

The Dykes of Queensborough

Over time the Queensborough landscape has changed and evolved. As fields yielded to residential homes and industrial lands changed to condominium developments there remained one constant, the dykes. The lives of those in Queensborough are shaped by the dyke system. Much of the neighbourhood is established on reclaimed land, creating fertile soil for farming and space for new homes. If the dykes were to fail those living behind them would be affected dramatically.



A. Ewen IHP7346

Queensborough's dykes emerged in the early part of the 1890s. In 1889 the City of New Westminster had expanded beyond its core area along the waterfront and northward to include both Sapperton and Queensborough. The City purchased 600 acres near the tip of Lulu Island while another 140 acres adjacent to them were purchased by Alexander Ewen. Mr. Ewen purchased this land to expand his canning business and grow food for his workers.



D. McGillivray IHP2474

In 1890 another businessman, Donald McGillivray, became a neighbour to Mr. Ewen when he completed his foundry in Queensborough and acquired 525 of the City's 600 acres. Mr. McGillivray had agreed to build a bridge to Queensborough as well as a new water system for the City in exchange for their land. By spring of 1890 both businessmen had set a plan in motion: they would dyke portions of their land in order to offer spaces of lease. In 1892 the City entered into an arrangement with Mr. Ewen and Mr. McGillivray where they would each be responsible for building a series of dykes and maintaining them for three years. Afterward the businessmen would cover half the cost of the dykes' maintenance. (Pullem 1975, pp. 5-6)

The first real test of the Queensborough dyke system occurred in 1894 when flooding along the Fraser had reached the highest level on record. Unfortunately the system failed on June 4 and riverfront farmers needed to work together; fighting a losing battle with the encroaching water. The aftermath left salt water in farmer's fields and cattle standing wet. Many of these animals later succumbed to tuberculosis. However the community survived the disaster and began to rebuild with assistance from the provincial government to reseed the land. (Gresko & Howard p. 38)

In 1907 Alexander Ewen died and much of his land was divided into lots which were sold off to individuals. The addition of newer cheaper land to the local market made Queensborough an inviting location for new residents from other countries. However the introduction of independent land owners made it no longer practical for each one to look after their own piece of the dykes. Subsequently the City took over dyke maintenance in

1909. In 1911 the Queensborough Ratepayers' Association was formed to address issues of concern to their neighbourhood. One of their initial concerns was the ditches directing waters to the perimeter of the community; pumps were needed to remove water from the ditches to the riverside of the dyke. Even though the dykes kept the water out, they also kept it in when seepage occurred due to a high water table. In 1912 the City installed the necessary water pumps. (Pullem 1975 pp. 14-15)

In 1948 the dykes experienced their second great test as the Fraser rose again during the spring freshet. This time the dykes held due to the tireless work of both Queensborough and New Westminster residents alike. City council minutes from May 29, 1948 state that the dykes in Queensborough on Lulu Island had been strengthened by City employees and volunteer labour and were holding back the river. However, the water was still rising and constant attention would be necessary to avoid disaster. Mainly under the direction of a peg legged squatter named Scotty McKenzie local residents had set up a sandbagging brigade. Scotty had experienced the Mississippi floods in 1926 so he knew how to build and maintain an emergency dyke (Wolf 2005, p. 172).

The 1948 flood demonstrated that the dyke system was not adequate to hold back the waters, too much sandbagging was required. On November 8, 1948 Mr. English of the Queensborough Ratepayers' Association addressed City Council urging them to rebuild the dykes as soon as possible. In January of 1949 council approved a contract for the clearing of the dykes and over the next several years work on the new dykes was completed. In 1962 it was decided the dykes would be raised another two feet beyond the 1948 flood level and by June 1964 The British Columbian had reported that the City of New Westminster Dykes will withstand flooding of up to 26 feet.

