

Stanley Park – An Engineer Legacy

With the arrival of British governance in 1763 in what was to become Canada, Royal Engineers assumed great responsibility for the construction of defensive works as well as the development of these North American colonies. Early activities included the construction of forts as well as roads and bridges and inland canals and waterways. Landmarks such as the Halifax Citadel and Fort Henry at Kingston still stand today and attest to the solidity of their defensive works.



The role of the Engineers gradually changed from a military focus to ‘national development’ as the Canadian colonies evolved. Amongst these early undertakings, the Royal Engineers surveyed and marked the Canada-United States boundary and laid out the original townsites of Toronto, Ottawa, London and New Westminster, Yale and Hope in British Columbia. They constructed the Cariboo Road through the treacherous Fraser Canyon in BC, built the Cayuga Road in Ontario stretching from Niagara to Simcoe, and built the Rideau Canal strategic waterway between Ottawa and Kingston.

What we know today as the Province of British Columbia was a great beneficiary of the development work of the Royal Engineers. Much of this work started in November 1858 when the new colony of British Columbia was declared. Sappers of various skills were employed under Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Clement Moody, over the next five years.

Among their activities, the Royal Engineers surveyed the border between Canada and the United States from the Pacific Ocean through the Rocky Mountains. The new city of New Westminster was developed on the site of the town of Sapperton.

These sappers laid out the Caribou wagon trail into the interior to support the Gold Rush. As well as supervising its construction, they built two of the most dangerous and difficult sections. They also explored and mapped the area, and their presence ensured law and order in the gold mining camps.

When the Royal Engineers laid out the early town of Vancouver, the area that is today Stanley Park was reserved for military use, thus preserving one of the city's greatest treasures. Originally home to First Nations people, the 1000 acres was later turned into Vancouver's first park in 1886 when the city incorporated. Much of the park remains as densely forested as it was in the late 1800s, with about half a million trees. Stanley Park became an evolution of the hopes and dreams of a pioneer city and provided a place for recreation and relaxation.

A legacy from the original sapper development, another legacy was in the form of the sappers who took their discharge when the unit was disbanded in late 1863. They became early settlers in the land they had worked so hard to develop and provided the strong foundations and leadership in the settlement of Canada.