotte Regional District (now called the North Coast Regional District). Then we formed the Queen Charlotte City - Skidegate Landing Advisory Planning Commission to advise the regional district. Next came the Management Committee and our own Area F, breaking away from rural Graham Island, but still being run by the regional district based in Prince Rupert. Queen Charlotte had two failed incorporation votes before the third vote passed in 2005—97 years after first being registered as a townsite. Our first mayor was Carol Kulesha. Skidegate Landing was included within the municipal boundary... being the seventh time the name has changed for the Landing.

It's also important to note that as soon as we incorporated and could make our own decisions, we signed a Protocol Agreement with the Haida Nation recognizing the co-existence of Crown and Haida Title, while committing to working together for our mutual benefit.

[16 - SHIP elders]

We have always been close to Skidegate, and not just physically. As the late Chief Skidegate, Louis Collinson once said, 'our roots are inextricably entwined.' Relationships have grown, individually and collectively, and like any relationship there are good times and bad. Strong rivalries and big celebrations. Deep down we care for one another, we're there in times of crisis, and we have proven time and again that we are better when we work together.

In 2010, Haida Gwaii gave back the name Queen Charlotte Islands to the province. In provincial language the change was called Bill 18, the Haida Gwaii Reconciliation Act. The regional district followed suit, changing its name in 2015. The Skidegate Haida Immersion Program (SHIP) elders have requested we also give back the name Queen Charlotte and return to the original name of *Daajing Giids*.

[17 - Spirit Square]

From what I understand, the English translation for *Daajing Giids* is: ‘hat, common.’ It makes me think of *all* the hats we wear in our volunteer commitments to keep the town going. Or perhaps it’s our common hat, one we *all* share to keep dry in the rain, to shelter one another.

There is a *Gidins* Eagle clan in Skidegate today. Their hereditary leader is *Wiigaanad*, Sidney Crosby. It is a large clan with many strong matriarchs. We live on their territory, and they have said many times publicly they’re willing to share it. The Haida Nation is willing to share also, as demonstrated with the recent signing of the Changing Tides agreement.

Canada is a different country today. And Haida Gwaii has always been at the forefront of consistently fighting for justice for its people.

Today, we have been given an opportunity to move forward and tangibly recognize this new reality. It’s a gift really, to reflect on *our* history here and to examine what’s important to us and our

relationships moving forward. By doing so we will not lose our past. It is recorded, in large part thanks to the late Betty Dalzell from Port Clements. It can be found at the Haida Gwaii Museum, and it lives on in the stories old timers tell. But today, we have an opportunity to begin a new chapter together.

I believe accepting the name being offered now will enrich and honour us and will show respect to our neighbours. We are fortunate to be given this chance at reconciliation and I trust we'll take it.

Thank you.