

ORIGINAL DISCOVERY OF GOLD

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JAMES HOUSTON: A Western Pioneer

by Robert Allison Hood



JAMES HOUSTON (1823 - 1902)

This 16" x 20" charcoal portrait of Houston, purported to be the original discoverer of gold on the mainland of British Columbia, hangs on display at the Langley Centennial Museum. Houston is credited with being the first whiteman on the mainland to discover gold.

Houston married a Nanaimo First Nations bride and the couple settled on the Derby townsite, the site of the original Fort Langley. Although he came from one of the wealthiest families in all of Scotland, Lady Houston, upon her death excluded Houston's children and grandchildren from any inheritance as there was no proof that the gold hunter had ever been 'church' married. Ironically his wife was one of the first First Nations women to convert to Christianity.

COURTESY LANGLEY CENTENNIAL MUSEUM

Scotland's ancient capital, Dunfermline, has sent out many of her sons abroad to far distant places to win distinction and wealth. Andrew Carnegie's name during his life was renowned for his benefactions at home and abroad, and his good works live after him. Just a short time ago Lady Houston, the widow of Sir Robert Houston, the great shipping magnate, and the heiress to his immense fortunes, died one of the wealthiest women in the world. It was not generally known that the uncle of Sir Robert, James Houston, also a Dunfermline boy, had an adventurous career that makes his history perhaps worth recording for the town's annuals. He claimed to be the first discoverer of gold in British Columbia, and so to have seen the means of starting the great gold rush to that country of 1858 and 1859 that brought about the early settlement. Now it is one of the richest of Canada's provinces, with a population of over 700,000.

James Houston never attained wealth, but he lived a most colorful and eventful life and left an honorable record behind him. He liked to talk to his son of his boyhood days when, as a youngster, he played with Andrew Carnegie, Dunfermline's most famous son. The latter, as is well known, sought his fortunes in the United States, but James Houston, when still but a youth, went to sea and signed articles on a ship going round the Horn. Few details are known about his early adventures but some colorful incidents are recorded which bear testimony to the courage and resourceful spirit of the young Scotsman. His ship was wrecked off the coast of New Zealand, and the survivors of the crew on landing were promptly taken prisoners. They were enclosed in a stockade, at which the native sentries kept guard outside. James made an attempt to escape but was discovered in the act and wounded in the groin by the spear of one of the Maoris. He was then tossed back again into the prison. Not daunted by this experience, the young man as soon as the wound was healed made a second attempt. This time he succeeded. There being no chance of salvation on land he swam four miles out to sea to a ship and was

taken aboard of her. He then led a party made up from her crew to where his comrades were confined and they were all rescued.

Next we hear of him he is back with his ship in New York harbor. Here he plunged into the sea to rescue the bride in a wedding party who had fallen off the dock and was well nigh drowning. Going ashore and walking about the streets in the great American metropolis, he was surprised to be greeted heartily by more than one passerby who was quite unknown to him. The explanation of this was that his brother Robert, an engineer by profession, was there at the time and these were friends of his who had been deceived by the close family resemblance between the two men. This was the father of the great shipping magnate, Sir Robert, who was to later make such a career in that industry.

In 1849 James Houston was a quartermaster on a ship sailing from New York to the Isthmus of Panama. This was the year of the great gold rush to California and the young man left his ship to take part. For some considerable period he worked there hunting for the yellow metal, but apparently without making any stake worth mentioning. Then the sea claimed him again, but not for long, as he deserted his ship with a friend named Eldridge at Bellingham in the State of Washington. This time it was the report of a great find of gold somewhere near Spokane that was the lure. The two young men bought horses and supplies and set off with hearts full of hope that they might find a fortune. However when they had travelled for two days inland and looked up at the high mountains that still lay between them and their destination, Eldridge's courage failed him. The loneliness of the land, its huge forests, and these giant peaks cast a gloom upon his spirits that was not to be dispelled. At last he said to his companion, "Jamie, this is where I go back." Houston tried to persuade him to continue, but he found this was useless, so the two friends parted. James gave Eldridge his gold watch to pay for his share of the provisions and then went on alone.

