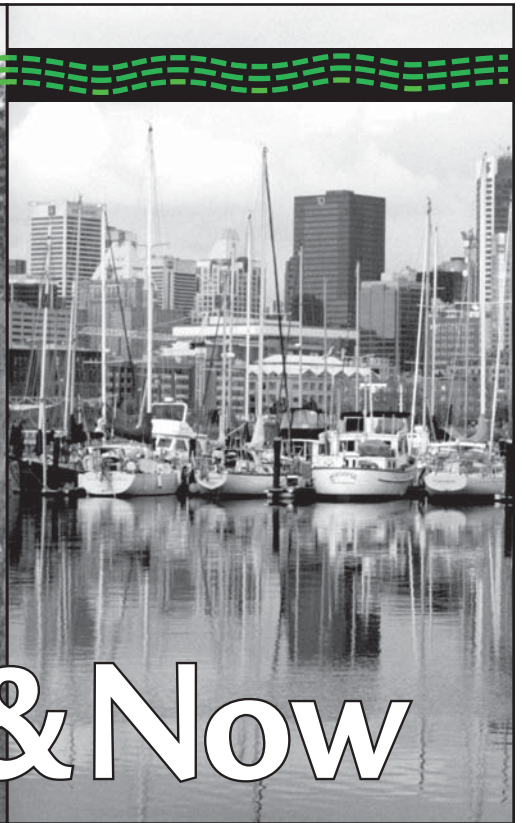


# False Creek's Watershed



## Then & Now

If you live in the False Creek district of Vancouver, you are accustomed to the urban landscape: paved streets, houses, businesses, industrial sites and the ever-present sound of traffic. When it rains, water is carried to the sea in storm drains, out of sight beneath the roads and buildings.

A scant 150 years ago this was a dense temperate rainforest, traversed by numerous creeks that passed through rich tidal flats on their way to the ocean. It was home to First Nations people who had lived in balance with the area's natural abundance for thousands of years.

### Why were the forests cleared? What happened to the freshwater streams?

A different set of values came to the region by way of European settlement. The newcomers' world-view originated in an expanding industrial economy where the focus was on material wealth and technological "progress". They saw nature as inhospitable, something to be tamed. It took them only a few decades to extract, process and sell off most of the watershed's abundant natural resources. The idea that healthy ecosystems are the foundation for our economy - that they are "natural capital" - was not even considered at the time.

We now realize that our communities can and must be more friendly to the ecosystem of which they are a part. Green spaces in an urban environment help freshen the air, and filter polluted rainwater before it enters the water table and the ocean. We have come to understand the importance of preserving this rich natural inheritance for future generations.

### "A placid marine corridor, framed in forest green."

To picture what the land around False Creek looked like 150 years ago, one has only to visit the old growth forest at Lighthouse Park, the clear waters of Lynn Creek, the historic native village site at Jericho Beach, or the vast tidal flats of Boundary Bay. Then imagine a creek choked with the squirming bodies of hundreds of returning salmon.

The watershed around False Creek was once dense with huge coniferous trees, some over 1,000 years old. Berry bushes of all kinds flourished in the understory. Bears and cougars roamed the woods, elk and deer inhabited the grassy pastures. In marshy areas near what is now Douglas Park and Trout Lake, beavers built dams. There was a large bog, called the "Tea Swamp", south of 15th Avenue between Main and Fraser. Creeks flowed from these marshy areas, swelled with countless other small streams, and

*Above left: The sons of Major J.S. Matthews, Chief Archivist for the City of Vancouver, near the mouth of Mackie Creek in 1902. City of Vancouver Archives, Dist. N 15.1. At right is a view of False Creek North, 1993. Photo by Larry Barr*

