

Core Documents: the Shooting of Thomas Williams

Document #1: Douglas reports on the shooting

Governor James Douglas outlines his response to the shooting of Thomas Williams in a despatch sent to the British Colonial Office.

“Thomas Williams a British subject settled in the Cowegin [Cowichan] country, was brought here this morning in, it is feared, a fatally wounded state, having been shot through the arm and chest, by "Tathlasut" an Indian of the Saumina [Somenos] Tribe who inhabit the upper Cowegin District. Thomas Williams is one of that class of men known in this country as "squatters", that is persons who have not purchased and therefore have no legal claim to the land they occupy, and though I have always made it a rule to discountenance [disapprove] the irregular settlement of the country, yet it is essential for the security of all, that those persons should be protected.

I propose in the first place to demand the surrender of "Tathlasut" from the Chiefs of his Tribe, and should we not succeed in securing him by that means, the only alternative left, will be to march a force into the country for that purpose. The squadron being now here, a sufficient force can with the co-operation of Admiral Bruce be raised without difficulty, and I feel assured that he will render every assistance in his power.

I have only further to assure you that I will do every thing in my power to avoid collisions with the natives, and not push the matter further than is necessary to secure the peace of the country.”

Source: Colonial Despatches, Douglas to Labouchere, 9709, CO 305/7, p. 92; received 23 October, No. 20, Victoria Vancouver's Island, 22th August 1856.

Document #2: Douglas describes apprehending the suspect

Governor James Douglas describes the measures he took to apprehend the suspect in a despatch sent to the British Colonial Office.

“The troops marched some distance into the Cowegin [Cowichan] valley, through thick bush and almost impenetrable forest. Knowing that a mere physical force demonstration would never accomplish the apprehension of the culprit, I offered friendship and protection to all the natives except the culprit, and such as aided him or were found opposing the ends of justice. That announcement had the desired effect of securing the neutrality of the greater part of the Tribe who were present, and after we had taken possession of three of their largest villages the surrender of the culprit followed.

The expeditionary force was composed of about 400 of Her Majesty's seamen and marines under Commander Mathew Connolly and 18 Victoria Voltigeurs, commanded by M^r M^cDonald of the Hudson's Bay Company's service. My own personal staff consisted of M^r Joseph M^cKay and M^r Richard Golledge, also of the Hudson's Bay Company's service, and those active and zealous officers were always near me, in every danger.

In marching through the thickets of the Cowegin valley the Victoria Voltigeurs were, with my own personal staff, thrown well in advance of the seamen and marines, formed in single file, to scour the woods, and guard against surprise, as I could not fail to bear in mind the repeated disasters, which, last winter, befel the American Army, while marching through the jungle against an enemy much inferior in point of numbers and spirit, to the Tribes we had to encounter. . . .

I may also remark for the information of Her Majesty's Government that not a single casualty befel [occurred to] the expeditionary force during its brief campaign, nor was a single Indian, the criminal excepted, personally injured, while their property was carefully respected.

The expedition remained at Cowegin two days after the execution of the offender, to re-establish friendly relations with the Cowegin Tribe, and we succeeded in that object, to my entire satisfaction.

I greatly admired the beauty and fertility of the Cowegin valley, which contains probably not less than 200,000 acres of arable land. I shall however address you on that subject, in a future communication.”

Source: Colonial Despatches, Douglas to Labouchere, 10152, CO 305/7, p. 94; received 8 November, No. 21, Victoria Vancouver's Island, 6th September 1856.

Document #3: The Cowichan's response to the trial

History professor Barry Gough, Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and Life Member of the Association of Canadian Studies, has written many critically acclaimed books about the history of the Pacific Coast for the past four decades.

“In the forenoon of the next day [after the capture], a court of six officers and six petty officers tried the offender. After a full and patient investigation of the known and substantiated details of the case, the court returned a verdict of guilty. The governor summarily ordered him hanged, and he was executed in the evening. The British took care to conduct the trial and execution on the very spot where the crime had been committed – at one of the majestic oaks that still grace Somenos fields. Captain Macdonald, who was present, recalled that the culprit was hanged before his tribe who, nonetheless, showed ‘many indications that their approval was withheld [disagreed] and that they yielded only to force [of the military expedition].’ For reasons unknown, the natives did not regard the capture, trial and punishment with the same measure of acceptance as the authorities.”

Source: Barry Gough, *Gunboat Frontier: British Maritime Authority and the Northwest Coast Indians, 1846-90* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), p. 66.

Document #4: Reaction from the Colonial Office

An official in the British Colonial Office in London offers an assessment of Douglas' response to the shooting of Thomas Williams in a despatch sent to Douglas.

