

Historical Sources for Judging Credibility

Document A: Douglas attempts to apprehend Siamsit

James Douglas describes the actions he took in apprehending Siamsit, the accused murderer of Peter Brown, at Nanaimo in a despatch sent to the British Colonial Office on January 21, 1853.

In consequence of that breach of faith, his [Siamsit's] Father and another influential Indian were taken into custody; in hopes of inducing them by that means, to yield to our demands; my earnest wish being, if possible, to gain our object without bloodshed, and without assailing [attacking] the Tribe at large.

After two days of the most anxious suspense, it was again settled that the felon should be given up; and he was accordingly brought to within half a mile of the anchorage, but on seeing me repair to the spot; he fled to the woods and made his escape. It was then impossible to temporize [delay in acting] longer, without a loss of character, negotiation had been tried in vain, and I therefore decided on adopting more active [military] measures, and with that view, ordered an immediate advance towards the Nanaimo River, where their villages are situated. We accordingly pushed rapidly in that direction, but the boats had scarcely entered the River before their progress was arrested by the shallowness of the stream, about three quarters of a mile below the first village... We then moved up the river to the second village, which we found nearly deserted by its inhabitants, who had fled to the woods with their effects.

The murderer's father was Chief of this last village, consisting of many large houses and containing the greater part of thei[r] stock of winter food. They were now completely in our power, and as soon as I could collect a sufficient number of the inhabitants I told them that they should be treated as enemies, and their villages destroyed, if they continued longer to protect the murderer, who we were now informed had left the river and lay concealed in the woods near the sea coast, about three miles distant.

The pinnacle [light sailboat] was immediately despatched with 16 seamen and 9 half whites, towards that point, where his place of refuge was soon discovered. After a long chase in the woods in which the half whites took the principal [leading] part the wretched man was captured and taken on board the Steam vessel.

The troops were withdrawn the same day from the River, without molesting or doing any injury whatever to the other natives.

Despatch to London, Douglas to Pakington, 3852, CO 305/4, p. 1; received 1 April [No. 1], Victoria, Vancouver's Island, 21st January 1853.

Document B: Apprehending the Nanaimo Suspect

Historian and anthropologist Chris Arnett provides a secondary account that describes how Douglas used extortion to capture Siamasit, the second accused murderer somewhere near Nanaimo.

Two days later the expedition continued towards Nanaimo in search of Siamasit, the other man involved in Peter Brown's death. Siamasit was the son of a si'em of Tiwulhuw on the Nanaimo River, and 'was regarded as the Hero of the Tribe.' Siamasit's relations, according to hwulmuhw [Aboriginal] law, offered furs in compensation for the death of a low ranking Hudson's Bay employee, but Douglas was not prepared to negotiate. He regarded the Nanaimo as posing little threat to hwunitum [British] interests 'not having the reputation of being so numerous or warlike in their habits as the Cowegin [Cowichan] Tribe.' Douglas seized Siamasit's father and 'another influential Indian' as hostages. After some difficulty, including a bloodless assault by marines and colonial militia on Kwulsiwul, the furthest downstream village on the Nanaimo River, Douglas marched on the village of Tiwulhuw and informed the people 'that they should be treated as enemies, and their villages destroyed, if they continued longer to protect the murderer.' Siamasit was soon tracked down at his place of refuge on the Chase River where he was captured by Basil Botineau of the Victoria Voltigeurs.

Chris Arnett, *The Terror of the Coast: Land Alienation and Colonial War on Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands, 1849-1863*. Burnaby, BC: Talonbooks, 1999, p. 44.