

## Overview of the Fraser River War

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The origins of the Fraser Canyon War can be traced to the 1850's when the Nlaka'pamux people of the Thompson and Fraser Rivers began selling gold to the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). James Douglas wanted to keep the discovery of gold secret so that the HBC could profit from the gold trade, and to avoid the possibility of large numbers of American miners moving into the British-held mainland. Since the British had not formally colonized or populated the territory, Douglas worried that the United States would try to annex the land once American miners had moved in.

Douglas' worst fears came true in the mid-1850's when rumours of gold began to circulate and miners began to stream across the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel into the mainland. In July 1857, Nlaka'pamux people expelled gold miners because they were taking gold from their land, and because they worried that mining would have a negative effect on the annual salmon run that provided their principal food supply. In letters to the British Colonial Office Douglas expressed concern that the miners may try to attack and expel the Nlaka'pamux. Douglas urged the British government to take steps to establish its presence and authority in the region.

Between 1857-1858 between 25,000-30,000 Americans and Europeans poured into British Columbia from California and the Oregon Territory. As the miners gained more and more of a majority, they drove the Nlaka'pamux from the gold bars on the river. To the miners, the Fraser Canyon was an area inhabited by "savages" far beyond the reach and power of the government in Victoria. In June 1858 a conflict nearly erupted at Hill's Bar when a group of Nlaka'pamux outnumbered a group of miners and threatened to wipe them out. After visiting the area to investigate the conflict, Douglas concluded that the main cause was that the Nlaka'pamux were jealous of the large quantities of gold being taken by the miners from their territory.

To avoid further conflict, Douglas appointed two officials to represent the authority of the crown on the mainland. By July 1858 Yale was a lawless town of tents and shacks, with a population of 5,000 miners, traders, and gamblers. There were just three government officials in the Fraser Canyon: two revenue collectors and a justice of the peace at Hill's Bar. As a result, the miners managed themselves and their own dealings with Natives, organized meetings, elected officers on individual bars, and applied and administered their own rules.

Tension between First Nations groups and miners increased in July 1858. Twenty-five miners travelling through the Okanagan Valley to the Fraser Canyon stole and destroyed provisions at an Aboriginal camp, and then ambushed unarmed Aboriginals returning to camp the next day, killing an estimated 10-12 and injuring equally as many. The Nlaka'pamux had many problems with the miners harassing the women, trespassing on their land, excluding them from mining for gold,

destruction of their property, and overall mistreatment. The 1858 salmon run was significantly less than other years, which the Nlaka'pamux blamed on the mining operations.

The violence began when Nlaka'pamux sent downstream the headless bodies of two French miners who had allegedly attacked a Nlaka'pamux woman. The miners quickly organized six volunteer militias. Captain Snyder of the New York Pike Guard militia convinced the miners that the war should be one of pacification, not extermination. Snyder proposed using a large show of armed force to pressure the Nlaka'pamux into a peace settlement with the miners.

On August 9, the miners' militias left for Spuzzum where 3000 miners had set up camp after fleeing from the Nlaka'pamux. The militias began moving upstream and sent reports to the Nlaka'pamux at Lytton that they wanted to make peace. According to reports, on August 14 the miners fought hostile Nlaka'pamux, killing nine, wounding others, and taking three prisoners. As the troops were returning to Spuzzum, volunteer soldiers burned three Native villages. One miner reported that a company of miners found several Indian camps and "just killed everything, men, women, and children." The heaviest miner casualties may have occurred when miners camped out for the night panicked in the dark and began firing at each other.

Aboriginals from all over the upper Thompson assembled at Lytton to decide on their response to the miners militias. The Okanagan, Shuswap, Bonaparte, Savona and Kamloops bands promised to fight if war was declared. One of the chiefs named Spintlum made an eloquent speech that convinced many to pursue peace. If Spintlum had not urged peace it is probable that many First Nations from the Fraser Canyon and the interior might have gone to war.

Captain Snyder arrived at Lytton to meet with 27 chiefs gathered from throughout the traditional lands of the Nlaka'pamux. Snyder offered the chiefs an ultimatum: either accept peace or face the prospect of being driven from their lands. Some historians believe the chiefs had already decided to settle for peace before Snyder arrived. Snyder concluded several oral and written peace treaties with the chiefs representing over 2,000 Aboriginal people.

Although the British Government had created the Crown Colony of British Columbia on August 2, 1858, there was little formal government presence in the Fraser Canyon. After receiving reports about conflict in the Fraser Canyon, Douglas raised a force of 20 Royal Marines and 15 Royal Engineers. He set out from Victoria on August 30 and arrived at Yale on September 13.

Douglas immediately met with both Aboriginal people and miners to investigate the conflict. He reprimanded the miners for ignoring British law and authority in the region, but was assured by the miners that they would follow the Queen's law in the future. He met with the Nlaka'pamux and guaranteed them reserves in the Fraser Canyon and prohibited the sale of alcohol to all Aboriginal peoples. Douglas also ordered townsites to be drawn up for Yale and Hope, and appointed a chief of police and five constables. With his business in the Fraser Canyon complete, Douglas returned to Victoria on September 20.

Source: Lindsay Gibson, University of British Columbia, Unpublished account, February 2010.