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A Short History of the Castle

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Craigdarroch Castle was built between 1887-1890 for Robert Dunsmuir, a Scottish immigrant who made his fortune from Vancouver Island coal. This Victorian mansion, built on a hill overlooking the City of Victoria (Craigdarroch means “rocky, oak place” in Gaelic) announced to the world that Robert Dunsmuir was the richest and most important man in Western Canada. Unfortunately, Robert died on April 12, 1889 just before construction of the Castle was completed so he never had the chance to live here. His entire estate, said to be valued at \$15 - \$20 million U.S. dollars in 1888 was left entirely to his widow, Joan. She moved into Craigdarroch in 1890 and lived here until her death in 1908.

Craigdarroch Castle is an example of a “bonanza castle”, massive houses built for men who became wealthy because of the industrial transformation of North America. Three of Dunsmuir’s American business associates were railroad entrepreneurs who had built their own bonanza castles: Collis P. Huntington, Leland Stanford, and Charles Crocker.

Dunsmuir’s American connections are reflected in the Castle itself. He commissioned architect Warren Heywood Williams of Portland, Oregon to design Craigdarroch. When Williams died, Arthur L. Smith who was a member of the same firm, completed the project with assistance from Williams’ son, David L. Williams.

The interior oak paneling was fabricated by the A.H. Andrews Co. of Chicago from white oak probably felled on land owned by the Andrews Lumber Company in Arkansas. These pre-fabricated elements (including stairs, door and window frames, and 2182 panels) were shipped from Chicago to Victoria in five railcars and installed in the house. Other woods used in the house included Spanish mahogany (in the Library), western red cedar (in the Porte Cochere Entrance) and multi-patterned parquet strips throughout the house incorporate exotic woods such as walnut, ebony, rosewood, maple, and teak.

Craigdarroch Castle has one of North America’s finest collections of Victorian residential stained and leaded glass windows. These windows are believed to have been produced by an American studio.

The red slate for the roof was produced from a quarry near the Vermont/New York border. The ridge and hip roof pieces were originally manufactured in Lincoln, California by Gladding, McBean (a company still in operation). Paintings depicting American landscapes by Frederick Schafer adorned the walls of the Castle.

Craigdarroch was a twenty-eight acre estate. On the south side of the Castle, the huge lawn was enclosed on three sides by a massive, twenty-foot high stone wall. Two staircases, on the east and west walls, provided access to the gardens below. In those days, a visitor could stroll along numerous paths and enjoy the quiet ponds, streams and meadows. The Castle grounds today are approximately 1.75 acres and include this large south lawn.

Robert Dunsmuir was born in 1825 near Kilmarnock, Ayrshire into a family of coal masters --- people who rented mines from the land-owning aristocracy. Joanna Oliver White, his future wife, was also born in Ayrshire and they married in 1847. Joanna later modified her name to Joan Olive. In 1850, they decided on very short notice, to take a three-year contract with the Hudson's Bay Company (Hbc). Robert and a pregnant Joan, along with two young daughters Elizabeth and Agnes, voyaged to the New World with Robert's uncle, Boyd Gilmour who had also contracted to work for the Hbc. Their arduous voyage by sailing ship from Scotland around Cape Horn to Vancouver Island by took 214 days. The ship made a stop at Fort Vancouver (now Vancouver, Washington) where Joan gave birth to their eldest son, James. Continuing their journey, the Dunsmuirs made landfall in 1851 at the Hudson's Bay post in Fort Rupert (near present day Port Hardy) which is approximately 300 miles north of Victoria in a very remote section of Vancouver Island. After many months of travel, the commitment on their contract did not begin until they made landfall at their final destination.

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The Hbc workers made their homes as best they could in the tiny settlement of Fort Rupert, and they lived in rough-hewn log cabins with dirt floors. The yield from the mines at Fort Rupert was disappointing so the Hudson's Bay Company decided to focus its operations in Nanaimo where the prospects seemed to be better. The Dunsmuir and Gilmour families moved to Nanaimo in 1854. Gilmour returned to Scotland when his contract expired in 1854 but the Dunsmuirs decided to stay on.

