

History of the Nootka Sound

The first residents of Nootka Sound were the Mowachaht and Muchalaht peoples. They had a rich existence and culture based on whaling, river fishing, hunting and foraging. They were great whale hunters, pursuing them far out to sea in whaling canoes.

In 1966 Parks Canada conducted the archaeological Yuquot Project at Friendly Cove. Evidence indicated that indigenous people had continuously inhabited the site for the last 4,300 years. A 1992 project enumerated 177 archaeological sites throughout Nootka Sound. These studies prove that Nootkan peoples had certainly inhabited the area long before the arrival of the first Europeans.



A Nootka community consisted of several distinct tribal groups, each one claiming direct descent from a known ancestor. History names Maquinna as the Nootkan Chief who met James Cook, but

for generations the highest-ranking chief of the Mowachaht people bore that title, or name, "Maquinna", a man with special rights and privileges, one holding the highest place in Mowachaht society.

The various tribal groups lived along the beach in rows of large wooden houses, each with four to six families made up of direct descendants, together with a number of their relatives by marriage. Removable planks fixed to permanent frames formed large pre-fabricated Big Houses, with the planks of the sloping roofs easily removed to allow smoke to escape, or on pleasant days to allow light and air to enter. When the tribe moved, the planks laid between canoes, became platforms on which to transport belongings and upon arrival at the new location these planks fit easily into pre-existing frames to make new dwellings in which to establish the home.



The Nootka people changed locations with the seasons, and upon the availability of the fish, berries, wild spuds, medicine roots, or bark and straws for weaving. They moved for instance to Yuquot (Friendly Cove) each February for spring and summer because of an abundance of fish, water, birds, seals, whales and sea otters. The men fished and hunted. The women gathered shellfish and herring eggs from spruce boughs placed in the water, and picked the wild berries.

In late August, when the rains began, the Nootkans left Yuquot and moved from the outer coast into the nearby inlets and rivers to catch the salmon heading upstream to spawn. These they smoked and dried for winter food, but they also gathered a variety of edible roots, and formed ripened berries into dried cakes.

Toward mid-November the families moved again, to Tahsis, their winter home, where they hunted deer and bear, and fished the rivers. When rain curtailed such activities the time came for feasting and for celebrations. By late December they were back out onto the coast to take advantage of the herring runs, and by the end of February were returning once again to Yuquot or Friendly Cove.



Skilled fishermen, the Nootka used a variety of traps, nets and tools but only chiefs and some selected commoners could hunt the California grey and humpback whales.

The Nootka enjoyed celebrations and held them often. Some marked family and individual events as well as the opening and closing of the herring or salmon seasons. The presence of guests at the feasts and ceremonies served to validate the event and amid much singing, dancing and feasting the host Chief lavished expensive gifts on his guests as thanks for their coming. In such manner he demonstrated his wealth, generosity, and prestige. The most important and elaborate celebration, the potlatch, took place when a high-ranking Chief passed to his sons any rights he himself might possess.

In December 1996, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada re-commemorated Yuquot, formally acknowledging the Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation's history there.

In 2006, Parks Canada and the community completed plans for Niis'Maas, an Interpretive Centre at Yuquot. The Land of Maquinna Cultural Society, a non-profit society, carries the mandate to preserve, protect and interpret the Mowachaht/Muchalaht's cultural traditions. As part of this program, a Resource Centre at Tsaxana opened in 2006 that houses contemporary and historical artifacts, photographs, books and documents.

European Contact

In 1774 the Spanish became the first Europeans to sight the entrance of Nootka Sound. This was aboard the *Santiago*, out of Monterey and under Captain Juan Perez, anchored off Nootka at Estevan Point which he named Punta San Esteban after one of his officers Esteban Jose Martinez.

Here he traded with the First Nations people for furs, but made no landing. Because the Spanish did not actually land and then take formal possession, the British would not acknowledge Spanish sovereignty over the area. This exploration oversight would later prove costly to Spain.

On March 29, 1778, in search of the Northwest Passage, Captain James Cook with two vessels, the 'Resolution' and the 'Discovery' sailed into Nootka Sound looking for a sheltered bay in which to make repairs. As Cook's ships arrived the Nootka people came out to meet them in canoes. This meeting was the first cultural exchange in the area between one of the more powerful First Nation's groups and Europeans.

On March 31, Captain Cook anchored in Resolution Cove and while repairs on the ships continued, trading took place between the natives and Cook's men. The Nootka offered various animal skins for trade, particularly the sea otter, but also offered such goods as carvings, spears and fish hooks. In exchange they wanted knives, chisels, nails, buttons and any kind of metal.

