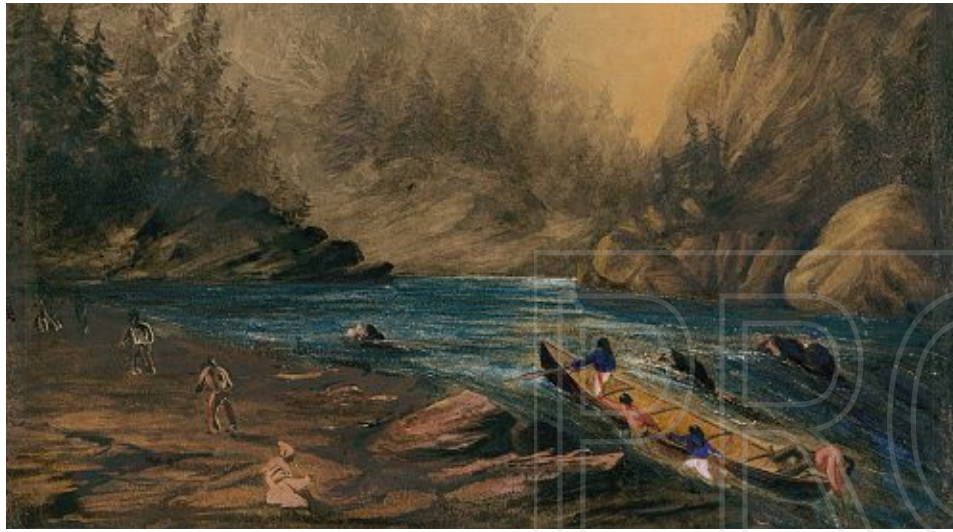


Langley City's 70th Anniversary Series

"McMillan's Journey"



Hauling up a Rapid on the Columbia River. Painting of a Columbia River boat by Lt. Henry Warre, 1846. Credit: Royal British Columbia Museum and Archives PDP00057

Hundreds of walkers and cyclists enjoy the calm of the City's Rotary Nicomekl Trail every day. Most are attracted by the natural beauty and recreational opportunities that the trail affords. Fewer are aware of an important event that unfolded there two hundred years ago.

Fearful that its Columbia River posts and access to the sea would be lost if the international border was eventually established at the 49th parallel of latitude (the current boundary line), the Hudson's Bay Company resolved to establish a new Pacific depot on the south bank of the Fraser River. Such an action would ensure that the Company had control of trade on either side of the river.

In November 1824, George

Simpson, Governor of the Company's Columbia Department, appointed Chief Trader James McMillan to head an exploratory expedition from Fort George (today's Astoria) to the lower reaches of the Fraser. Leading a company of forty-one men, McMillan left Fort George in mid-November 1824. The men in his party were every bit as diverse as the current population of the City of Langley: Scottish, Irish, French-Canadians, Métis, Iroquois, Americans, and Hawaiians.

"The trip to the Fraser was brutal. Fog, fierce winds, "weighty rain," heavy swells, and bitter cold dogged the men repeatedly." Although equipped with a single mast and sail, McMillan's three Columbia River boats were not well-suited to

travel in rough seas. Their length and bulk made them awkward to handle while negotiating narrow rivers. Their weight required the expedition to repeatedly unload and reload their supplies whenever portage (the boats had to be moved overland) was required.

After challenges, McMillan and his men reached the mouth of the Nicomekl River on December 13. "It had taken his expedition twenty-five days to travel a distance that can now be completed by car in less than six hours." Yet the voyage was far from over. Not knowing where the mouth of the Fraser lay, McMillan decided to proceed up the Nicomekl River as far as he could. Local indigenous people had advised him that a portage would then take him to the Fraser.

McMillan's clerk recorded the voyage up the Nicomekl "both laborious and tedious." The frequently winding river was often blocked with driftwood and willows, requiring the party's boats to be pulled as well as rowed. The expedition eventually reached a "pretty little plain" at or near today's Portage Park. Finding the Nicomekl no longer navigable, McMillan had his boats hauled out of the river and began a 11-kilometre-long portage across the "soft and miry" prairie.

The party reached the Salmon River two days later at or near Portage Park, encountering two boys from Kwantlen First Nation, after setting up camp. McMillan descended the Salmon River the following morning. On reaching the Fraser, the party began the days-long task of surveying it shores, travelling upstream as far as Mission before descending to the sea and travelling home. McMillan's return three years later would lead to the establishment of the company's post at Fort Langley. Today, his party's epic voyage is commemorated by plaques in both the City (at Portage Park) and the Township (at McMillan Park).

- Warren Sommer



This chainsaw sculpture of Kwantlen First Nation Chief Whittlekainum by artist Pete Ryan stands in Innes Square in the City of Langley. Credit: Warren Sommer