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Courtesy Rheta Skea

Above: *Hotel keeper John Hector and his wife, Augusta Nilsson and their two daughters. Oldest daughter, Ruth Victoria, married James Skea and did some teaching in Ruskin and Langley. The youngest, Jean Louise, taught at Cache Creek, then trained as a secretary and worked for Finning Tractor in Vancouver. See Ronald Greene's "Token History" column starting on page 36.*

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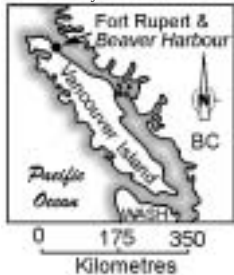
Included:
Information and
subscription form for
the 2003 conference
in Prince George.

Negotiations for Control and Unlikely Partnerships: Fort Rupert, 1849-1851

by Marki Sellers

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IN THE summer of 1850 three English sailors were killed, apparently by Natives, near Fort Rupert on Vancouver Island. The sailors had recently deserted from the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) ship *Norman Morison*, and were on board the barque *England* heading for California. The murder of the three sailors aroused the fear of the non-Native settlers of the new colony and resulted in the use of military force against the Nahwitti Kwakwaka'wakw, amongst whom the murderers were suspected to originate.¹

That same summer, a strike was underway at Fort Rupert. White miners at the fort were undertaking job action against the HBC, in protest of poor conditions and treatment by officers. After the leaders of the strike were imprisoned in the bastion and the miners were threatened with sword and pistol, they and their families collectively deserted the fort. Securing passage on the barque *England*, they fled Fort Rupert for the gold fields of California.

The Nahwitti incident of 1850 and the events at Fort Rupert are important to the early history of British Columbia. They represent the first colonial use of military force against an Aboriginal community on Vancouver Island, and the first collectively organized job action in the colony. The handful of historians who have studied the events of 1850 have tended to focus on either the job action and desertion of the miners at the fort, or else on the death of the deserting sailors and the military action taken against the Nahwitti. As a result, the scholarship on these events has been unnaturally divided into a discourse on the Kwakwaka'wakw or on the white labourers. This essay looks at the multiple relationships between the Native and non-Native population, and between these two sets of events.

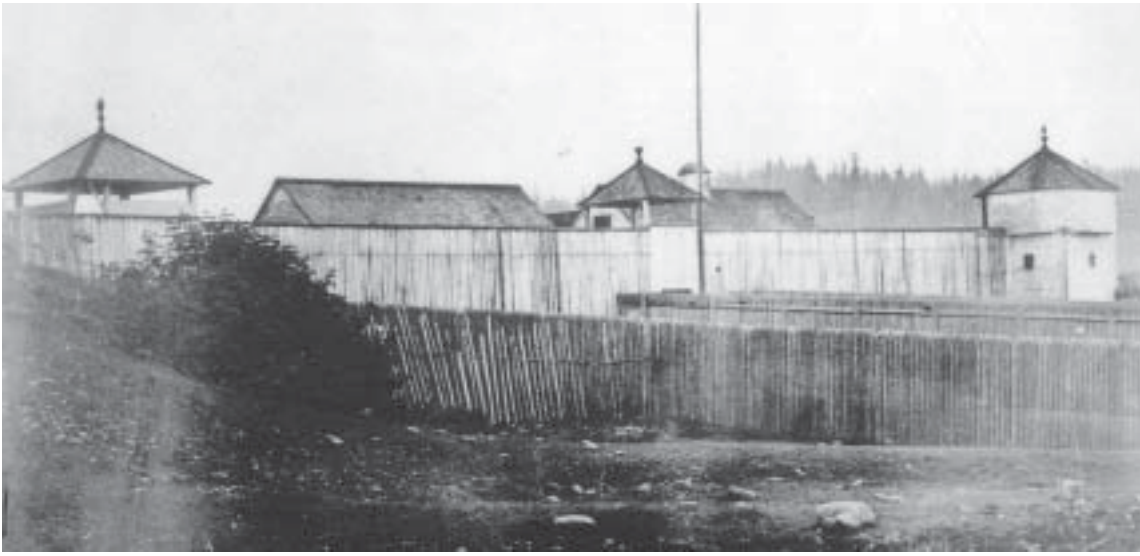
The job action and desertion of the fort miners, the death of the three sailors, and the military action taken against the Nahwitti all happened within the context of larger relationships and events: they were connected to a struggle for power and control. The Nahwitti, the Kwagiulth,² the fort's miners, the officers of the HBC, and the new colonial government were each involved

¹The Nahwitti are a Kwak'waka-speaking group of the Kwakwaka'wakw nation. In the early 1800s the Nahwitti were actually three different communities living at the extreme northern tip of what is known as Vancouver Island. These communities, from west to east, were: the Yutlinuk, the Nakomgilisala, and the Tlatlasikwala. In the late 1800s the three communities consolidated, becoming the Nahwitti. During the first half of the nineteenth century the term Nahwitti, variously spelled, was often used by whites to refer to the Tlatlasikwala. The Nahwitti incident occurred in Tlatlasikwala territory, along the northeastern tip of Vancouver Island. Robert Galois, *Kwakwaka'wakw Settlements, 1775-1920: A Geographical Analysis and Gazetteer* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994).



BC Archives HP-060083

Right: Fort Rupert. 1898



Left: View of Hudson's Bay Company Fort Rupert. ca. 1880.

in a negotiation over control of resources and labour. In addition, the Nahwitti and Kwagiulth Kwakwaka'wakw, the Company, and the colonial government were in a struggle over the ownership of land. Yet the events of 1850 were also about a partnership between members of the Aboriginal population and the white immigrants at Fort Rupert. Both the fort officers and the miners of the fort needed the Kwakwaka'wakw to survive. The fort required the permission of the Kwagiulth to access the land and coal, and needed their country produce to survive.³ The miners required the help of the Nahwitti to desert the fort and depended on their continued support once they left the fort.

