

Snuneymuxw Settlement *at Departure Bay*

Stl' i lep Village Site

The uneven shoreline, sheltered islands and sandy beaches of the east coast of Vancouver Island have been, for centuries, a place of beauty and plenty. Aboriginal people were the first to make this sheltered stretch of coastline their home. Eventually settling in what is today Nanaimo, the Snuneymuxw, a Coast Salish people, found food, fresh water, and winter shelter among the islands and inlets.

The Snuneymuxw left abundant traces of their original settlement in Nanaimo, which are evidenced by the many archaeological sites in the area. Their homes, the first architectural structures to be built in Nanaimo, were great longhouses measuring about 100 feet long by 30 feet wide. Built with skeletons of log beams, the longhouses had split cedar planks for the walls and shed roofs with a smoke hole. Each longhouse housed several families, providing a place for sleeping, cooking and celebrating.

Departure Bay, or Stl'i lep, (meaning "at the base of the mountain") was the site of a Snuneymuxw winter village and burial ground for several thousand years (a remnant of the burial ground is located at the intersection of Departure Bay Road and Bay Street). This winter village had three rows of cedar-planked longhouses built along the length of the beach. Another set of longhouses was situated close to the present day Pacific Biological Station. According to Snuneymuxw Elders there were four families that wintered at this site. A fifth family wintered on the Nanaimo Harbour at Commercial Inlet.

The Snuneymuxw used this winter village from December to March. They performed their winter dances here and bathed in the nearby creeks. This is also the place where the annual cycle of food gathering began. In March huge runs of herring arrived. Elders say that the first man at Departure Bay created herring by stirring the water with a paddle. Following the herring runs were large flocks of duck and fish such as spring salmon and halibut. Deer and elk were also plentiful in the area.

In the late spring the Snuneymuxw families spread out and some would move away to Gabriola Island where they fished, gathered shellfish and other foods. In the late summer months they met again at Departure Bay picking berries before setting out to the Fraser River for the sockeye season. They returned to Nanaimo in the fall for the salmon runs on the Nanaimo River and then back to Departure Bay for the winter months.

▲ Adapted from "Columns, Cornices and Coal: The Heritage Resources of Nanaimo" produced by the City of Nanaimo, and from information provided by the Snuneymuxw First Nation.

Displacement of Stl' i lep Village Site

The Snuneymuxw continued to live seasonally at the Stl'i lep village site up until the mid 1800's at which time a series of events led to their displacement. The first event occurred in May, 1861 when a pioneer named John Christie pre-empted 114 acres of land around Departure Bay including most of the village site. The remaining portion of the village site was claimed by another pioneer named William Hughes in October 1861. The land was surveyed in 1870, and title was crown-granted to these men in 1871. Despite this, the Snuneymuxw continued to use the winter village site. However, events that occurred in the 1890s and early 1900s such as the construction of the Dunsmuir Colliery wharfs, the CIL dynamite plant in what is now the Cilaire subdivision, and continued residential settlement throughout the Bay area disrupted the environment and traditional fishing patterns and ultimately resulted in the displacement of the Snuneymuxw at this site.

▲ Based on: Information provided by the Snuneymuxw First Nation.

Circle of Life (miik'w silanum)

"Our daily, monthly, and seasonal activities depended on the cycles of the sea, the forests and the life within them. The cycles were consistent, predictable and dependable. The animals, plants, the birds and the sea creatures were always there, giving themselves up to our use, providing nourishment for body and spirit. In March, the herring arrived. Stl'i lep provided huge catches. When it started to get cold, most families returned to the Nanaimo River for the chum salmon harvest."

▲ Source: Geraldine Manson, (Snuneymuxw First Nation)



▲ Long House at Departure Bay

"Our activities in the long house are directly related to the season. It is in the winter that we have a strong connection to the spirit world. Winter dances and sacred ceremonies give us strength and renew the legacy of our elders' teachings."

▲ Source: Geraldine Manson, (Snuneymuxw First Nation)



▲ Fishing Camp at Departure Bay



Departure Bay (1850's)



Departure Bay (1850's)

Sketches above by James Madison Alden (1834-1922). He was an official artist of the U.S. Coast Survey and the United States-Canadian Boundary Survey. From 1854-1861 Alden produced numerous sketches and watercolours for the two surveys, depicting much of the West coast from San Diego to British Columbia.

▲ Source: Washington State Historical Society