



The BC Sugar refinery, whose architect was probably B. T. Rogers, was called the worst building in Vancouver by the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper in 1975 because of the “sheer force of its industrial revolution ugliness,” even though it was a welcome landmark to travellers on the CPR as it signified journey’s end.

Rogers Sugar

FOR WESTBOUND PASSENGERS on the trans-continental train it may have been a welcome sight as a signal that the journey’s end was near, but the BC Sugar Refinery, located between the rail tracks and the waterfront, by some was considered the ugliest building in Vancouver. Construction of the brick complex began on July 8, 1892, and on November 12 that year the first shipment of raw sugar, 250 tons, arrived from the Philippines.

The sugar refinery was the brain child of Benjamin Tingley Rogers, a 24-year-old American who grew up in the business. His father owned a sugar refinery in New Orleans, and the young Rogers worked there until his father was killed by a brick thrown by a striking worker in 1883 and the factory was sold. Rogers then worked for a New York refinery, where over the course of four years he learned every technical aspect of refining sugar. In 1889 he went to Montreal on a technical mission, and it was here that he heard about Vancouver and the newly completed railway across the continent. Through his New York connections he managed to be introduced to William C. Van Horne, the president of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

Van Horne must have been impressed with Rogers’s ideas, because over the next two weeks there were several meetings that included Richard B. Angus, General Manager of the Bank of Montreal and one of the founders of the Canadian Pacific Railway, that resulted in concrete plans and \$80,000 in seed money for the enterprise. Rogers travelled on to Vancouver (presumably as a guest of the CPR) and on 24 January 1890 checked into the Hotel Vancouver. Three days later he produced a letter on the hotel’s stationery, which read as follows:

To His Worship the Mayor and Aldermen of the City of Vancouver

Gentlemen:

On behalf of myself and associates I beg to lay before you a proposition to establish a sugar refinery in the City of Vancouver on the following conditions.

1st The refinery is to be known as the Columbia Sugar Refining Company Limited of Vancouver, B.C. and shall be erected and in operation within eight months of the signing of this agreement.

2nd The said refinery shall be constructed of brick in the most substantial manner and be provided with all the necessary improved machinery for supplying the market with the grades of refined sugar and shall have a capacity of not less than 100 pounds of sugar per day.

3rd As a guarantee of good faith that the above conditions will be carried out, the company agrees to give a bond in the sum of \$10,000.

The establishment of the aforesaid refinery shall however be subject to the following provisions.

1st Provided that the City of Vancouver shall vote a bonus [gift] to the company of \$40,000.



2nd That all the property of the proposed Columbia Sugar Refining Co. shall be exempt from taxation for a period of fifteen years.