The conflict at Fort Rupert began with its very establishment in 1849 at Beaver Harbour. The HBC's presence in the area was sharply focused on taking ownership over the coal. Although the fort did engage in collecting furs from Aboriginal traders in exchange for Company goods, the primary purpose of the fort was to secure and mine the known coal deposits in the area.⁴ In 1835 the HBC learned of the coal deposits from Native informants.⁵ Following this, the Company made plans to mine the coal and sell it to the emerging steamship industry. They hoped that by establishing a formidable presence in Beaver Harbour they would be able to transfer control of the coal from the local Kwagiulth Kwakwaka'wakw, as well as protect it from American interests.⁶ Following the construction of the fort, the HBC hired the local Kwagiulth to mine the surface coal, and sent to England for experienced miners to work the underground deposits.⁷ The HBC then negotiated a series of con-

tracts to provide coal to steamships on the Northwest Coast.⁸

The Hudson's Bay Company and its officers never expected that their right to own and mine the land would be contested by the Kwagiulth. After HBC employee Duncan Finlayson's information-gathering visit in 1835 the Kwagiulth realized that Europeans were interested in the coal. Quick to seize this new economic opportunity, the Kwagiulth began to surface-mine the coal themselves and sell it to European ships visiting the area.⁹ The establishment of the fort at Beaver Harbour and the arrival of the miners threatened the Kwagiulth's control of the land and the coal and the Kwagiulth's new market. They reorganized their villages into a single winter village near the fort to take advantage of trade, but they did not recognize the HBC's claim to the land. From the onset of the Hudson's Bay Company's interest in the coal at Beaver Harbour, the Kwagiulth had asserted their right to mine the coal, and their Native right of ownership. Finlayson reported in 1836 that the Kwakwaka'wakw would not permit the Company "to work the coals as they were valuable to them, but that they would labour in the mine themselves and sell to us the produce of their exertions."¹⁰ They made it clear to officers and servants of the Company that they themselves controlled and owned the coal.

After the fort was established, the HBC hired Kwagiulths to mine the surface deposits. This action initially suppressed the conflict between the Kwagiulths and the HBC. While the fort waited for the arrival of the experienced miners from England, Kwagiulth labour became the pri-

² The Kwagiulth are the community of Kwakwaka'wakw living at Fort Rupert. After the fort was built in 1849 the Kwagiulth merged their communities into a single village at the fort. The Kwagiulth and the Nahwitti had a history of conflict with each other.

³ The HBC purchased, for example, 3,000 salmon to fertilize the garden, and other fresh meat for the workers. See Andrew Muir, *Private Diary, Commencing 9 November 1848 to 5 August 1850*, BC Archives, 29 October 1849.

⁴ Eric Newsome, *The Coal Coast: The History of Coal Mining in BC - 1835-1900*, (Victoria: Orca Book Publishers, 1989); John Sebastian Helmcken, *The Reminiscences of Doctor John Sebastian Helmcken*, Dorothy B. Smith, ed. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1975); Patricia M. Johnson, "Fort Rupert," *The Beaver* (1972): 4-15.

⁵ Galois *Settlements*; Helmcken *Reminiscences*; and others.

⁶ Margaret A. Ormsby, introduction to H. Bowsfield, Ed. *Fort Victoria Letters, 1846-1851*, vol. 32 (Winnipeg: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1979) xxxviii.

⁷ James Douglas, in *Fort Victoria Letters*; Helmcken *Reminiscences*; Johnson "Fort Rupert;" and others.

⁸ For example, the HBC negotiated a contract to provide one thousand tons of coal to an American mail delivery steamship. See Douglas *Fort Victoria Letters*.

⁹David Lewis, *Yesterday's Promises: A History of the District of Port Hardy*, (Victoria, British Columbia: Robinsion Press, 1978).

¹⁰Quoted in Galois *Settlements*, 201.

¹¹Quoted in Galois *Settlements*, 201, emphasis added; Ormsby, introduction, *Fort Victoria Letters*, viii.

¹²Lynne Bowen, "Independent Colliers at Fort Rupert: Labour Unrest on the West Coast, 1849," *The Beaver* (1989): 25-31; Johnson "Fort Rupert"; Mark Leier, Lecture at SFU, 19 February 2002; and others.

¹³Bowen "Independent Colliers"; Lynne Bowen, *Three Dollar Dreams*, (Lantzville: Oolichan Books, 1987); Leier, Lecture at SFU, 19 February 2002.

¹⁴Andrew Muir, *Private Diary*, 88-89.

¹⁵Michael Muir, "Reminiscences," as researched for H. H. Bancroft in *BC Sketches*, BC Archives, 14.

¹⁶Galois *Settlements*, 201.

¹⁷Fort Rupert Journal quoted in Galois *Settlements*, 201. Galois' square brackets.

¹⁸Andrew Muir *Private Diary*, 16 and 17 April 1850: 91-92.

¹⁹Leier, Lecture at SFU, 19 February 2002; Bowen *Three Dollar Dreams*.

²⁰Muir *Private Diary*; Bowen *Three Dollar Dreams*; Leier "Lecture"; Newsome *Coal Coast*.

²¹Bowen *Three Dollar Dreams*; Newsome *Coal Coast*; Leier, Lecture at SFU, 19 February 2002; Douglas in *Fort Victoria Letters*; Helmcken *Reminiscences*.

²²Douglas *Fort Victoria Letters*, 3 July 1850: 104.