Since their creation, the dykes of Queensborough have been accepted as a common component of the community. The neighbourhood's ditches drain water from the land and direct it toward the perimeter. There, large pumps suck water from the ditches and deposit it in the river on the dykes' far side, keeping the land safe and dry. Several poems, stories and reminiscences have been documented by those who grew up in Queensborough and the dykes often appear in them. A tight community has formed in Queensborough, bounded and protected by a ring of earth and it wouldn't be the same without its dykes.

In 1989 Edna Anderson, a long time resident of Queensborough, wrote down some of her memories about the community she grew up in. Mrs. Anderson said the following about the dykes:

When the first settlers came to this part of Lulu Island, they had to build dykes to prevent the encroachment of the river into their land. These dykes were made from the existing land with manual labour, consequently the early dykes gave some protection but were not strong.

Along the top of the dyke there was a footpath, the sloping sides were grassy banks and trees grew along the inside and outside of the dyke. This was a beautiful place for a Sunday stroll or almost any time one wished to go there...

...I spent many happy hours with my parents at the dyke as they cut firewood in the depression years, from driftwood which came ashore. We packed a lunch and combined work with pleasure... we explored little paths down the bank of the dyke, through the shady trees by moss covered logs where luxuriant ferns grew. Birds were everywhere, also very busy, as they too went about their daily lives... most notable were the seagulls because they were big birds... it seemed natural to hear their cries as they reached the water. My father taught me to identify the different trees along the dyke which were predominantly deciduous. Spring arrived for me with the alder, catkins and pussywillows. (Anderson 1989 p.14 – 16)

In 1991 Steve Gatensbury, another Queensborough native, wrote the following about the dykes:

There was a well-worn path along the top of the south dyke. Sometimes it was planked and sometimes just puddled clay. The top of the dyke was no more than six feet wide and we would occasionally make a slip and plunge down to the ditch at the bottom.

On the outside of the dyke, opposite the end of Wood Street there was a big Hemlock tree that looked quite out of place because tall evergreens were rare on the island. We rode our bikes from one end of the dyke to the other and though there was brush on the river side, we knew all sorts of private places where there was enough of a sandbar to sit and fish... On the eastern end, the dyke was lined with net houses, winter storage boat shelters, Hasegawa's Boatworks and the dwellings of the infamous south dyke squatters. (Gatensbury 1991, pp. 44-45)

Mr. Gatensbury's sister, Ruth Kulesa, wrote the following about the squatters of the 1920s & 30s:

We also had W.W.I veterans who lived in squatter lodgings along the south dyke of the river. They too, were quiet and peaceful about twenty-eight days a month. When (war pension) pay day rolled around, they went to town and tanked up. Then they were tigers. To be a captive audience on a crowded, smoke filled bus with two or three raving and lurching drunks was agony for one of my tender years and ears. (Gatensbury Kusa p. 12)

Mrs. Anderson's opinion of the squatters was quite different as she stated:

Squatters shanties along the dyke always intrigued me for they were usually built from the flotsam and jetsom of the river. There was a separate population on the dyke that was a community in itself. They lived their lives in their own way and we accepted this situation as a way of life for them until the city decreed they could no longer live there. (Anderson 1989, p18)

Mr. Gatensbury also wrote the following about the Chinese who worked co-op farms along the dykes:

To irrigate these fields, they used an ingenious system that was a familiar site and sound to every island resident. Close to the dyke there was a pump house that had a long intake pipe supported by a wooden framework that stretched out into the river. The pump was run by a one-cylinder gas engine with a flywheel, a governor and a magneto for spark... This was sufficient to bring water over the dyke and into a distribution system of wooden troughs and the main canals in the fields that fed the many branches that ran between the rows. From these, the

farmers ladled out a drink for each plant with a can attached to a long handle.
(Gatensbury 1991, pp75-76)

Since their development in the later half of the nineteenth century, the dykes of Queensborough have become a part of the social, emotional and economic fabric of the community. They have allowed for some of the most fertile soil in the Fraser Valley to maintain stability for the development of market gardens, nurseries and new homes. They have also allowed for some of New Westminster's strongest cultural communities to find a place to establish themselves to the benefit of future generations. Community memories run deep in Queensborough and the dykes are attached to those memories; so much so that the identity of Queensborough is tightly bound to them.