He persevered in his journey until he reached the Pend d'Oreille River, but on arrival there he did not see much prospect and so pushed on over the boundary line into Canada. It was a rough unsettled country, but with true Scottish perseverance James kept on travelling.

He had passed out of the heavily timbered lands of the coast regions where often the heavy underbrush made the "going" most difficult into a dry interior country of brown, burnt up hillsides, similar to those of California, and many lakes of a rich blue color such as were new to him. He had now "joined up" with a new partner, and the two men were able to ride along making good progress. The country, though rough and unsettled, was a pleasant one, and if the summer climate was hot it was a dry heat and healthy and bracing. Fish and game were abundant.

They rode happily along Okanagan Lake, charmed with its clear blue waters and the rich browns and purples of the encircling hills.

The route they were travelling now was that annually followed by the Fur Brigade of the Hudson's Bay Company in its progress from Fort St. James in the north to the Columbia River with the year's costly yield of furs. It was the policy invariably followed to make the cavalcade as grand and imposing as possible so as to impress the Indians with the Company's greatness and power, and thus imbue them with a wholesome respect. It is possible the travelers may have met it and enjoyed the spectacle of the long procession of mounted men and pack animals winding along the lake front, headed by the Chief Factor, dignified in his beaver hat, frilled linen and blue coat with metal buttons. No doubt, in the loneliness of the land through which he travelled, Houston would have been thrilled with the novelty and picturesqueness of such a sight.

Their pleasant journeying together was not to last. One night they pitched their camp by the lakeside. Here was just enough room in the small tent for the two to lie stretched out close together. Houston lay on the

outside next the flap and his companion on the inside. During the night hostile Indians crept up upon them to the rear of the tent and transfixed with a spear, thrust through the canvas, the sleeping man at the back. Houston awoke to hear his partner's death cry, and managed somehow or other to slip out the tent door and make his escape in the darkness.

His plight now was a serious one for he had lost both his horses and his supplies and was without a gun. He travelled on subsisting on the flesh of fowl hens, a bird like a partridge, which he found he was able to snare with a lace drawn from his boot. At last, after several days of hunger and fatigue, he saw a tent on the other side of the lake he was skirting. "Thank God! A white man at last!", he exclaimed, and plunged into the water and swam across.

He found a lone camper by the name of Todd, and he was kind to the distressed traveler. When the latter was rested he gave him provisions so that he was able to proceed to the Hudson's Bay fort at Kamloops. Here the factor, Donald McLean, another Scotsman, received him hospitably, and with him Houston spent the winter. He was inclined to be reserved and secretive about himself, and McLean, who asked him no questions, thought he must be a deserter from the United States army.

On the advent of spring, Houston was seized with the prospector's itch to be off on the quest, and he went out panning for gold along the course of the Thompson River. It was then that he made the discovery that he claimed was the one which turned the eyes of the world upon British Columbia and started the great gold rush of 1858 to that until then little known part of the British Empire.

There were a number who boasted this honor, and it may be that Houston's claim is not truly founded. Who can say at one way or other with assurance at this time? Judge F.W. Howay, the foremost authority in British Columbia history, supports the view that gold was first discovered in 1855 at "the mouth of the Pend d'Oreille River, where it leaps with a bound of about ten feet into the Columbia." This was just north of the boundary line. The following year, he states, it was found on the Thompson River and on the Fraser [River] near Fort Hope. However important may have been Houston's discovery, it is certain that it did not bring him wealth.

The next we hear of him he was shooting the rapids of the turbulent and treacherous Fraser River in a canoe with two companions, Alexander Robinson and Pete Baker. The hazardous venture was



PETER BAKER (UNKNOWN - 1897)

An older Peter Baker poses at a portrait studio in New Westminster. He accompanied Houston on his first gold discoveries along the Fraser River. Baker had come to New York and taken a ship through the Isthmus of Panama where he contracted and almost died of scarlet fever.

