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Geological Survey of Canada

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History of GSC Vancouver

By J. A. Roddick
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Long before the opening of a GSC Vancouver office, the need for geologists in the Colony had been recognized. In January 1864, when much of its news concerned the progress of the American civil war, the *British Columbian* (a New Westminster paper) ran a long-winded editorial entitled "*AN IMPORTANT SUBJECT FOR LEGISLATION*". It began "*Amongst the many subjects awaiting the action of our rude, crude and imperfect Legislative Council, probably one of the most important, is a thorough geological survey of British Columbia.*"

Not only did they want a GSC office, but they wanted it staffed by the Survey's founder himself. "*In pointing to Sir William Logan, as pre-eminently qualified for the position, we do not do so because he is a Canadian, but because, as such, he has acquired an amount of practical experience, which would be invaluable for such a mission as we have indicated. [...] Nor do we believe the elevated position he has attained in his profession has placed his services beyond our reach. Were our Legislature to make application to the Imperial Government, and at the same time fully explain the vast importance of the scheme, we have no doubt that all reasonable assistance would be afforded, and with his whole soul devoted to his profession, if Sir William Logan were offered the appointment, we have no hesitation in saying that he would accept it with alacrity.*"



Sir William Logan

Well, it didn't happen that way, but fifty-four years later they settled for a less prominent, but still well-known geologist. Charles Camsell opened the GSC's Vancouver office on May 27th 1918, in the Pacific Building on the southeast corner of Hastings and Howe streets. His assistant was Victor Dolmage. Camsell was the son of a Hudson's Bay Factor and had joined the GSC in 1904. His pioneering work around Great Bear Lake and the Yukon had gained him considerable recognition. He accepted the position after applying for a raise in pay to offset the higher living costs of Vancouver and the 'more advanced social position' he would have to maintain there. With the customary dispatch of those times, this action had followed a memorandum written by the Deputy Minister, R.G. McConnell, the previous month (April 24th) in which he stated that the office was required 'to keep more closely in touch with prospecting and mining development throughout the province and in Yukon Territory, to work more closely in co-operation with the Provincial Department of Mines, and to act as a local distribution office for reports, maps and other geological information'.



C. Camsell

The office was an immediate success as prospectors, exploration geologists and mining engineers availed themselves of its maps and reports, as well as its highly relevant library and its geological expertise.

On McConnell's retirement in 1920, Camsell was called to Ottawa to assume the position of Deputy Minister. His place in Vancouver was taken for a short time by J.D. Mackenzie, who died in 1922 from complications arising from wounds he had received in World War I.



J.D.
Mackenzie

Victor Dolmage then took over the office and managed it through most of the 1920s, assisted by Clive Cairnes, and later by Forest Kerr. In October 1929, a few days before the stock market crash, Dolmage left the Survey and began private consulting. His timing was disastrous, but he survived the Great Depression, aided mainly by the boom in gold mining, and eventually became the most prominent geological consultant in the province.



V. Dolmage

W.E. Cockfield, who had started working for the Survey in 1912, joined the staff in 1920, and succeeded Dolmage in 1929. He had become known for his work in the Mayo district of the Yukon. He headed the office until shortly before his death at the end of 1955. His twenty-five year tenure remains, by far, the longest in the history of the Vancouver office. He was assisted during the 1930s by H.C. Gunning, A.H. Lang and J.F. Walker (who resigned in 1934 to become Provincial Mineralogist, and later Deputy Minister of the B.C. Department of Mines). Cockfield had no assistant from 1939 until 1949, when Jack Armstrong was transferred from Ottawa. From 1939, however, the GSC office was shared by the B.C. Department of Mines, which was represented by up to three mining inspectors, the Gold Commissioner and one or two support staff. For periods of a year or more during the early 1950's other GSC personnel were attached to the office. They included R.B. Campbell, J.G. Fyles, E. Hall, E.C. Halstead, S.L. Leaming and J.A. Roddick. During this period Cockfield and consultant, Victor Dolmage, undertook the original planning for the blowing up of Ripple Rock in Discovery Passage, between Vancouver Island and the mainland.



W.E. Cockfield

J.E. Armstrong took over the office from Cockfield, whose health was failing, in September of 1955. In addition to his office duties, Jack Armstrong carried on with his pioneering studies of the Pleistocene geology of the Lower Fraser Valley, and, with Ed Hall, wrote the original reports on the proposed Columbia River dam sites.



J.E.
Armstrong

In Ottawa, the Geological Survey expanded rapidly during the 1950s, and, to house it, a new building was completed in 1959. It was filled to capacity from the start. To relieve the pressure, the decision was made in 1961 to move the Cordilleran Section to Vancouver. Everyone did not move immediately, but soon the staff there included A.J. Baer, S.L. Blusson, R.B. Campbell, H. Gabrielse, L.H. Green, W.W. Hutchison, H.W. Little, J.E. Muller, J.A. Roddick, J.G. Souther, H.W. Tipper and J.O. Wheeler. The geologists were told to keep in mind that their Vancouver location was to be only temporary (not to exceed five-years) until they could be accommodated in the new building under construction in Calgary.