²³Douglas *Fort Victoria Letters*, 104-105. "The U.S. Propeller *Massachusetts* called at Fort Rupert on the 18th Ultmo. for coal. She was sent to the Indian

mary means of mining the coal. Although the HBC was under the impression that they now owned the coal, it is unlikely that the Kwagiulth saw it that way. The surface coal being mined was not within the fort itself, but two or three miles away. Furthermore, the HBC had not restricted access to the deposits by, for example, erecting a fence. The coal still belonged to the Kwakwaka'wakw, and it was being mined by their labour. The HBC was paying the Kwagiulth for the "produce of their exertions" at a rate of a 2 ½ point blanket for every two tons.¹¹ In effect, the Kwagiulth had negotiated their relationship with the Company. The Company could sell the coal to steamships in the area, but the coal belonged to the Kwagiulth. The Company was paying them for a product, not their labour.

The arrival of a new labour force from England again threatened Kwagiulth control at Beaver Harbour and reopened the conflict. In the fall of 1849, eight Scottish miners arrived, with their families, from England to begin work on the sub-surface coal deposits.¹² The miners had come to Fort Rupert expecting to dig coal in an established coal pit,¹³ but instead they were required to look for a good coal seam and sink the mine shaft themselves. As the new HBC miners began to work outside the fort, sinking a coal shaft, they encountered resistance from the Kwagiulth. Andrew Muir, one of the Scottish miners who had arrived from England, complained in his diary of being:

away from the Fort with our work and no protection ... and several times the Fort having rows with the Indians and us working at a distance from the Fort without any protection whatsoever the Indians has come down and threatened to shoot us.¹⁴

Another miner, Muir's younger brother, later reported he was also concerned "for there was not a large enough force of protection. The Indians surrounded the mouth of the shaft, protesting that they would kill all below unless compensation was given them for their land rights."¹⁵ As their threats were directed towards the coal pit and the new miners, it is likely that these Kwagiulth were resisting the theft of their property.

In April 1850 some of the chiefs at Beaver Harbour took their concerns about the theft of their property directly to the Company.¹⁶ They demanded the HBC stop "enclosing 'more of their lands as ... [the Company] had not paid

them for it'."¹⁷ That night Kwagiulth people stole items from the workplace of the miners. Andrew Muir wrote "how could we be thought to stand and work our work...their annoyances by day and their thieving depredations by night."¹⁸ Clearly the Kwagiulth did not mean them to "stand and work their work." The Kwagiulth resisted the economic threat posed by the miners, and attempted to control their own labour and their land.

In 1850, the Kwagiulth did not have to try very hard to disrupt production by the Fort Rupert miners. Spending months searching for a good coal seam and sinking a mine shaft (work they were not skilled at and did not have the proper tools for), the fort miners had had little opportunity to mine coal,¹⁹ and felt they had been misled by the Company. They were unhappy with their working and living conditions and the treatment they received from the HBC officers at the fort.²⁰ The miners soon began to protest their conditions, engaging in a labour slowdown and a strike, which further increased the Company's dependence on the Kwagiulth mining.²¹ Although the Hudson's Bay Company had anticipated that the miners would produce tens of thousands of tons of coal for the Company to sell, with the general difficulty of work, the strike, and punishments for their job action, the Scottish miners' labour produced almost none. James Douglas wrote in July of 1850 that the miners had "not yet discovered a workable seam, nor turned out a single bushel of coal since their arrival, all the coal we have hitherto sold being the produce of Indian labour."²² While the miners fought to control the conditions of their labour, the Kwagiulth miners had continued to mine the surface coal and sell it to the Company, even providing their labour to load the coal onto ships.²³ In effect, the Kwakwaka'wakw labourers were the miners at Fort Rupert. The strength of their position as miners, and the pressure they were able to exert against the fort's already unproductive mining efforts, led the HBC to negotiate a treaty with the Kwagiulth.²⁴ But this was not the end of conflict for the fort.

In June of 1850, while the miners were still on strike and gaining the support of the other fort workers, the barque *England* arrived to take on coal for its journey to California. Stowed on board the *England* were four sailors who had deserted from the HBC ship *Norman Morison* while at Fort Victoria. The sailors were attempting to reach

California where the gold rush was underway. Probably having heard news of the riches to be gained in California, or of the higher wages paid to sailors on American ships, the deserters had left the restrictive conditions of work on the HBC ship and were heading for what they hoped was a better life.²⁵ Not all of them would make it.

When the barque *England* arrived at Fort Rupert, the miners had been on strike almost continuously for three months, since early April. In addition to their demands for better food and working conditions, the miners requested protection from the Kwagiulth while they were working.²⁶ The continued pressure from the Kwagiulth over the issues of land and resource control had made an impact. The miners were looking for a resolution to their complaints and had appealed to both the HBC and the Governor of the colony in hopes of getting satisfaction.²⁷

With the arrival of the *England* a new solution presented itself. There was no wharf at Beaver Harbour, so the Kwagiulth loaded coal onto ships from their canoes.²⁸ While their ship was loading, the sailors from the *England* visited the fort and conveyed to the miners tales “of the riches of California and the gold fields.”²⁹ These stories, combined with the general unrest among the workers, led them to become “peevish” and “in-subordinate.”³⁰ Strengthened by the new alternative, Andrew Muir and the other miners confronted HBC officer Blenkinsop about their intentions to leave the fort. Blenkinsop wrote:

The Miners with Mr. Muir [Andrew Muir] at their head, came to me in a body this morning and said they would all leave this place in 10 days if they could not get a settlement, their intention being as they told me, to go to Fort Victoria to see the Governor and after the settlement was come to, they had made up their minds to work no more for the Company.³¹