“I have to acknowledge the receipt of your Despatches N^{os} 20 and 21 of the 22^d of August and the 6th of September last, reporting the capture and execution of an Indian found guilty of attempting the life of a British Settler in the Cowegin Country.

In the present instance I have no hesitation in approving your proceedings, which the peculiar and aggravated circumstances of the case appear to have justified, but I would remind you that the extreme measure of sending an Armed Force against the Indian Tribes must be resorted to with great caution, and only in a case which urgently demands the adoption of such a course.

With reference to what you say of the conduct of Commander Connolly, I have to inform you that I have sent copies of your Despatches to the Board of Admiralty.”

Source: Colonial Despatches, Labouchere to Douglas, NAC, RG7, G8C/1, p. 497, No. 20, Downing Street, 13th November 1856.

Document #5: Douglas describes the trial

Governor James Douglas describes the trial and reaction of the Cowichan in a despatch sent to the British Colonial Office.

“I have to announce, for the information, of Her Majesty's Government my return, this day, from "Cowegin" [Cowichan], with the expeditionary force placed at my disposal by Rear Admiral Bruce for service in the Cowegin country.

....He was tried before a special court convened on the spot, and was found guilty of "maiming Thomas Williams with intent to murder," an offence which the statute 1st Victoria chapt. 83 section 2. considers felony, and provides that the offender should suffer death.

He was accordingly sentenced to be hanged, and the sentence was carried into effect, near the spot where the crime was committed, in the presence of his Tribe, upon whose minds, the solemnity [seriousness and formality] of the proceedings, and the execution of the criminal, were calculated to make a deep impression.

The Cowegin Tribe can bring into the field about 1400 warriors but nearly 1000 of those were engaged upon an expedition to Fraser's River, when we entered their country. About 400 warriors still remained in the valley, nevertheless no attempt was made, except a feeble effort, by some of his personal friends, to rescue the prisoner or to resist the operation of the law.”

Source: Colonial Despatches, Douglas to Labouchere, 10152, CO 305/7, p. 94; received 8 November, No. 21, Victoria Vancouver's Island, 6th September 1856.

Document #6: Douglas justifies his actions

Governor James Douglas responds to the British Colonial Office's assessment of his response to the shooting of Williams in a despatch.

“2. I trust I may be permitted to make a few explanatory observations, in reference to the remarks in your Despatch on the subject of the expedition to Cowegin [Cowichan], with the view of more clearly showing, than was done in my report of the expedition, that the measure [act] of sending an armed Force against the Cowegin Indians was only resorted to, on the failure of all other means of bringing the criminal to justice . . .

3. . . . never was a signal [single] example more urgently demanded for the maintenance of our prestige [reputation] with the Indian Tribes than on that occasion. . . . the natives of this Colony were also becoming insolent [disrespectful] and restive [restless], and there exist the clearest proofs derived from the confession of his [Tathlasut's] own friends, to show that the Native who shot Williams, felt assured of escaping with impunity [without punishment]. He, in fact told his friends that they had nothing to fear from . . . the whites, as they would not venture to attack a powerful tribe, occupying a country strong in its natural defences, and so distant from the coast.

4. . . . Our demands for the surrender of the criminal were answered by a rush to arms, and a tumultuous [disorderly] assemblage [gathering] of the Tribe in warlike array. From thence arose the necessity of employing an armed force to support the requisitions [rules] of the Law, and the danger to be guarded against, in our efforts to apprehend the criminal, was a collision [battle] with the whole Tribe. To avert that calamity [disaster], if possible . . . I had . . . to impress on the minds of the Natives, that the terrors of the law [punishment for attempted murder] would be let loose [punished] on the guilty only, and not on the Tribe at large, provided they took no part in resisting the Queens authority nor in protecting the criminal from justice.

5. And further I took the field in person with the expeditionary force, directed all their movements, and adopted every other precaution, dictated by experience, to avert disaster and ensure success.

7. . . . I was not influenced by the love of military display in assuming the great responsibility involved in directing the Cowegin Expedition; but solely by a profound sense of public duty, and a conviction, founded on experience, that it is only by resorting to prompt and decisive measures of punishment, in all cases of aggression, that life and property can be protected and the Native Tribes of this Colony kept in a proper state of subordination.

8. I have further much satisfaction in reporting that the result of the expedition has produced a most salutary effect [improvement] on the minds of the Natives.”

Source: Colonial Despatches, Douglas to Labouchere, 3887, CO 305/8; p. 24; received 29 April, No. 4, Victoria Vancouver's Island, 24th February 1857.