

Petition for a Wagon Road to Port Moody

Researched By: Ralph Drew, Belcarra, BC, September 2018.

Source: *British Colonist*, Tuesday, February 8th, 1881.

“Messrs. McGillivray and Harris on Saturday last [February 5th, 1881] presented to the ‘Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works’ [William Smithe] a petition which was largely and influentially signed by the residents of ‘New Westminster City’ and vicinity, asking for the construction of a wagon road from a point near the [Royal Engineers] Camp [‘Sapperton’] to Port Moody, the terminus of the ‘Canadian Pacific Railway’.”

In 1859 Colonel R. C. Moody was concerned about protection of the capital of the new ‘Colony of British Columbia’, New Westminster, and developed a plan to defend the city from American attack. A primary concern was maintaining access to the ocean should the Fraser River be blocked by ice during the winter. Colonel Moody immediately directed the Royal Engineers to clear a military trail from the Royal Engineers’ Camp (‘Sapperton’) at New Westminster, extending northward to the eastern end of Burrard Inlet (today’s ‘Port Moody’). This very early route antedated the ‘North Road’, but was soon superseded by it and fell quickly into disuse. In 1859, Moody also had a pack trail built through the forest from New Westminster “due north” to Burrard Inlet — the first “road” built in the new ‘Colony of British Columbia.’ (This pack trail also served as a north-south “base line survey” from which subsequent land surveys were referenced by the Royal Engineers.) In 1861, the pack trail was upgraded to a wagon road — renamed ‘North Road’ — to allow ships anchored in Burrard Inlet to unload military supplies and personnel if New Westminster were attacked from the south.

Port Moody’s isolation and the state of the ‘North Road’ after 1869 was related by John Murray, son of Lance Corporal John Murray, RE, to city of Vancouver archivist Major J.S. Matthews in July 1934:

“After the capital of B.C. was moved to Victoria in 1869, the ‘North Road’ deteriorated into nothing more than a trail for Indians; a track you could not get a horse over, because all the bridges put-up by the Royal Engineers on the North Road had been burned-out. [Note: a great bush fire ran through this area about 1865.] There was no way in which a horse could be got to the Burrard Inlet end of the North Road until 1881. During Governor Seymour’s residence on the Mainland [1864–1869], he kept the North Road open for the purpose of conveying the mails when the Fraser River was frozen-over; he made the North Road into a sleigh road, but after he left [in 1869], it went wild again, so that when we [John’s father, Lance Corporal John Murray, RE, and the survey party] came on the scow [to Port Moody] in March 1882 ... there was no direct trail that I ever heard of from Sapperton to the present site of Port Moody.” – John Murray

As early as April 1881, the possibility that Port Moody may not be the railway terminus began to be openly discussed. This prompted newspaper editorials defending the choice of Port Moody as the railway terminus, and expounding the virtues of Port Moody as a salt water port. Thus, Port Moody was seen as an important business opportunity for the citizens of New Westminster, who felt that they should be benefitting from Port Moody’s development and the construction of the railway, but the lack of road access continued to be a problem. Clarke’s Road connecting Port Moody to the North Road was finally completed in December 1883.