The miners’ threat of desertion threatened the Hudson’s Bay Company’s economic interest in Fort Rupert. The HBC still imagined that coal production at Beaver Harbour could lead to lucrative profits. The Company hoped the fort would become a major supply centre for coal on the west coast of North America,³² but the desertion of workers was a threat to the fort’s existence. With only forty men inside the fort and three thousand Kwagiulths without, the officers feared that desertions would leave the fort “weak and almost defenceless” against a Native attack.³³ In an effort to stop workers from deserting, the officers spoke to Kwagiulth chiefs living near the fort and asked them “not to sell them [the workers] any canoes, or to take them away” from the fort.³⁴ In addition, to prevent escapes, the Company guarded the gates more closely. On the eighteenth of June however, pulling off the first in a series of desertions, four employees from the fort managed to slip away.³⁵

At risk of losing their control over the fort and the coal, the HBC officers took action to maintain their power at Fort Rupert. They understood that any escape from the fort would likely hinge upon the cooperation of the

diggings about 20 miles south of Fort Rupert with Mr. Beardmore who dug and sent 235 tons of coal on board in the space of 12 days. . . .” The miners were on strike when the *Massachusetts* and the *England* arrived to take on coal. Both boats received coal from the fort, coal gathered by Natives. Johnson “Fort Rupert.”

²⁴ Galois *Settlements* 201. Blenkinsop made a treaty with the Kwagiulth in 1850; the following year another treaty was signed between the Kwagiulth and the HBC.

²⁵ In the period between 1846 and 1851 many men deserted the HBC’s service to participate in the gold rush in California or for the higher wages offered in the United States. For example, the HBC signed three-, five- or seven-year contracts with its employees. HBC sailors were paid £4 per month, or else £17 a year. Sailors working for American companies were paid \$100 to \$140 (in American dollars) per month. This was considerably more than what HBC sailors were paid. James Douglas wrote many times of the “extravagance” of this American wage.

²⁶ Barry M. Gough, *Gunboat Frontier: British Maritime Authority and Northwest Coast Indians, 1846-90*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1984); Bowen *Three Dollar Dreams*.

²⁷ The miners had sent a letter to Governor Blanshard listing their complaints and asking for redress. The Governor responded in June by appointing John Sebastian Helmcken as magistrate to hear their complaints.

Notes continue >>>



Left: *Canoe at Fort Rupert.*

²⁸ Helmcken *Reminiscences*. Johnson "Fort Rupert". Patricia Johnson reported that Natives carried the coal out to the ships.

²⁹ Helmcken *Reminiscences*, 308.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Douglas *Fort Victoria Letters*, 103. Letter to Barclay 3 July 1850, containing part of a letter from Blenkinsop.

³² Ormsby, introduction, *Fort Victoria Letters*.

³³ Helmcken *Reminiscences*, 308.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Muir *Private Diary*. These four deserters sailed away that day on the *Massachusetts*, a boat that had arrived to take on coal from the fort.

³⁶ Muir *Private Diary*, 18 June 1850: 116-117.

³⁷ Helmcken *Reminiscences*, 308. In his account, Helmcken reports on what the chiefs agreed to.

³⁸ Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997) Harris suggests that Natives who had an interest in the fort would, in an attempt at "currying favour and presents from officers at the forts," often cooperated with forts by bringing deserters back. (Harris *Resettlement*, 45).

Galois, in *Settlements*, argues that the Kwagiulth valued their role as intermediaries in the trade at the fort and took actions to secure this role.

³⁹ Gough *Gunboat Frontier*; Helmcken *Reminiscences*.

⁴⁰ Helmcken *Reminiscences*.

⁴¹ Capt. Brown of the *England*, quoted in John Sebastian Helmcken, "Vancouver Island Courts - Magistrate Court - Fort Rupert" BC Archives: 17 July report to Blanshard.

⁴² Gough *Gunboat Frontier*; Helmcken *Reminiscences*; Helmcken "Magistrate Court".

⁴³ Helmcken "Magistrate

Kwakwaka'wakw population at and around the fort. On the day of the first desertions, Blenkinsop offered a reward of ten blankets for each man returned.³⁶ The officers attempted to prevent a worker-Native alliance by securing the assurance of the Kwagiulth chiefs that no aid would be provided to the deserting workers. Although the Kwagiulth chiefs promised not to sell the workers any canoes or to take them away they did not promise to prevent deserters from escaping.³⁷ Even as the chiefs agreed to cooperate with the officers, forging a partnership of sorts, they continued working in their own interests. It seems likely that the Kwagiulth agreed to cooperate with the officers because they valued the economic benefits of the fort and their roles as intermediaries in the trade.³⁸ It is also likely that the deserters did not leave the area unnoticed by the three thousand Kwagiulth surrounding the fort. While not assisting them, perhaps because the miners were a threat to Kwagiulth interests, the Kwagiulth also did not attempt to turn them in.

Into the midst of this tension caused by a struggle over the land, the coal, and labour arrived the HBC steamer *Beaver*. Reaching Fort Rupert on 27 June 1850, the *Beaver's* mission was two-fold. First, the captain of the *Beaver* was searching for the four sailors who had deserted from the *Norman Morison* at Fort Victoria and were rumoured to be on board the barque *England*.³⁹ Second, it carried correspondence for the fort, including a letter from Governor Blanshard appointing Dr. Helmcken as magistrate at the fort.⁴⁰ Shortly after the *Beaver* entered the harbour, someone on board the steamer came to the barque *England* and warned the deserters that "they were about to be apprehended."⁴¹ Three of the deserters, afraid of being arrested, then slipped overboard and fled in a canoe.⁴²

Though they initially camped on an island in the harbour, receiving food and communication from other sailors, they apparently became scared by the interest of the Kwagiulth and fled their hideout.⁴³ Helmcken wrote :

