

GWI **infosheet**

GORGE WATERWAY INITIATIVE

WORKING TOGETHER TO BALANCE CONSERVATION, RECREATION AND COMMUNITY VALUES

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FIRST PEOPLES OF THE WATERWAY

Aboriginal people have lived on the land around the Gorge Waterway and Portage Inlet for more than 4,000 years. The Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations are both Coast Salish peoples and are two remaining local bands whose connection to the waterway remains very strong.

FROM THEN UNTIL NOW

For centuries, the Esquimalt and Songhees people have used the waterway for gathering food such as salmon, herring, oysters and other shellfish, waterfowl, and eelgrass. They sometimes took refuge from northern invading bands in Portage Inlet. During these times, First Nations' settlements were all along the waterway stretching into Victoria harbour, but in the early 1900s as European settlement grew, the two nations were moved to much smaller reserve lands in Esquimalt.

In the present day, First Nations do limited fishing and no hunting in the area. However, treaties signed more than 150 years ago with the Songhees and Esquimalt are still in effect and recognize their rights to gather food on unoccupied lands in the area. Both bands are actively looking at ways to update and strengthen their

treaty rights. The Songhees are involved in the BC Treaty Commission process with a broader group of neighbouring bands, called the Te'Mexw Treaty Association. The Esquimalt people are pursuing other legal and negotiated arrangements.

LEGEND OF CAMOSSUNG

Haylas the Transformer, Raven and Mink found a young girl, named Camossung, and her grandfather. She was crying, so Haylas asked her why. She answered, "My Father is angry with me and will not give me anything to eat." Haylas asked her if she liked sturgeon, and when she answered "no" he threw the sturgeon to the Fraser River. That is why there is sturgeon there and not here. He asked her if she liked cranberries and when she answered "no," he threw them into Shawnigan Lake. That is why there are cranberries there now. She refused many things but duck, herring, coho, and oyster she

accepted, and that is why these are plentiful on the Gorge Waterway. Because she was greedy, Haylas told her she would look after the food resources for her people and he turned her and her grandfather into stone.

The stones of Camossung and her grandfather could be seen for thousands of years at reversing Gorge Falls under what is now called Gorge Bridge. There was a large whirlpool below the falls and Songhees people would dive in to gain special spirit powers from Camossung. In 1960, someone dynamited the rocks to improve navigation through the narrows, although what is left of the rocks can still be seen under the bridge at low tide.

CRAIGFLOWER CREEK WATERSHED

The land and waterbodies in this watershed were important hunting, fishing and gathering grounds for salmon, deer, elk, and a wide array



Jody Watson

The rocks representing Camossung and her grandfather are still visible below the Gorge Bridge.

of native plants. With regular harvesting and prescribed burning, First Nations enhanced the production of certain types of plants, the most well known being camas, a wildflower bulb that was a staple carbohydrate food. Periodic burning also helped to maintain Garry oak meadow ecosystems. The mouth of Craigflower Creek, where it enters Portage Inlet, was known to the Songhees as Pulkwutsang, "the place of Ghost."

CRAIGFLOWER SITE

Thousands of years ago until the 1700s, there were extensive settlements of Kosampson people on the corner of what is now Admirals and Craigflower Roads. The Kosampson were the ancestors of the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations. In 1994, an archaeological dig revealed many interesting artifacts from the site including middens that attested to the abundant shellfish and game nearby and various different types of stone and bone tools used by early Kosampson people. In 1854, a schoolhouse for settlers was built on the site, and subsequently a house for the adjacent farm. Craigflower Manor and Craigflower Farm are now designated as a Provincial Heritage Site.

IF YOU FIND AN ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE

If you come across an area that appears to be a midden, human remains or other physical evidence of how and where people lived in the past, do not disturb it and immediately contact the Archaeology Branch of the provincial government (952-5021). These sites often contain valuable information that is important to both local First Nations and those studying the history of first peoples... care must be taken to prevent the destruction of

WHAT IS A MIDDEN?

A midden or kitchen midden is an archaeological term for a place that includes such things as food waste, broken pottery, shells, animal bones, other household items, and sometimes human remains that indicate the site of a prehistoric human settlement. Middens reveal considerable information about the history, activities, uses, and ancestry of

these areas. There are many middens along the shores of the waterway, which attest to the extent of early First Nations communities. A midden site underneath the south side of the Gorge Bridge, which is fenced off to protect it from interference, is 4,000 years old. Historian Barbara Huck aptly refers to this midden as "a time capsule of life along the Gorge."



Todd Carnahan

Middens such as these are common along the waterway.

important cultural resources.

LEARNING MORE

Visit the Songhees First Nation website (www.songheesnation.com) or contact either of the two local band offices — Esquimalt (381-7861) and Songhees (386-1043). Grant Keddie, Curator of Archaeology at the Royal BC Museum, has produced a book on the Songhees people (*Songhees Pictorial*), which describes in words and many old photographs, the period of time from first contact with European settlers to the early 1900s.

For more information on the Gorge Waterway Initiative:
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This GWI Infosheet is one in a series on the natural and cultural features of the Gorge Waterway, Portage Inlet and surrounding watersheds

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