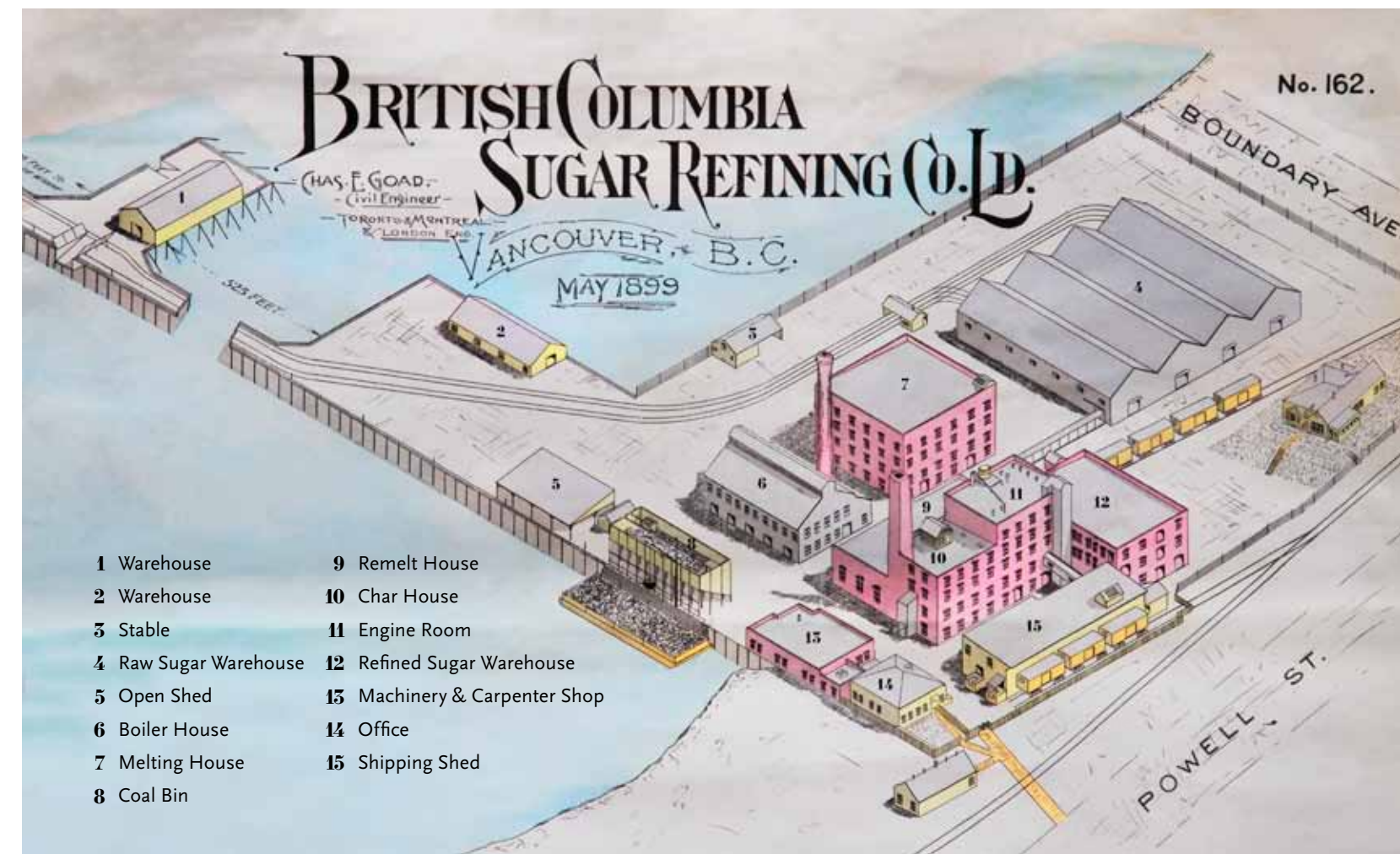
3rd That in the event of the water works systems being acquired by the city, water in any quantity desired by the company shall be furnished them free of charge for a period of ten years, at the expiration of which period the city shall bid themselves to furnish water for a second period of ten years at a charge of not more than ten cents per thousand gallons.

Respectfully yours,

B. T. Rogers

The letter may have been drafted beforehand by Rogers's associates in Montreal since it contained several demands that were probably the result of those meetings held at Van Horne's office. Rogers himself was well versed in the sugar industry, knew the practical side of the refinery, and knew the importance of water for the production. In any event, the City of Vancouver was eager for new

The initial plans for Rogers's facility were believed to have been designed by Rogers himself. The land for the site, donated by the city, was strategically situated on Burrard Inlet just east of the Hastings Sawmill with access to both shipping and rail. The water required for the plant was flumed from nearby Trout Lake.





Rogers's first home, built on the southeast corner of Denman and Davie Streets in 1900 and 1901, was called "Gabriola" because the rock for its construction was quarried from Garbiola Island.

business, and the venture was hugely attractive to a lot of people, including Vancouver Mayor David Oppenheimer. Oppenheimer's company sold the land on which Rogers would locate his refinery to the city for \$30,000, and the city granted it to Rogers's company. This was the first industry in Metropolitan Vancouver not related to the region's own natural resources like timber, fish and furs.