The presence of iron among the Nootkan people amazed both Cook and his men and the origin of this iron has never been traced, but may have come about through an overland trade route already established by the Nootka. They used a trail from Tahsis up the Tahsis Valley to Woss Lake, then to the Nimpkish River and to Nimpkish Lake where they traded with East Coast Vancouver Island natives who in turn traded with groups on the Mainland.

Repairs finished, Cook explored the rest of Nootka Sound, stopping at the Nootkan Village of Yuquot where John Webber, his shipboard artist, made water colour paintings of the sights and peoples. His illustrations provide a fairly accurate picture of both the dwellings and the way of life among the people at that time.

After almost a month in Nootka Sound, Cook and his ships left the area laden with furs and a better understanding of the Nootkan people. In 1785, British Captain James Hanna from China in the *Harmon* became the first commercial fur trader to arrive in Nootka, the first of hundreds who would make their way to the West Coast as a result of the published accounts of Cook's voyage. Hanna's second trip, on the *Sea Otter*, was not so successful because he had been beaten there by Captain Cook and the *Enterprise* which had bought up all the skins. On departing, the owner of the vessels left John Mackay with Maquinna and thus Mackay became the first white resident of British Columbia.

During this period both Spain and Britain sought to expand their colonial possessions and, as a result, Nootka Sound and the North Pacific region became important in the plans of both of them. The Russians also recognized the political value of the area, but the Americans, while seeing political advantages, seemed interested in only its commercial viability.

Many British expeditions, after Cook, arrived to trade with the Nootka. One expedition, commanded by John Meares, arrived in 1786; then in 1788, Meares built a small trading post at Friendly Cove. The Spanish, like the British, realizing the importance of the area, hoping to solidify Spanish sovereignty in it, and aware of the movement of Russian explorers down the coast for sea otter pelts and lands to conquer, decided to build a fort at Friendly Cove.

In 1789 Esteban Jose Martinez returned to build that fort. He wasted no time in establishing one at Friendly Cove, but for no known reason abandoned it a few months after arriving. Some months after his departure however, Spain re-established the fort when, in 1790, Francisco de Eliza, accompanied by three ships, arrived in Nootka and a small Spanish village soon arose on the shores of Friendly Cove.

With both the Spanish and the British claiming the area, tensions quickly grew. During Martinez's brief stay in 1789 he had not only built a fort, but had also seized British ships, stating that the vessels were violating Spanish sovereignty.

These events triggered the Nootka Controversy, which brought the two countries close to war. Spain claimed the territory as a result of the Perez expedition of 1774; and Britain based its claim on Cook's actual arrival at Nootka in 1778 and on Meares' purchase of land from Maquinna in 1788.

The first Nootka Convention of 1790 partly resolved the impasse. France, Spain's traditional ally, was involved in the French Revolution and would be of little help, thus Spain returned all seized property and recognized that the West Coast was now open to both Spanish and British traders.

Though war no longer threatened, many unresolved disputes still existed over the territory. In 1792, Britain sent Captain George Vancouver to meet with Bodega y Quadra, the new Spanish commander of Nootka. Though friendly, they could come to no agreement on behalf of their respective countries. Vancouver further ascertained that Spain would not fight for Nootka, and that trade was now the main Spanish focus.

In Paris, in 1793 Britain and Spain signed a second Nootka Convention and trade at Nootka continued to flourish. In 1794 they signed the third and final Nootka Convention. The following year with Spain's colonial empire in decline, the Spanish dismantled their fort at Nootka, and thus gave the British sovereignty over the area.

For twenty years the Nootka people and Friendly Cove had been the centre of Pacific Coastal trade. Maquinna had become one of the most powerful and famous of the Northwest Coastal chiefs. Despite European influences, the culture of Maquinna's people had changed very little, although they had come to rely on the goods obtained through the fur trade.

Nevertheless, despite the changes there was no lack of controversy. In 1803 the Boston, under Captain Salter, anchored some three kilometres up the inlet from Friendly Cove and after quarrelling

with Captain Slater, Maquinna led an assault, and killed all but two of the crew. One of them, a sail maker named Thompson and the other John Jewitt, a metal worker, became Maquinna's slaves for nearly three years until rescued by Captain Hill of the brig 'Lydia' out of Boston. After being liberated Jewitt published a story about his experiences.

By the early 1800's, with the decline of that important fur trade, Nootka Sound faded into obscurity. With the sea otters nearly wiped out, even more drastic changes would occur with the coming of permanent settlements on the West Coast. Nevertheless, the profusion of Spanish names on the map of B.C.'s coast will always remind travelers of the coast's early international history.