In 1855, the Hbc and Governor James Douglas granted Robert Dunsmuir and one other man the right to prospect and mine coal independently. The Hbc's right of exclusive trade and chartered lease of Vancouver Island subsequently ran out in 1859. Ten years later, in 1869 (three years after the crown colonies of Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia had been united, and two years before BC joined Confederation) Dunsmuir found a rich seam of coal near Nanaimo. It was the richest coal seam to be discovered on Vancouver Island, and Dunsmuir's tenacity and business acumen helped him secure the necessary resources to exploit this major discovery.

In 1871, Dunsmuir recruited three British Royal Navy officers as partners and they provided capital to support the expanding coal mining operations: Lieutenant Washam Neston Diggle contributed \$10,000; Rear-Admiral Sir Arthur Farquhar contributed \$12,000; and Captain Fredrick Wilbraham Egerton contributed \$10,000. An increased presence of the British Royal Navy on the northwest coast of North America, and market demands from a rapidly growing population in San Francisco dramatically improved the market for high-quality Vancouver Island coal. The growth of this market, efficiently served by Dunsmuir, Diggle & Co. launched Robert up the ladder of success. To give a measure of the increased value of the company, in 1883 Dunsmuir bought out his first partner, Diggle, for \$600,000 – a profit on Diggle's initial investment of 6,000 percent!

Dunsmuir's wealth continued to grow when he secured the contract to build the Esquimalt & Nanaimo Railway. Government grants awarded to Dunsmuir and his partners to assist in the construction of the 78-mile railway totaled \$750,000 in addition to

the rights for 1.9 million acres (almost a quarter) of Vancouver Island. It was an added bonus for Dunsmuir that the railway connected his coalfields with one of his major customers, the British Royal Navy at Esquimalt.

The Dunsmuir Family:

Robert and Joan had two sons and eight daughters plus one child who died in infancy.

As the Dunsmuir fortune grew, the family eventually moved from Nanaimo to Victoria and took up residence in 1884 in a house named Fairview situated near the Legislative Buildings. Robert at this point had been elected and was serving as a Member of the Legislative Assembly for Nanaimo. James, the elder son, took charge of the mining operations in Nanaimo, and Alexander, the younger son, lived in San Francisco and managed the sales and shipping office. Dunsmuir coal now moved to market on Dunsmuir rail and in Dunsmuir ships and the business empire included iron works, saw mills, a quarry and extensive real estate.

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In 1887, two years after the last spike had been driven on the E&N railway, Robert Dunsmuir and five years after he started accumulating 28 acres of property, Dunsmuir gave the orders to start building Craigdarroch. There were still three Dunsmuir daughters who were not married and the mansion would be the perfect venue to launch them into married life. Unfortunately, Robert died in April 1889 before the house was completed. After Robert's death Joan spent some time travelling in Europe. Her sons oversaw the completion of the construction while she was in Europe and Joan, with her three unmarried daughters, took up residence in 1890.

Robert's death brought strife to the family. Contrary to verbal promises, he left his entire estate and business holdings to his wife Joan. This was a blow to both James and Alex (now in their thirties) who had worked in the family business all their lives. It took seven years of negotiations with Joan before she would give her sons title to the San Francisco company. It took another three years before she agreed to their terms to purchase the Wellington Colliery. With this settlement, Alex Dunsmuir felt secure enough in his financial future to marry Josephine, a divorced woman that he had been living with as man and wife for close to twenty years. Their married life only lasted six weeks; Alex passed away on January 31, 1900 while they were in New York on their honeymoon.

After the death of Alex, a costly quarrel over his will again divided the family, setting Joan and her daughters against James and his children. This quarrel triggered a lawsuit that went all the way to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London. James, who was at this time the Premier of British Columbia, was very much in the public eye and a story in the New York Times announced: "Premier sued by his Mother". As a result of the legal action, Joan and James did not speak for years. When she died in 1908 having lived in Craigdarroch for 18 years, James was not expected to attend her funeral but at the last minute he changed his mind. During the service, he broke down and wept.