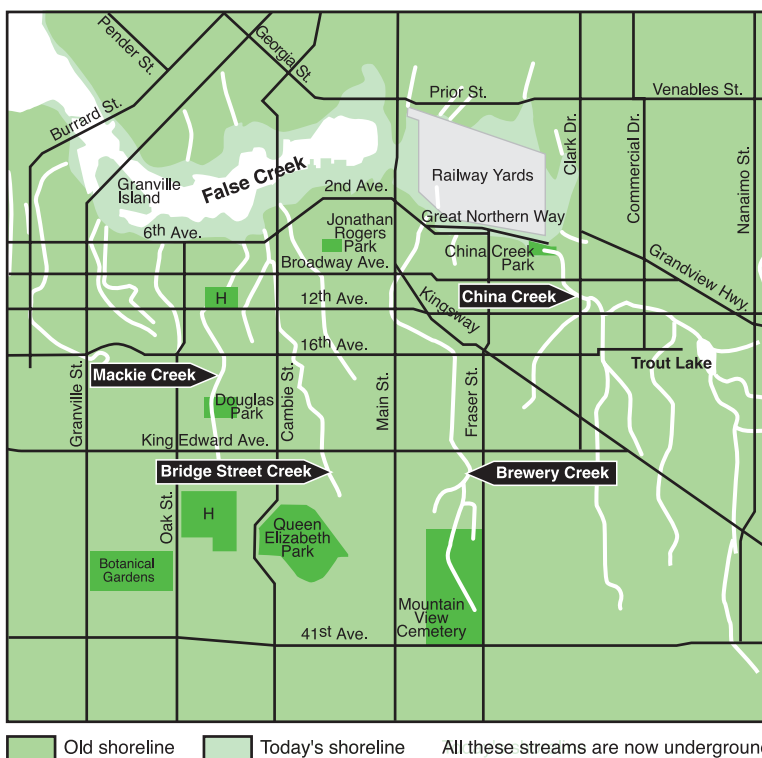


*On the south shore in 1886, near a creek that flowed parallel to Hemlock Street. The log's diameter has been estimated at about three metres. City of Vancouver Archives, Dist. P35 N24.*

wound their way down to the sea. Salmon and trout thrived.

At high tide, the peninsula of present day downtown Vancouver was an island. The eastern end of False Creek was a large tidal flat fanning out from a narrow isthmus of land at what is now Main Street. The shallows supported abundant sealife such as oysters, clams, crabs, and mussels. The seawater was rich with oolichans, herring, perch, flounder and rock cod. Sturgeon came into the still side waters to enjoy their warmth and calm. Because of the rich intertidal life, thousands of migratory birds lived around the creek, and seals and orcas were often seen. The First Nations used to say, "When the tide is out, the table is set."

According to Major J.S. Matthews, Vancouver's Chief Archivist at the turn of the last century, False Creek was "originally a narrow sylvan canal, where at high tide the waters lapped the lower branches of towering trees which lined its shores; a placid marine corridor framed in forest green."





The Mount Pleasant district in 1889 where Kingsway crosses Main Street at 7th Avenue. By this time, almost all the timber had been cleared. City of Vancouver Archives, Van. Sc. P147 N82.

### False Creek's lost streams – where did they go?

Although all of the creeks that flowed into False Creek have completely disappeared under the urban landscape, they played an important part in Vancouver's development and prosperity.

### Timber, pig farms and beer

**China Creek**, with a total length of 16 km, was the largest stream that flowed into False Creek. It drained a huge area west of the Renfrew Highlands, from 45th to 4th Avenue. Flowing towards the northwest, it passed through Trout Lake and picked up at least three more streams from the south before reaching seawater at what is now the corner of Glen Street and 7th Avenue. This creek took its name from the Chinese market gardens and pig farms near its mouth. People often stood on its banks to spear fish for dinner.

Deep ravines with fast flowing creeks were often used as garbage dumps, and China Creek soon became polluted. By the 1950s, City Council deemed it a "health hazard" and the creek's waters were diverted into a large sewer pipe. The grassy field at China Creek Park marks the location of the old creek mouth.

**Mackie Creek** began near Oak Street and 37th Avenue, followed close to Willow Street and entered False Creek's old shoreline at 6th Avenue.

