

For those buried and forgotten

For those whose deaths were excluded from official record

For those whose graves were looted, vandalized, destroyed, abandoned, and removed

Some of whose names may never be known,

We will remember.

This place is the unceded and unsurrendered land of the Halkomelem speaking peoples. From time immemorial this land was a forest, lush with cedar, hemlock, alder, willow, fern, and horsetail. To the north along 10th Avenue, marshland fed into Glenbrook Creek which led to Skaiaemetl, a large Coast Salish settlement on the shores of the Fraser River.

In 1859, at the time when Chief Tsimilano was living at Skaiaemetl, New Westminster was founded. Shortly thereafter, City Council forcibly removed Indigenous peoples onto reserves. The reserves in New Westminster were closed by the McKenna–McBride Commission in 1916, and Indigenous peoples were forced to move again, without compensation, alternative land on which to move, or acknowledgement of the injustices perpetrated against them.

Over time, a great diversity of people settled in New Westminster to work in local sawmills, shipyards, and canneries, including Indigenous people from various Nations, Chinese, Japanese, Indo-Canadian, Italian, Portuguese, Slovakian, Scandinavian, and other European settlers. Substantial vibrant communities developed with strong inter-cultural relationships, however discriminatory policies and systemic racism affected these communities in adverse ways.

In 1865, 5 acres of land on 8th Street (then Douglas Road) were cleared for a non-denominational public cemetery – one intentionally created for all regardless of race, class, income, or circumstance. This cemetery was the only cemetery in New Westminster at this time, and all deaths up until 1869 were buried here. This included those from the First Nations, Chinese, Japanese, Sikh, and European communities of the area. Many different burial practices were carried out here. Over time, the cemetery was expanded, however until 1908, it operated without a plot map.

Increasing Euro-Canadian pressure for exclusive burial grounds, specific to church and fraternal organizations, led to increasing segregation within the public cemetery and the city at large. As the cemetery grew, bodies were moved, and new burials were allocated according to race, religion, and class. In addition, B.C.'s Births, Marriages and Deaths Act of 1872 specifically excluded Chinese and Indigenous populations from registration. Between 1897 and 1917 this act was reversed and re-enacted several times, including and discluding Indigenous and Asian people from official record in response to racist public pressures- effectively erasing them from recorded history.

In 1892 a Chinese cemetery was established in the SW corner of the block, where Japanese burials also occurred along 8th Street. In 1908, two acres along 10th Street were designated as the 'New Chinese Cemetery', and a further two acres south of here were allocated for the City's unknown and destitute. A further two-acre section along 8th Street, sometimes referred to as the 'Asylum Grounds' was

designated for those from Essondale, and the Provincial Hospital for the Insane, later known as Woodlands, as well as those who died at the Provincial Jail and (early deaths) at the BC Penitentiary. Up until the City finally closed the cemetery in 1919, the remaining cemetery grounds continued to be used by the general public and included burials from the nearby isolation hospital and orphanage.

The area also holds tremendous spiritual, cultural, and historical importance to the T̓silhqot̓'in Nation. Chief Nits'il'in Ahan's remains are believed to be buried here. In 1865, Chief Ahan, along with five other T̓silhqot̓'in warriors, was wrongfully hanged for defending the T̓silhqot̓'in people and lands against the colonizers who had abused and mistreated their people, including willfully spreading smallpox as a means to annex and colonize T̓silhqot̓'in territory. In 2014 Chief Ahan was officially exonerated by the Prime Minister, and the Premier of British Columbia offered an official apology.

The cemetery was neglected by the City, and lack of maintenance and concern for the communities and individuals laid to rest there resulted in graves being moved, built over and sometimes destroyed to accommodate colonial uses on the site. These uses have included an isolation hospital, city works yard and horse stables, military training barracks, Vincent Massey Junior High School, Lester B. Pearson Sr. High School, and eventually the old location of New Westminster Secondary School.

In the early 2000's with plans underway to rebuild the high school, a community debate began about the burials. This debate surfaced many of the same sentiments from decades ago reflecting stigma, racism, and exclusionary attitudes toward those buried. After advocacy from organizations representing those connected to the site, the New Westminster School District made the decision to rebuild the school at this current location, which does not contain any burials.

The official opening of the new New Westminster Secondary School on October 14th, 2021, marks the official decision as a community to acknowledge and respect the diverse and sometimes painful histories of our past. Many past acts were purposefully concealed, and more truths will be revealed over time. We will continue to do the work to listen, to learn, and to help give voice to these truths. Over time, this place aspires to become a site to restore dignity, grieve, practice respect and reconciliation, and provide sanctuary where sanctuary is long overdue.