

Langley City's 70th Anniversary Series

"Thomas Langley and the Langleys"



Looking west along the Yale Road through Langley Prairie, 1947
Credit: salishan Place by the River

Langley City, the Township of Langley, Fort Langley, and Langley Prairie. Newcomers and visitors to the Langleys alike are often confused by the multitude of Langleys. Throw the now-largely-disused terms West Langley, East Langley, Old Langley, and New Langley into the mix and the mystery only increases. So why are there so many Langleys, and how did the name come into use at all?

The answer begins with James McMillan's establishment of a Hudson's Bay Company's trading post in the winter of 1827. **McMillan named the new fort in honour of Thomas Langley, a prominent director of the London-based Company.** Langley also served as a director of the Bank of England, the Russia Company (which imported spars and hemp from the Baltic states), and the Marine Society (which turned London street urchins into sailors). Fort Langley's commercial activities would focus on trading for furs and the production of agricultural goods. Its farm would be located on Langley Prairie, an area stretching southwest from today's Trinity Western University to today's City of Langley.

The farm experienced years both good and bad. By the 1870s, however, the farm's operations had ceased to be profitable. The Company arranged for its subdivision and sale. Retired employees of the Company and settlers from Eastern Canada and the British Isles took up land and established farms of their own. By 1873 the population of what we now call "the Langleys" was sufficient to warrant the incorporation of the Township of Langley.

By the mid-1900s, much of Township remained rural, its elected council dominated by farming interests. The settlement that had grown outside the Hudson's Bay Company's now-abandoned fort was still little more than a village. The commercial area of Langley Prairie, built along the Yale Road (predecessor to the Fraser Highway), however, had grown into a small but successful urban centre. In 1955, when the Township declined to provide the streetlights, sidewalks, and sewers that its commercial area required, Langley Prairie separated from the Township. **Although consideration was given to naming the new city something other than Langley, the new municipality chose to retain its existing identity.** Residents dropped the word "Prairie," however, a term that evoked an image of an old, rural area rather than one of a progressive, aspiring city.

But what about the man who gave his name to the Langleys 128 years before? Although he never came to North America, Thomas Langley helped guide the Hudson's Bay Company's expansion west of the Rocky Mountains. He was very much part of the decision to establish the fort that would ultimately bear his name. When the Company ran into financial difficulties in

1809, a loan from Langley helped to ensure its very survival. Without that loan, the Company might well have collapsed, and Western Canada could have become American territory. Langley eventually retired to the country house he had built overlooking the River Thames and Hampton Court Palace. He died there in 1829, two years after the construction of Fort Langley.

-Warren Sommer



Southborough House: Thomas Langley's country house near Kingston-upon-Thames
Credit: Surrey History Centre



Langley Prairie, B.C.

When Langley Prairie separated from Langley Township in 1955, the community elected to modify its old name, becoming the City of Langley.
Credit: salishan Place by the River