Management was split. The Cordilleran Section was headed by H.W. Little, although the Vancouver office continued to be managed by Jack Armstrong. It was not a particularly happy arrangement. The eventful year of 1968 saw the Vancouver office move from the Customs Warehouse, at the north end of Howe Street, to the Sun Tower Building. The B.C. Department of Mines felt that that location was too far removed from the centre of the mining community, and did not move with the GSC to the Sun Tower. In the spring of 1968 Hew Little was called back to Ottawa to head the Uranium Minerals Program. A short time later, Armstrong returned to Ottawa to become Secretary-General of the 24th International Geological Congress scheduled for 1972. The Cordilleran Section and office management were then amalgamated (still in 1968) under one head, J.O. Wheeler.



H.W. Little

John Wheeler's tenure lasted only two years before he too was summoned to Ottawa, in 1970, where he became Division Chief, and de facto, Chief Geologist of the Geological Survey.



J.O. Wheeler

Hu Gabrielse replaced him as head of the Vancouver office. The office was expanded in 1971 to include a small marine section under D.L. Tiffin, and grew to a Subdivision in 1972 (and to a Division in 1980). In 1978 the marine section was moved to Pat Bay near Sidney on Vancouver Island. At that time it included D.L. Tiffin, R. Currie, I.I. Frydecky, D. Seeman, and C.J. Yorath.



H. Gabrielse

After presiding for 10 years, Gabrielse returned to full-time geology in 1980, and was succeeded by R.B. Campbell. Computers were brought in. Although J.A. Roddick and W.W. Hutchison had been using the UBC computer facilities in connection with the Coast Mountains Project since the mid-1960s, access had been only through a teletype terminal and a 300-baud modem. In early 1983, in-house computing was introduced to the office. Computers revolutionized office procedures, much as helicopters had revolutionized field work in the early 1950s.



R.B. Campbell

On Campbell's retirement in 1987, D.J. Tempelman-Kluit took over the Division, which then included the Pacific Geoscience Centre at Pat Bay. This arrangement ended in 1989 when the Vancouver Office and PGC became two separate divisions.

D.J.
Tempelman-Kluit

Dirk Tempelman-Kluit resigned in April of 1995, a year marked by budget cuts, down-sizing and reorganization. The Cordilleran Division now reverted back to a Subdivision of the newly created Pacific Division, led by Sandy Colvine, residing at the P.G.C.

Catherine Hickson became Subdivision Head in Vancouver in April, 1995. Under her leadership the office moved westward to the corner of Seymour and Robson streets. There an expanded sales office was opened at street level to serve an expanding clientele.



C.J. Hickson

In September 2002, Steve Irwin became the GSC Vancouver Subdivision Head.



S.E.B. Irwin

Since 1939, Explosive Inspectors have shared office space with the Survey. This ended for a short time in 1991, when they moved to another Vancouver building, returning in 1997. From time to time members of other parts of the Geological Survey and Department have worked in the Vancouver office, including ESSInfo, Mines and Metal Sector - Policy, and Terrain Sciences Division.

[Click on an image thumbnail to view a larger image, [notice](#)]



1918 - 1925

Pacific Building in 1923, South East corner of Hastings and Howe



1925 - 1949

Federal Building in 1936, behind the old Post Office Building, North West corner of Hastings and Granville



1949 - 1951

Macauley Nicolls Maitland Building in 1929, 810 West Hastings St., South West corner of Hastings and Howe



1951 - 1954

300 West Pender St. in 1986, South West corner of Pender and Hamilton



1954 - 1964

Winch Building in 1909, 739 West Hastings St., North East corner of Hastings and Howe



1964 - 1968

Customs Examining Warehouse, c. 1913, 326 Howe St., behind the Winch Building



1968 - 1996

Sun Tower Building in 1978, 100 West Pender St., South East corner of Pender and Beatty

**1996 (Sept) - present**

Vancouver House c. 1996, 605 Robson St., North West corner of Robson and Seymour

*Jim Roddick
December 1999*

(Information for this capsule history of the GSC Vancouver Office came from an outline by J.E. Armstrong, and M. Zaslow's book 'Reading the Rocks'. Also consulted were the memories of Hu Gabrielse, Howard Tipper and John Wheeler, as well as those of the author, whose first contact with the GSC came in May 1946 when he met with Stan Duffell on the second floor of the Federal Building, in preparation for field work in the Ashcroft map area.)

See also: [No Stone Unturned: The First 150 years of the Geological Survey of Canada](#)

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http://gsc.nrcan.gc.ca/org/vancouver/about/history_e.php