Joan left her estate, including Craigdarroch, to her five surviving daughters, one son-in-law, and three of her grandchildren. In order to divide the proceeds, the contents of the Castle were sold in a three day auction. The auction catalogue listed oriental carpets, silks, brocades, fine china and silver, and furniture of mahogany, oak and walnut. A developer, Griffith Hughes, assisted the Dunsmuir daughters with the subdivision and sale of the 28-acre property into 144 lots. When it became evident that there was little

interest in purchasing the Castle, they devised a scheme whereby anyone purchasing a lot would be eligible to win the Castle. The March 28, 1910 edition of the Victoria Times gave a first page account of this remarkable point in the Castle's history:

“ As a result of the drawing held in connection with the disposition of the lots at Craigdarroch Castle, possession of the Castle itself and the adjoining gardens passes to Solomon Cameron and Parker Clark of the Westholme Lumber Company.....After a few lots had been disposed of by Mr. Hughes, he then devised a scheme which was concluded on Saturday night in the drawing. In accordance with the scheme, over 120 lots were sold at \$2750 each, but the allocation of these lots was left to be decided at the drawing.....all buyers were given a change, in a second drawing, for the castle itself and the property around it. Pools were formed by many of the holders of chances in order to make sure of winning. One pool in fact, had three of the last five chances. An individual holder, however, in the Westholme Lumber Company in which Messrs. Cameron and Clark are the interested representatives secured the prize. The drawing took place at the castle, the greatest interest being naturally shown by all those who flocked to Craigdarroch.

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Mr. Cameron never took up residence at Craigdarroch. He put his brother in place as a caretaker and used the Castle as collateral for loans to finance his business activities. Ten years later, he lost the Castle and other property to the Bank of Montreal when he failed to pay a debt of more than \$300,000. Thus begins the history of the Castle's use as a public building.

In 1919, the Federal Government leased the Castle and massive renovations were made to convert the building to use as a military hospital for World War I veterans. By 1921, the hospital had vacated and a new tenant was found, the Victoria College.

Founded in 1903 as an affiliate of McGill University in Montreal, Victoria College had been dissolved in 1915 when a new university, The University of B.C. was established in Vancouver. A local lobby group, spear-headed by Victoria College founder Dr. Edward Burness Paul, were successful in having the College reinstated in 1920. At that time, the College was housed in the new Victoria High School building (situated near Craigdarroch Castle) but the situation was not ideal for either the high school nor the College. When Dr. Paul learned that the Veteran's Hospital located in Craigdarroch Castle would be closed, he seized the opportunity to propose Victoria College as a new tenant for Craigdarroch. His proposal was accepted and preparations were started for the move.

At the Castle, the rooms that once housed recuperating veterans were modified again to accommodate the first cohort of students. For example, the double drawing room became two classrooms and the library was converted into the Registrar's Office. The formal dining room, fitted out with slatted benches became the math classroom. The college library was housed in the fourth floor ballroom. Bedrooms on the second and third floors were converted either into classrooms, common rooms or offices.

From 1921 to 1944, enrolment in Victoria College seldom reached more than 250. In 1945, however, 128 servicemen returning from World War II increased enrolment to 400. Every available space was commandeered for classroom and study purposes, even food services were suspended so the kitchen could be converted into a classroom. By 1946, the level of enrolment reached 600, an intolerable number for the building and health & safety issues became a major concern. As an interim measure, an army hut was moved onto the grounds and converted into two classrooms but the need for new premises was

critical. After students staged a protest march bringing their plight into the public eye, it was agreed that Victoria College would be moved into campus of the Normal School (for teacher training) that had also been recently vacated as a military hospital. The Victoria School Board, which had purchased Craigdarroch Castle from the Bank of Montreal in 1929, then decided to move their offices into the Castle and when the College vacated, more modifications were made to create office space.

The Victoria School Board occupied Craigdarroch from 1946 until they vacated for larger premises in 1967. The Victoria Conservatory of Music, established in 1964, had been searching for a home for its 40 staff members and 435 students and Craigdarroch was an ideal site. The City of Victoria agreed that this was an appropriate solution; the Conservatory was a suitable tenant for the Castle and by leasing it to them for a dollar a year, the City was also able to give the institution important financial support.

There were those, however, who felt that Craigdarroch Castle should be turned into a Museum. The Castle Society was formed in 1959 by late James K. Nesbitt but it wasn't until the Conservatory vacated in 1979 that the Society was given the opportunity to operate the Castle as a historic house museum. It was then that the extensive and expensive restoration process began to return the Castle to the way it was when Joan Dunsmuir first took up residence. In 1995, the City of Victoria finally handed over ownership of the Castle to the Craigdarroch Castle Historical Museum Society. With the support of annual visitation of approximately 140,000 visitors per year, the invaluable contributions made by 120 volunteers, and the dedication of a staff of 14, the Society continues its work to preserve and restore this important heritage site as a legacy for future generations.

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