A day or two afterwards I told Capt. Brown [of the *England*] and the carpenter to get these men on board ... [as they] were no longer wanted.... He promised to do so. I have no doubt that these men were afterwards supplied with victuals by the ship's crew; but possibly did not trust the declaration that they were no longer wanted.⁴⁴

The officers at the fort were aware of the sail-

ors' location in the harbour because Kwagiulth informers told Blenkinsop that they had seen "white men upon the beach of [the] island."⁴⁵ After reporting the location of the men to the fort, the Kwagiulth then went at night into the camp of the sailors and stole a paddle to present as evidence to the fort officers. Already nervous about being apprehended, and likely wary about their unfamiliar surroundings, the theft of the paddle while they were sleeping may have heightened their fear further. A few days following this incident Captain Brown reported to Helmcken that the sailors "had been seen by Indians and thinking they would be apprehended had taken a canoe and gone up the straits to await the ships coming."⁴⁶ They had fled in the direction of the Nahwitti.

On the evening of the second of July, nine days after delivering their ultimatum to Blenkinsop, the miners of Fort Rupert deserted.⁴⁷ John MacGregor, John Smith, Andrew Muir, Archibald Muir, Robert Muir and John Muir, Jr. escaped the fort and made their way in a canoe to Nahwitti territory. John MacGregor and John Smith both left their wives behind. When Helmcken discovered the miners were missing he immediately suspected that they would attempt to find passage on the barque *England* still in Beaver Harbour. He wrote to Captain Brown on the third of July that "it is supposed that these men whom you are well acquainted with, are now hiding upon the coast waiting the arrival of your vessel to obtain passage to California," and threatened charges if he took "deserters from this service."⁴⁸

Captain Brown responded to the letter on the sixth of July, declaring that he did not know the miners, and that he did not knowingly have them on board his vessel.⁴⁹ He then invited Helmcken to search his vessel that afternoon, as he was ready to depart Beaver Harbour.

The miners were not only receiving help from the barque *England*, they had also forged an alliance with the Nahwitti that allowed them to escape the fort. Camped across from a Nahwitti village, awaiting the arrival of the *England* as she sailed north, around the tip of Vancouver Island, the miners received aid and kindness from the Nahwitti. The miners waited seven days before the *England* passed Shushartie Bay and they were able to board her. During that time Andrew Muir visited the Nahwitti village, where he was seen on the ninth of July by Linecoux, an interpreter



at the fort.⁵⁰ He reported that Muir “told him all the miners were safe and encamped opposite Sucharti; that the Newittees were kind to them; that they would not return to the fort.”⁵¹ Similarly, Charles Beardmore, the fort clerk, reported having seen the miners during a visit to the Nahwitti village in July.⁵² Nancy, a Nahwitti chief, gave Beardmore a letter he was to deliver for Andrew Muir. The letter, addressed to the second mate of the barque *England*, clearly shows that the miners were receiving help from the Nahwitti. Muir wrote:

Dear Bill: “Oh but your lang o coming” here we are knocking about always expecting you, but have not yet been so fortunate, last night Nancy came to us and informed us that Dr. was on board on the scent so we are under his [Chief Nancy’s] care at present, he knows all about our whereabouts, he [Helmcken] is so dull the Dr. I hope you will get quit of that plague you have on board before you come this length. Our provisions are at an end nearly. Send back word with Nancy giving your advice and inform the mate and Captain too. I have directed to you as Nancy is most familiar with you, we have heard various reports about the women, let us know will you. This is sad knocking about but that is nothing if we can make a good termination of the affair.⁵³

Chief Nancy and the Nahwitti helped the

miners with more than just communication, kindness, and a safe place to stay while waiting for the *England*. In his inquiry about the wives of John Smith and John MacGregor, left behind at Fort Rupert, Muir was attempting to find out more than their general condition. The women were to seek passage on the barque *England* for themselves, and to meet up with their husbands as the ship moved through Nahwitti territory.⁵⁴ Denied their request for “permission to leave for California on the Barque England,” the women deserted the fort and made their own way on board the *England*.⁵⁵

In order to get on the ship, or to avoid detection once on board, the women needed the Nahwitti’s help. Helmcken was making regular visits to the ship looking for deserters from the fort. On the afternoon that the women boarded the ship, Helmcken had been on board for over twenty-four hours and he had given no indication that he was about to leave.⁵⁶ In order to prevent the discovery of the women on board the *England*, the Nahwitti created a diversion that caused Helmcken to leave the ship.⁵⁷ A group of Nahwitti arrived with a message for the doctor, reporting that “some women had been killed by a tree falling at the coal field and others were wounded.”⁵⁸ Helmcken left immediately to “see whether any assistance could be rendered the un-

Above: *Fort Rupert*.

Court”; Helmcken *Reminiscences*.

⁴⁴ Helmcken *Reminiscences*, 310.

⁴⁵ Helmcken “Magistrate Court” 7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

⁴⁷ Muir *Private Diary*; Helmcken “Magistrate Court”; and others.

⁴⁸ Helmcken letter to Captain Brown, quoted in “Magistrate Court,” 3 July 1850.

⁴⁹ Captain Brown letter to Helmcken, quoted in “Magistrate Court,” 2 July 1850.

⁵⁰ Helmcken *Reminiscences*.

⁵¹ *Ibid* 313; Helmcken “Magistrate Court,” 9 July 1850.

⁵² *Ibid* 318; Helmcken “Magistrate Court,” 13 July 1850.

⁵³ Muir quoted in Helmcken “Magistrate Court,” 17 July 1850.

⁵⁴ Helmcken does not realize this but his report reveals it.

⁵⁵ Helmcken “Magistrate

Court." The women left by escorting to the ship a woman who was authorized to leave, and simply did not return to the fort.