New Westminster Museum and Archives, October 2009

Appendices

Appendix #1

Rough time line for dyke development on Queensborough

February 1889	City Council sets up Lulu Island Committee
October 15, 1889	New Westminster buys Lot 757 containing the 600 acres nearest the city and Alexander Ewen buys Lot 758 containing the remaining 140 acres at \$1 an acre
Spring of 1890	Council arranges for Donald McGillivray to build the bridge to Queensborough and also the city's water system Council gives him 525 acres out of its 600 which would be signed over to him on completion of his foundry.
July 1890	McGillivray signs contract to supply and lay waterpipes from Coquitlam to New West
Nov 30, 1891	1 st Queensborough Bridge officially opens
1892	City makes agreement with Donald McGillivray and Alex Ewen whereas these two men would be responsible for building the dykes, maintaining them for three years, and paying half the cost of maintenance for subsequent years.
1894-1896	Flooding of the Fraser in 1894 highest level recorded– results in growing demand flood control
June 4, 1894	Lulu Island dyke gives way (Fraser Port, pg 38) water rises until June 15
1907	Alexander Ewen dies. Land is sold off to individuals and it's no longer practical or responsible that each owner looks after his own piece of the dyke
1909	City takes over entire maintenance of dykes
1911	Queensborough Ratepayers Association established. First President, Ben Sparks, secretary Anthony Sprice. First demands: larger flood gates and a pump to empty the ditches
1912	First pump installed
Jan 25, 1915	Mayor Gray's speech on dykes

- 1948
1948-9 Fraser Flood – dykes hold in Queensborough?
Discussions in council regarding the 48 flood, its effects, the proposed clearing of the old dykes and reconstruction of the new ones. (See attached excerpts from council minutes for this period.)
- 1948 Multi-million dollar cost of the overall for Fraser Valley was divided federal and prov govt 37.5% each, municipalities fronting the river at 25%. (Columbian Feb 24, 1968)
- June 19, 1949 Inspection of Queensborough dykes takes place (new ones presumably?)
- 1962 Fraser River Committee issues report: level of dykes be raised two feet higher than any previous flood crest

Appendix #2
Extracts from City Minutes regarding the Dykes

1948

- May 29 “the dykes in Queensborough on Lulu Island had been strengthened by City employees and volunteer labour and were holding back the river. However, the water was still rising and constant attention would be necessary to avoid disaster
H.M.C.S. Antigonish sent to New Westminster
- Special council committee set up.
- June 7 Serious flood condition at Queensborough. Shortage of manpower. Suggested that majority of the residents leave the island at night and return in the daytime as there was a danger of a sudden break in the dyke.
- Lulu Island bridge closed except for emergency traffic
- June 21 Report: Evacuation Committee concludes its duties. Red Cross served 500 free meals daily on a 24 hour basis, as well as sandwiches etc to canteens at the dykes in Queensborough. The unselfish service of all voluntary helpers in this work, cannot be too highly praised.
- Nov 8 Queenborough Ratepayers’ Association, Mr. English addresses council re re-building of the dyking system and urged early action.
- Dec 20 Secretary of Ratepayers’ Assoc expresses appreciation for co-operation during past year . . .
- 1949*
- Jan 10 Contract for clearing of dykes on Lulu Island in the Queensborough District discussed. Council approves. City Solicitor to negotiate with companies and private persons concerned who were at the present time straddling the dyke reserve.
- Mar 31 Fraser Valley Dyking Board dissolved. The City Board of Works department was now watching the dykes in Queensborough

Appendix #3
Newspaper Articles

June 3, 1964 City of New Westminster dykes will withstand floods up to 26 feet
– well above the level of the 1948 flood (24 feet) – Columbian
Newspaper

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