COURTESY BAKER FAMILY, ALBION
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN JOSEPH THOMPSON

performed in safety, and the three men made the journey as far as Fort Yale, where the river becomes more peaceful, portaging their frail craft where necessary. Those who have travelled on either the Canadian Pacific or the Canadian National Railway, the lines of which run along roadbeds one on each side of this tremendous canyon—roadbeds that have been blasted out of the solid rock above the stream—will have some slight conception of the difficulty of such a feat and perhaps wonder that it could be done at all. The canyon widens and then narrows again often in a regular succession, and the turbulent, mighty stream spreads itself out only to find itself thus periodically confined and constricted and forced into narrow, rocky gateways through which it dashes with a fury of white contending waters fascinating to witness. The thought of a frail canoe on such a wild torrent and amid such cruel rocks, inspires wonder at the hardihood of those who would venture with it. Not many years were to pass after Houston made the perilous passage before a wagon road was made along these rocky precipitous canyon sides—a wagon road that has been rebuilt today and along which the motorist may travel in comfort while trying to realize and image for himself some of the perils and hardships faced and surmounted by those pioneers through whose mighty labors his easy journeying has been made possible.

At Fort Yale the river widens out, and from there the travelers' task was easier. They glided easily down to Fort Hope and thence upon the now wide and majestic flood to Fort Langley, the Hudson's Bay headquarters on the south bank of the river, but a few miles from the delta. The Fort was then in its heyday of its history.

It had been founded in 1827 by James McMillan, sent out to do so from Fort Vancouver, and as a trading post for the Company had proved a great success. Here had visited in great style in 1828, the Governor General of the Company, George Simpson, with a piper, in full regalia, marching behind him, brave in kilt and sporran. It had flourished with its trade, and besides had become a food depot of considerable size, with a

large staff of workers. Here salmon were salted and packed in barrels, manufactured within its palisade, for exportation. Cranberries in large quantities were shipped to San Francisco. Hemp was grown and sent to England to be made into rope. The Fort was on a fertile site, not the original one when Houston first saw it, but three miles farther up the river. It had an area of about 630 by 240 feet, and this was enclosed by a palisade built from logs of split cedar well over a foot thick. At the four corners were bastions twenty feet square. In each there were two nine pound guns and also smaller cannon. The gates were huge double door affairs on iron hinges, and were only opened on special occasions, a small single door being the one commonly used. The officers' quarters was a two storey erection called the "Big House" and the upper floor of this was reserved for the officers of the Brigade when they visited the Fort. On the lower floor lived the factor and clerk and their families. Here was the great reception room where Governor Douglas had been installed when the Crown Colony of British Columbia was instituted in 1858. Then there were numerous other buildings for residence and also for work purposes.

The Fort had a pleasant social life of its own. Many of the men of course, were married to First Nations women as there were very few white women in the country. At Christmas time there was a week of rejoicing and merriment, and dancing was kept up night and day. On the festive itself the Indian chiefs were all invited up to the "Big House" and a whole beef, as well as peas, tallow and molasses, were given to them. The arrival of the annual Brigade, too, was a great occasion both for the people of the Fort and for the Indians, and the scene of its arrival has been pictured as very fine.

James Houston was evidently struck with the advantages of the spot and the fertility of the soil, and no doubt he was tired of wandering around. At any rate, he settled down on a piece of land on the east side of the Salmon River and not far from the Fort. Here he built himself a house and started to make a farm out of the virgin forest.



A MINIATURE TIN GOLD PAN HOLDS PLACER GOLD AND BLACK SAND TAKEN FROM THE PEND D'OREILLE RIVER.

COURTESY ROSSLAND MINING MUSEUM & ARCHIVES

THE GOLD PAN

A gold pan was generally made of sheet iron in the shape of a circular dish with flared but straight sides and flat at the bottom. The most common pan, known as the "Australian" was 15" in diameter at the top to about 7" at the bottom, and 3 inches deep. The sides are generally angled at 30 to 45 degrees. The "American" pan is similar but had a straight lip at its top.

Panning was the simplest and most inexpensive of all the methods used to recover placer gold. According to N.L. "Bill" Barlee's book "The Guide to Gold panning in British Columbia: "Although the origin of the gold pan, the device used in panning, is obscure, some authorities believe that it came into common usage among the placer miners of Transylvania, in the central part of Europe, no later than the 15th century, and possibly some time before then. In the alluvial gold-fields of North America, Australia, and other parts of the world it was and is the prospector's inseparable companion, being ideally suited to test any gravels that were indicative of carrying placer gold." It is equally possible that the origins are from Rome.