⁵⁶ Helmcken "Magistrate Court."

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Helmcken "Magistrate Court," 7 July 1850.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 7 July 1850.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 16 July 1850.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Helmcken *Reminiscences*.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Helmcken "Magistrate Court," 16 July 1850.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 8 July 1850.

⁶⁸ Helmcken "Magistrate Court," 13 July 1850. This is the initial report given by Beardmore on 13 July. Just over a month later he retracts this story, saying it was false, and gives another version of the events.

⁶⁹ Helmcken *Reminiscences*; Helmcken "Magistrate Court."

⁷⁰ Helmcken "Magistrate Court," 9 July 1850.

⁷¹ Beardmore, quoted in Helmcken "Magistrate Court," 13 July 1850.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Beardmore, quoted in Helmcken *Reminiscences*, 318. This is Beardmore's corrected statement, given 20 August, to Helmcken.

⁷⁴ Helmcken reported that

fortunates and to remain at the fort in case any disturbance might arise from this untoward accident."⁵⁹ The actions of the Nahwitti allowed the women to remain undetected and to therefore meet up with their husbands when the *England* passed through Nahwitti territory at Shushartie Bay. Reflecting on the incident a few days later, Helmcken wrote:

This report it is now said was a mere subterfuge...the report of the people being killed at the coal field...turned out to be only one or two wounded by a tree falling during a gale at night. The tree had been partly cut through and a fire lighted against it, and the Indians sleeping close by when it fell.⁶⁰

It is unclear whether the tree was intentionally felled or if it was simply a fortuitous event, which the Nahwitti were able to use to their advantage. In either case the effect was the same. The passage of the women was secured through the cooperation of the Nahwitti.

But the Nahwitti relationship with HBC employees was not purely cooperative. At the same time as the doctor received a message about the accident at the fort, Chief Nancy, also on board the ship, received a message that caused him to also immediately leave the ship.⁶¹ Nancy was told that "his wife or some relation was sick."⁶² Speculating about the message later, Helmcken reported that this message was also "subterfuge in order to get him [Nancy] and all the Newitties out of the vessel."⁶³ He later suspected that Nancy was actually receiving, or about to receive, a message about the deaths of the three sailors who had deserted from the *Norman Morison*.⁶⁴

The sailors had paddled north into Nahwitti territory, likely hoping to reconnect with the barque *England* as it left Beaver Harbour. They got as far as twenty-five miles from the fort, and one or two miles from where the miners were camped, before they were killed.⁶⁵ There are many different versions of what happened to the sailors. The Kwagiulth, who disliked the Nahwitti and "look[ed] upon them as dogs," were quick to report that "the Newitty's committed the murder."⁶⁶ Upon being questioned by fort employees, the Nahwitti professed their innocence and "declared the [Kwagiulth] report to be false."⁶⁷ The Nahwitti may also have made a report that claimed that northern invaders, the "Hyders or Sabessa men had committed the murder."⁶⁸ However, as a fourth report was given testifying to the Nahwitti's guilt, and as the Nahwitti knew



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the location of the sailors' bodies, had the sailors' clothes, and later offered compensation to the fort for their murder, it is likely that the Nahwitti were indeed responsible for the men's deaths.⁶⁹

The most likely chain of events is that some of the Nahwitti killed the sailors in an act of self-defence and a desire to maintain status. Lineous, who was sent out by the fort to discover who had murdered the men, reported that "the Newitte people had supplied them [the sailors] with food but not receiving any present, they endeavoured to rob them of some clothes, which the men resisted, the Indians then shot them and also stabbed."⁷⁰ In the report that suggested that northern invaders had committed the murder, the Nahwitti stated that the northerners had approached the sailors and invited them into their canoe.⁷¹ The sailors became aggressive, "took an axe [and] flourished it in the air" and "took up a big stone, pitched it into the canoe and smashed it."⁷² A third report stated that:

some Newittes had been out hunting. On their return they fell in with a canoe containing three white men. Wishing to show them w[h]ere the six other (miners) deserters were, they approached. The white men took to land, the Newittes followed. One of the white men brandished an axe in a threatening manner... whilst another took a big stone, flung it at and smashed the Indians' canoe. The Newittes became infuriated, fired, killed one, the others took to the bush, were followed, shot and stabbed likewise, and then stripped and hidden in hollow trees; one man sunk in the ocean.⁷³

Given the similarity of these three reports, and the aid the Nahwitti had given the miners, it is possible to reconstruct a likely combination of facts.

Within each of these reports lies evidence of self-defence. In all of the accounts, the sailors are

reported as having acted in a threatening manner toward their killers. When this information is combined with evidence about the Nahwitti's friendliness towards whites and their partnership with the miners, another version of the events seems likely.⁷⁴ For example: Some of the Nahwitti came upon the sailors and attempted to help them find the miners, who were within one or two miles of the sailors' location. The sailors, frightened of the Nahwitti, and of being

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caught, paddled to a nearby island to escape. The Nahwitti followed and attempted to communicate with them. The sailors then became aggressive, threatened the Nahwitti with an axe, and threw a rock at a canoe, destroying it. The Nahwitti became angry and attempted to defend their bodies and their honour. They killed the three sailors, drowning one in the water, and took the clothing from the men before leaving. This version accounts for the deaths of the sailors, suggests an explanation for the Nahwitti possessing the sailors' clothing, and provides a motivation for the Nahwitti killing the sailors.

