



Take a [virtual tour](#) of the Fraser Cemetery

Fraser Cemetery – New Westminster, BC

On an incredible sunny day in March we visited the Fraser Cemetery which occupies a beautiful, atmospheric site overlooking the Fraser River in New Westminster. Queen Victoria named New Westminster *The Royal City* in 1859 and it is one of the oldest cities in Western Canada. The Fraser Cemetery, dating back to 1869, merged with a number of individual cemeteries. Over the years the cemetery grew and expanded up the hill and by 1913 it had grown to the size of the boundaries it now occupies. We took our time to enjoy the various sections, each having its own unique feel. We don't plan our cemetery visits around sunny days but, coincidentally, it is just our luck that we have great weather so we can devote the time we need to leisurely exploration.

The Church of England and the Church of Masons began their development of the site around 1870 and were later joined by International Order of Odd Fellows opening their section in the mid-1880s. These groups privately operated the cemetery and then the city opened up their own section around 1912. By 1930 the private groups turned their sections over to the city as the upkeep, cleaning and watering became quite costly. Today the Fraser Cemetery spans about 20 acres and includes wonderfully scenic vignettes of stones and stories which have



local, provincial and national connections. While there have been a number of burial grounds in the city since its beginnings in 1859 the site of Fraser Cemetery is the largest and longest in use. The very first cemeteries used in New Westminster no longer exist. Admiring the view of the river on a clear day it is hard to imagine that the land was once covered by forest and rough roads which ran all the way up the hill and were very difficult to clear.

Today many of the people buried in the earliest graves no longer have many, if any, intentional visitors. Is this why a ghostly woman in white Victorian dress motions at

those who are casually strolling the grounds? A few guests at the cemetery have reported seeing a woman waving to them and motioning, drawing attention to specific gravesites. One visitor said she was being directed towards a particular marker by a female ghost soundlessly pointing. Only when the visitor looked down did she realize it had been the tombstone that she was looking to find but the mysterious woman was no longer in sight. Some guests say they've been physically touched or pushed towards specific areas in the cemetery. Are these ghosts of people who survived the Great Fire? Are they former pioneers giving a gentle reminder, those who no longer have regular visitors, not wanting to be forgotten?

The cemetery is one feature of the city which has been preserved in its original form revealing its gradual evolution of older to newer sections. New Westminster itself would have much more of its original heritage buildings and beautiful architecture if it wasn't for the Great Fire which broke out on the night of September 10, 1898. Hay caught fire in a warehouse late at night and in minutes the fire swept the city terrifyingly levelling markets, churches, the library, the wharf and CPR warehouses along with several homes. Sadly, the fire was no match for the New Westminster Hyack Brigade who called in reinforcements from the Vancouver Fire Department. Despite best efforts the winds that night made

containing the fire a huge challenge and the city was devastated. The fire hall itself burned down.

So while the many original buildings were lost and are no longer around to be our glimpse into the past, the cemetery, with its many residents of New Westminster, remains a steadfast timeline to the city's history. We were aware there were many prominent residents buried in Fraser Cemetery so we wandered back in time to find some notable markers. James Digby's gravestone is the oldest one in the cemetery and was originally moved from another gravesite in 1908. The actor, Raymond Burr, famous for the series Perry Mason, is buried at the cemetery. Cyrus Wesley Peck, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Canadian Scottish Regiment, was a WWI Victoria Cross Medal Recipient. Beth Wood, the first woman to be elected to the City Council in 1949 and the first female Mayor of New Westminster is interred here. The one we really wanted to find because we visited the Irving House earlier in the day was Captain William Irving who manned many ships that covered coastal routes from Oregon to British Columbia during the gold rush. The obelisk shaped gravestone commemorates the Irving and Briggs families along with a nearby cluster of more humble markers for descendants. But whether you're looking for historically significant graves or just meandering contemplatively, the cemetery is filled with many pioneers and recent residents, who, we are sure, would love a visit.



We absolutely enjoyed our afternoon at Fraser Cemetery and left feeling a connection to those who reside there, quietly and unassumingly continuing to tell their stories. We were able to capture many serene photos under a blue sky filled with picturesque clouds. While we didn't encounter a pointing spirit, our experience piqued our interest motivating us to research to gain further insight into New Westminster's rich history. Will we visit again one sunny day and have the privilege of passing a young lad who was the most recent ghostly sighting? A visitor reported seeing a young boy quietly sitting on a bench and when he briefly

turned and looked back, eerily the boy was gone. Maybe next time, the ghostly boy won't mind if we join him on the bench. First we will ask if it's okay with him, of course.