A miner partially filled the pan with dirt containing placer, put it in water and with a swirling motion created a whirlpool that separated the stones and gravel from the gold due to specific gravity; the gold being 20 times heavier and water and 5 times heavier than the gravel.

The time required to wash a pan of gravel took 10 to 15 minutes and it was considered a good day's work to wash 50 pans. Gold panning was used only to test gravel.

Pans today are manufactured in both metal and high impact plastic for lightness although Russian iron or heavy gauge steel pans are still traditional. Steel pans are heavier and stronger than plastic pans. Some are made of lightweight alloys for structural stability. Plastic gold pans resist rust, acid and corrosion, and most are designed with moulded riffles along one side of the pan. Of the plastic gold pans, green and red ones are usually preferred among prospectors, as both the gold and the black sand stands out in the bottom of the pan.

Clearing land in the coast regions of British Columbia is a heavy task today when there is plenty of stumping powder to blow out the stumps and stumping machines to complete the drawing of them after the powder has done its work. Then it was an almost Herculean task. The winter rainfalls in that country are so heavy that the trees grow to giant size and the underbrush is very thick. To burn it all after it has been cut down is in itself a tedious and slow process. But Houston tackled it bravely, and after he had sufficient land cleared he set about procuring livestock to put upon it. For this he went off all alone into Oregon riding on a pony, and bought a dozen herd of cattle, driving them back to his farm single handed. They were Herefords and Holsteins and amongst them was a bull. The cattle throve well on the way home and the herd increased.

Not long after this a very attractive Indian girl came from the tribe at Nanaimo to visit her sister, who was married to an First Nations brave of the tribe at McMillan Island. Her name was Mary Cusheon. The two girls had been the first converts to Christianity of the Reverend Thomas Crosby, who was the pioneer Methodist missionary in the Province, then carrying on his work at Nanaimo on Vancouver Island. James Houston fell in love with the girl, married her, and took her to his home. On 27th March 1838, a son was born to the couple, and they called him Alexander. Later a little girl was born but she died. Houston married a Nanaimo First Nations bride and the couple settled on the Derby townsite, the site of the original Fort Langley. Although he came from one of the wealthiest families in all of Scotland, Lady Houston, upon her death excluded Houston's children and grandchildren from any inheritance as there was no proof that the gold hunter had ever been 'church' married. Ironically his wife was one of the first First Nations women to convert to Christianity.

Houston prospered in a modest way. His herds had grown and he went into the dairy business. For twenty-four years he sat upon the Council after the district about Fort Langley had been formed into the municipality that now goes by that name.

He was a man of strong character and was much respected in the community. In the rough adventurous life he had lived before coming to Langley he had not forgotten the religious training of his youth, and his home was a God-fearing one. Shortly after his marriage there had been two shiploads of girls sent out from England to become wives to the settlers. Many of those latter now that this opportunity had come to get mates of their own race and color, cast out their Indian wives to replace them with the newcomers, but not so James Houston. He preferred to cleave to the one he had taken for better or for worse.

About the year 1890 he sold the farm into which he had put so much toil and labor intending to return to the place of his birth. But when the final decision came he found he could not bear to leave this land of his adoption which he loved, and instead of going away he squatted on the site of the of the old Fort at Derby and built himself a little house there. This was an Admiralty Reserve, and still belonged to the Imperial Government. There was no objection to him occupying it, but he paid 10.00 dollars a year to the municipality by way of taxes. He had property now in New Westminster and in the young town of Vancouver and he was able to get along comfortably enough. He lived here happily until he died on 17th April 1902. His Indian wife had pre-deceased him by many years. His son, Alexander, however, had stayed with his father, and the two had ever been "good pals". Four years later, Alexander received a Crown grant to the land his father had squatted on, 158 acres more or less, and for the sum of ten dollars he became its owner. Here he has lived until this day, and has brought up his girls and boys. The youngest is now a lad of sixteen, and the eldest son was recently married. Mrs. Houston presides graciously and efficiently over the home.

Alexander is a tall fine looking man and carries his years well. His home looks out on the site where the original Fort Langley stood facing the river in those days before the Gold Rush, when a constant guard was maintained for fear of hostile Indians, and when fur was still king.