Just as the Nahwitti had a motivation for killing the sailors, they also had a motivation for forging a partnership with the miners and helping them to escape the fort. The Nahwitti and the Kwagiulth had a history of rivalry.⁷⁵ The establishment of Fort Rupert in Kwagiulth territory further intensified this competition,⁷⁶ and the Nahwitti's efforts to help the miners desert the fort may have been motivated by their rivalry with the Kwagiulth. For the first thirty years of the nineteenth century, "Newitts," located in Shushartie Bay Nahwitti territory, had been a primary fur trade centre on Vancouver Island.⁷⁷ As long as the trading centre had been within Nahwitti territory they had been able to control the trade to some extent, and may have seen their relative status and wealth increase. Upset at their loss as the primary trading centre, the Nahwitti

may have aided the miners in an attempt to hurt the fort, and therefore, damage the Kwagiulth's power. The act may have been motivated by a desire to protest against their loss of power and control in the trade with Europeans.

This inter-group rivalry between the Kwagiulth and the Nahwitti also influenced the Kwagiulth's actions during the conflict of 1850. The Kwagiulth were quick to assert that the Nahwitti had committed the murder.⁷⁸ Helmcken, aware of the conflict between the Nahwitti and the Kwagiulth, placed little faith in their report. He wrote: "they cannot know excepting from report. Our Indians [the Kwagiulths] look upon them as dogs and I think are jealous of them, so that little dependence can be placed upon their evidence."⁷⁹ Following the reports, by the Kwagiulth and fort employees, of the Nahwitti's guilt, the Kwagiulth volunteered to wage war on the Nahwitti for the fort.⁸⁰ Helmcken stated that "the Quockaulds [Kwagiulth] ask daily whether they shall go and fight the Newittes for us."⁸¹ The Kwagiulth seem to have attempted to use the incident to further their struggle with the Nahwitti for status, power and control.

[They] offered, almost importuned us to allow them to go and make war upon the Newittes.... They were told the white men would revenge themselves ere long in their own way, but the warriors could not under-

Above: *Remains of Fort Rupert in 1929. Opposite page recent photo at the same site.*

he could "hardly believe the Newittes committed the murder, because they [had] always been very civil to the whites, are a very small tribe and must have known these men, because so many had been on board Capt. Brown's vessel coming through the straits here and whilst lying in harbour. Moreover it is to their interest to keep friends with the whites and also they have hitherto been afraid to offend them. If they murdered these men why should they not have treated the miners in the same manner? They were living close by." Helmcken "Magistrate Court," July 16th, 1850.

⁷⁵ *Galois Settlements.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

Notes continue >>>

⁷⁸ Helmcken "Magistrate Court," 16 July 1850.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Helmcken

Reminiscences, 313.

⁸¹ Helmcken "Magistrate Court," 16 July 1850.

⁸² Helmcken *Reminiscences*, 313.

⁸³ Helmcken "Magistrate Court."

⁸⁴ Helmcken "Magistrate Court," 16 July 1850.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Gough *Gunboat Frontier*.

⁸⁷ Gough *Gunboat Frontier*; Helmcken *Reminiscences*, and others.

⁸⁸ Gough *Gunboat Frontier*. The HBC and fur traders had used such force before to impose their will upon Aboriginal people on the Northwest Coast, or to punish Natives. For a discussion of the use of force by the HBC in New Caledonia see Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia*. On the subject of vengeance and punishment by fur traders against Natives see John Phillip Reid, "Principles of Vengeance: Fur Trappers, Indians, and Retaliation for Homicide in the Transboundary North American West," *Western Historical Quarterly* (1993): 21-43.

⁸⁹ Helmcken *Reminiscences*, 320.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 321.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*; Gough *Gunboat Frontier*, 43.

⁹² Gough *Gunboat Frontier*, 43.

⁹³ Gough *Gunboat Frontier*; Helmcken *Reminiscences*, and others.

⁹⁴ Gough *Gunboat Frontier*, 43.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Gough *Gunboat Frontier*, 43.

⁹⁶ Helmcken *Reminiscences*, 321.

⁹⁷ Gough *Gunboat Frontier*.

⁹⁸ Helmcken *Reminiscences*; Gough *Gunboat Frontier*.

⁹⁹ Gough *Gunboat Frontier*, 44.

¹⁰⁰ Helmcken *Reminiscences*; Gough *Gunboat Frontier*; Galois *Settlements*.

¹⁰¹ Helmcken *Reminiscences*, 322.

stand why we should wait, as they were quite ready and eager for the fray....⁸²

The Kwagiulth were clearly opportunistic in the death of the sailors and more interested in attacking their rivals than in helping the white men of the fort seek their kind of justice.

Although the officers at the fort had assured the Kwagiulth that they would revenge themselves in their own way, in truth the conditions at the fort prohibited them from acting. The officers offered a reward for the surrender of the murderers, but did not take immediate action against the Nahwitti whom they suspected.⁸³ In a letter to Governor Blanshard Helmcken explained: "we cannot go to war, because the distance is great and our men too few to protect the Fort and fight also, even if they were willing so to do."⁸⁴ The HBC's lack of control over workers within the fort weakened their relationship with Natives outside the fort. In an appeal for help from Governor Blanshard, Helmcken wrote that

if we make no demonstration the Indians will lose all respect for us and make an attack upon our fort....The Indians well know the disaffected state of this fort and what with this and their riches have become saucy and probably should any disturbance arise with them they would attack us, the Indians being 3,000 in number and our men between 30 and 40 it is not very difficult to imagine who would gain the victory.⁸⁵

These comments captured the attention of the governor, and led him to request aid from a military ship.⁸⁶

In October of 1850 the English corvette, HMS *Daedalus*, arrived at Fort Rupert with the Governor on board.⁸⁷ The voyage was supposed to be one of "inspection and inquiry" but it became the first use of military force by the colonial government against an Aboriginal community on Vancouver Island.⁸⁸ Before force was used to capture the murderers, Helmcken approached the Nahwitti village with the fort interpreter, constable, and six Natives, to demand the surrender of the murderers. He reported that "the chiefs said they could not, but were willing to pay the value of the murdered men in blankets, furs or any goods, according to their (Indian) custom."⁸⁹ Unwilling to accept this offer, the white men "determined to send armed boats to seize the murderers."⁹⁰