It cut a ravine 60 feet deep – "a natural barrier to travel," said Major Matthews. In 1882, the foot of Mackie Creek was very busy. "Small tugs and scows landed hay and barley for the oxen at Jerry Roger's logging camp in the muskeg where elk once pastured,

now Douglas Park, Heather Street. After the oxen dragged the great logs down the skidroad, they were dumped into the boom from the tollway..."

At least four more unnamed creeks west of Mackie began around Shaughnessy Heights and flowed into False Creek close to the sandbar that was later built up to become Granville Island. One that paralleled Hemlock Street was well known for its cutthroat trout.

**Brewery Creek**, a deep watercourse that supported lots of fish, had its headwaters at 37th Avenue and Fraser Street, a region which later became Memorial View Cemetery. It followed Fraser Street, then moved west towards Main and 15th at the "Tea Swamp". Even today the streets here are bumpy, due to the soft boggy ground beneath. From here it flowed steeply downhill, entering the now-drained eastern flats at Brunswick Street and 1st Avenue. Near the turn of the century, its deep, fast-moving waters were dammed at East 8th to power local breweries.

Gladys Schwesinger, who lived at the foot of Brewery Creek from 1897 to 1908, describes the area as "our special preserve, our forest retreat, our playground, and my own personal conception of a fairyland on earth..." Gladys and her friends waded in the cool waters, "and climbed back and forth over the many logs which had conveniently fallen across its deeper pools, joining rock to rock, and affording walkable bridges."

Another large stream, **Bridge Street Creek**, began on the eastern slope of Little Mountain, where Queen Elizabeth Park is today, and entered False Creek near Cambie Street. It was also well known for its fishing. Major Matthews



The south shore of False Creek just west of Cambie Street in 1912. This area was lined with sawmills well into the 20th century. City of Vancouver Archives, CVA 99-325.

wrote that "...at Cambie and Broadway (in 1900), salmon came through the southwest corner of the intersection in abundance". Standing at this busy intersection today, it is hard to imagine a stream choked with salmon!

Quotes by Major J.S. Matthews are from notes handwritten on photographs in the City of Vancouver Archives.

Quotes by Gladys Schwesinger are excerpts from the pamphlet *Recollections of Early Vancouver in My Childhood 1893-1912*, by Gladys Schwesinger, City of Vancouver Archives, 1964.

## Under our feet, water still flows to the sea

The creeks that once flowed into False Creek are still there - you just can't see them because they are hidden underground. If you live in the area, here are some ways you can help sustain the local ecosystem.

- Vancouver's water is soft, so we can minimize the amount of laundry and dish detergent we use to reduce the effect on sealife near sewage plant outfalls.
- Use non-toxic, fish friendly cleaners when washing your car, and keep other toxic substances off the street. The fish painted on many storm drains in your neighbourhood are a reminder that they empty into fishbearing habitat. Yes, there are still fish and other sea creatures in False Creek!
- Patronize environmentally friendly businesses in your area.
- Reduce, Reuse and Recycle as much as possible. This includes water, green garden clippings, and small and large household items.
- Create a more natural, native landscape in your garden. Fill up large grassy areas with native shrubs, flowers and trees. These reduce water usage and maintenance, attract birds and helpful insects, and bring more biodiversity and tranquillity to the area.
- Follow the progress as the City of Vancouver moves towards separating the sewer/storm runoff system. Today, during heavy rainstorms some sewage still overflows the present system and goes directly into the Creek. The City is actively working on a long-range plan to twin these pipes so all sewage goes to the treatment plant. They need to know we support this progress!
- Support or join an environmental organization that is working in your watershed.

### Some helpful connections:

- The False Creek Watershed Society and "The Salmon Celebration" [www.falsecreekwatershed.org](http://www.falsecreekwatershed.org)
- Community Advisor, Burrard Inlet and Indian Arm Fisheries and Oceans Canada Phone: 604-666-0743

Thanks to Chief Dick Williams of the Squamish Nation for some historical information.

Written by Celia Brauer for the Salmon Celebration.

Design and layout by Black Cat Graphics & Communications, North Vancouver.

Salmon icon by Celia Brauer.

This brochure was made possible with a grant from Fisheries and Oceans Canada.