



LIḠWILDAḐW RESEARCH CENTRE

We are continuing regular newsletter updates to share exciting history from the Archives with the communities. Some of you know all about this history but others do not, so it is a pleasure to introduce V.2, Edition five of; **Tales from the Vault.**

Although this isn't Liḡwildaḑw history, it's something I came across recently and found interesting, especially because it seems to be a piece of history that isn't widely known. Given how close it happened to our region and how it connects to early colonial pressures and gold rush movement through Indigenous territories, I thought others might find it interesting too.

The Fraser Canyon War: The untold story of B.C.'s founding.



Noon on the Fraser, 1858

In the spring of 1858, the Fraser Canyon became the site of a major conflict between Indigenous Nations and thousands of miners arriving in search of gold. The Nl̓eʔkəpmx (Interior Salish) people of Thompson River had already been mining gold before the arrival of outsiders. When news of gold spread south, large groups of American miners quickly moved into Indigenous territories, often ignoring colonial authorities and Indigenous land rights.

Some miners traveled in organized companies of 250 men carrying U.S. flags. Over 8,000 came north through the Okanagan corridor, where the Okanagan Nation and their allies attempted to block the routes. Others came by the Fraser River, with many deliberately bypassing Fort Victoria to avoid paying mining license fees.



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Tensions rose as miners repeatedly disrespected Indigenous lands and communities. At Okanagan Lake, a group of miners raided an Indigenous camp, destroyed their food supplies, killed unarmed people, and forced survivors to flee to East into Blackfoot (Cree) territory.

Fighting broke out in mining camps near the Nicoamen River and along a riverbank known as China Bar. Miners claimed that 26 of their own had been killed by Indigenous warriors, though some of these deaths likely occurred during river travel. In response, American miners attacked Nl̓eʔkəpmx villages, killing at least 36 people, including respected chiefs.

Some miners formed militias. The Whatcom Guards, led by Captain Graham, openly declared their intention to kill every Indigenous person they encountered. At the same time, another militia, the Pike Guards, led by Captain Henry Snyder, aimed to negotiate peace rather than continue the violence. As Snyder's group moved upriver toward present-day Lytton, he repeatedly urged Graham to stop his attacks.

Snyder eventually met with Chief Sexpinlhemx (Spintlum) and other Nl̓eʔkəpmx leaders on August 22, 1858. They negotiated a peace agreement that allowed miners to continue working in the goldfields while stopping further bloodshed. After the agreement, Snyder sent a white flag downriver to confirm the peace with other militia groups. Captain Graham was seen receiving the flag, scoffing at it and casting it aside, refusing to accept the truce. Soon thereafter, Graham and his lieutenant were assassinated by - many believe - Indigenous warriors watching the camp who had witnessed Graham's rejection of peace.

At Fort Hope, some miners gathered to call for a larger war, alarmed by exaggerated reports of white deaths on the newly opened Harrison-Lillooet trail. Governor James Douglas responded by traveling upriver, the visible presence of British forces discouraging some miners from continuing the conflict. To the miners, Douglas firmly asserted his authority, his arrival signaled that British law would be enforced. However, the Fraser Canyon War exposed the growing tensions between Indigenous Nations, American miners, and British colonial authorities.

The leadership of Chief Sexpinlhemx and peacemaking efforts of Snyder, combined with Douglas's intervention, helped prevent further escalation. Still, the Fraser Canyon War remains a significant event in our province's history. It was one of the earliest major conflicts between First Nations and newcomers in the region and was closely tied to the drawing of modern borders. Beneath these colonial borders, however, questions of land ownership, Indigenous sovereignty, and resource control remain unsettled. Issues that continue to hold relevance today.

Source note:

This summary draws from a combination of archival accounts, including writings from Governor James Douglas and newspaper correspondent Donald Fraser, as well as scholarly work on the Fraser Canyon War. Specific incidents were compiled from historical records, court testimonies, and recent interpretive works by BC historians and museums. Interpretations of militia actions and peace negotiations are supported by documented encounters between Captain Henry Snyder, Chief Spintlum, and colonial officials in August 1858.