A few days later "three armed boats from the *Daedalus*" were sent to Nahwitti.⁹¹ Their goal was

to arrest the murderers or take chiefs as hostages and, if that did not work, to attack and burn the camp.⁹² When the armed boats arrived, however, they found the Nahwitti village deserted.⁹³ The commander of the boats then ordered the village burned.⁹⁴ Of the destruction Blanshard wrote: "the Indians decamped with the greatest part of their property, the remainder was burnt with the houses."⁹⁵ The *Daedalus* then returned south.⁹⁶ Governor Blanshard, convinced that the murderers would not be surrendered without the use of more force, and believing the Company and the settlers to be in danger, determined he would return to Fort Rupert with another military ship.⁹⁷

In July of 1851, almost one year after the death of the sailors, HMS *Daphne* arrived at Fort Rupert.⁹⁸ Armed boats, containing "sixty sailors and marines" were sent out from the *Daphne*.⁹⁹ Since the destruction of their village in the fall of 1850 the Nahwitti had relocated to a stronger defensive position.¹⁰⁰ When the boats arrived, the Nahwitti attempted to defend themselves. A gun battle broke out and at least two Nahwitti were killed and three injured.¹⁰¹ According to reports, the Nahwitti then fled into the woods around their village. The men from the *Daphne* burned their village and destroyed their property. Following these attacks the Nahwitti communicated to officers at the fort that they would surrender the murderers. A short time later some of the Nahwitti arrived at the fort with the bodies of three men reported to be the killers. With the surrender of the murderers, the Nahwitti incident ended.

Even while the Nahwitti villages were being destroyed by white men, the Nahwitti maintained a level of control. In the confrontation over the deaths of the sailors, the power of the Nahwitti can be seen, not in their ability to win the battle, but manifest in their actions.¹⁰² When Helmcken approached the Nahwitti and demanded the surrender of the murderers, the Nahwitti offered their own solution to the conflict: the payment in blankets for the dead men. The practice of offering blankets as compensation for a wrong was a common practice amongst Northwest Coast Aboriginal peoples. Helmcken wrote:

it shows too how quarrels were settled Indian fashion by payment of damages. The Indian idea of law – and indeed it is their law – of payment applies even to persons killed.... This Indian law was often acted on at Fort Rupert

and suited very well – none other would – or could – have been put in force.¹⁰³

Their offer of compensation rejected, it is probable that the Nahwitti recognized that military force would be used against their village. Helmcken, when refusing their offer of the blankets, had told the Nahwitti that “as they had refused peaceably to surrender the murderers force would have to be used and perhaps many would thereby suffer.”¹⁰⁴ In an act to protect their lives, and the belongings they could salvage, the Nahwitti fled their village before the military attack, leaving the white men a deserted village to burn. When the Nahwitti rebuilt their village they chose a location that could be better defended.¹⁰⁵ Finally, when the second attack destroyed their village and property, and resulted in the deaths of two Nahwitti, the Nahwitti expressed their power within their own community by surrendering the murderers. By capturing and killing the murderers the Nahwitti, as much as was possible, ended the conflict on their own terms. They also ensured that the captured murderers were men they were willing to give up.¹⁰⁶ Upon surrender of the murderers to the fort, the Nahwitti claimed the reward offered for their capture.¹⁰⁷

The events at Beaver Harbour in 1850 are important to the early history of British Columbia. They present a snapshot of power dynamics in the new colony, and in doing so dispel old myths. Neither the colonial government nor the Hudson’s Bay Company held the balance of power at Fort Rupert. Instead, the Kwakwaka’wakw maintained their dominance and the white settlers were subject to a larger struggle for power between the Kwagiulth and the Nahwitti. Although the HBC and the colony had some influence, they were forced to engage in a struggle for control and ownership with the Kwakwaka’wakw people.

It is in this struggle for power that the most



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interesting history emerges, a history that is not unnaturally divided along lines of ethnicity. In the negotiations between the Company, the Kwagiulth, the Nahwitti, and the miners, innovative and creative resistance often won out. The Kwagiulth used direct action to stop the miners and the Company from stealing their coal. They successfully negotiated payment for their land, and won their demand for payment for the “produce of their exertions.”¹⁰⁸ The Nahwitti forged an alliance with the deserting miners, allowing them to undermine the strength of the fort and therefore to strike at the wealth and status of their enemy. The miners engaged in work slowdowns and a strike. They eventually formed a partnership with the Nahwitti that allowed them and their families to escape to California. Although the Company, and the colonial government, used coercive measures against these groups, the miners, Kwagiulth, and Nahwitti were able to maintain their agency, often getting the better of the HBC. ~

Above: John Muir family and friends at Sooke BC.

¹⁰² Bruce Stadfeld, *Manifestations of Power: Native Response to Settlement in Nineteenth Century British Columbia*, (Burnaby: MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1993).

¹⁰³ Helmcken *Reminiscences*, 142-143.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid* 320.

¹⁰⁵ Galois *Settlements*.

¹⁰⁶ It is unclear from the historical record whether the men surrendered were indeed the killers. Helmcken notes that at least one of the men was suspected to be a slave of the Nahwitti. He wrote: “it is said one with light coloured hair escaped, and that a slave was killed and substituted for him and used in his place.” Helmcken *Reminiscences*, 323.

¹⁰⁷ Helmcken *Reminiscences*, 323. It is not clear whether the reward was actually paid them.

¹⁰⁸ Galois *Settlements*, 201.