The construction of the refinery began in July 1891, and the plant was ready to operate in less than six months. As there were no experienced sugar workers in Vancouver, a workforce had to be trained to produce the sugar. The technical set-up of the refinery was largely directed by Rogers himself, with some support from the New York company he had worked for earlier. By early 1892 the first sugar was ready, and on January 20th the *Vancouver News-Advertiser* wrote:

The Sugar Refinery of this City turned out its first sample of refined sugar yesterday and the Company may well be satisfied with the result. The sample that is a high-grade yellow is clean, with well-marked grain, bright and full flavored, and very much superior to specimens of the same grade from refineries in Eastern Canada. The manager, Mr. Rogers, and all connected

Opposite
Benjamin Tingley Rogers neatly attired in his Commodore of the Vancouver Yacht Club uniform in 1912.





SHANNON IN ALL ITS SPLENDOR, 1930. Named after dairy farmer William Shannon, the most prestigious estate in Vancouver was built on a ten-acre parcel of land just to the south of the CPR's Shaughnessy development for Benjamin T. Rogers. The 'Sugar King' contracted the the architrcture firm of Somerville and Putnam to build the large Beaux Arts style house, coach house, and garage. Rogers died in 1918 before the project was completed and his wife was overwhelmed by the scale of the home. Mrs. Rogers and her children lived in the home for several years but in 1935 sold it to Austin C. Taylor, the pwner of the Bralorne Gold Mine and later the chairman of the British Columbia Security Commission during the Second World War.

with the refinery are highly delighted with the first fruits of their labor. Today they will begin manufacturing regularly at the rate of 150 barrels per day of all grades. The first sample of granulated sugar will be manufactured today. About 75 men are employed at present on the works.

The BC sugar wholesale price that week was 7 cents a pound for granulated and 6 3/8 cents for yellow. A barrel contained about 300 pounds of sugar.

In order to ensure their investment, Van Horne installed John M. Browning, the CPR's Vancouver land commissioner who also served as Vancouver City Council's finance chairman, as the company's first president. It deserves to be mentioned that Vancouver's councillors did not consider Browning's dual role as both a grantor and a recipient of the city's resources a conflict of interest. Forrest Angus, a brother to Richard B. Angus who lived in the posh part of Victoria, became the vice president. Angus held this position from 1890 to 1892 and subsequently was president until 1897, when Rogers was elected president. Within a year he was also the largest shareholder of BC Sugar.

The two things that brought Rogers to Vancouver were his ambition to run his own show and his realization that Vancouver—at the

western end of the new trans-continental railway—was just across the Pacific from the Philippines and the source of most of North America's sugar at the time. For the most part Rogers's calculation proved right, with the exception of the loss of two full shiploads of raw sugar in 1893—the ships just vanished during passage from the Philippines and never reached their destination. But apart from this one bad year the company flourished.

On 12 April 1916 Rogers wrote to Sir Edmund Osler, an Ontario politician, director of the Canadian Pacific Railway and shareholder of BC Sugar:

On March 31st the refinery completed the 25th year of operations.... During the period there has been disbursed in dividens a total of \$3,099,375.... At the same time assets have increased from \$250,000 to nearly \$7,500,000.

Capacity of the plant [has been increased] from 30,000 pounds to 900,000 pounds per day—or thirty times. Our plant is today the best equipped in Canada and is not excelled by any other refinery in the world.

These results have been accomplished without my asking shareholders for one cent beyond the original subscription. I think therefore I am entitled to be proud of what I have been able to do....

Rogers married Mary Isabella Angus, whose father James Angus was the brother to R. B. Angus. The wedding took place at the bride's home in Victoria before a small group of friends on 1 June 1892, and the marriage produced seven children between 1893 and 1915.

By 1900 Rogers was prosperous enough to contract the building of the city's grandest home with rock quarried from Gabriola Island. The Rogers family moved into their "Gabriola" on 23 July 1901. Not content with his grand West End mansion, the "Sugar King" began planning to build an even more elegant home in South Vancouver called Shannon between 1912 and 1915. The name came from William Shannon and family, who arrived in 1887 and whose farmland was gradually surrounded by the city.

B. T. Rogers originally considered selling BC Sugar once the company became a going concern but later changed his mind after falling in love with the province's beauty. In 1904 he ordered a custom-built steam-powered 50-foot yacht, named the *Mow Ping*, from Hong Kong and joined the Royal Vancouver Yacht Club. In 1912 he purchased the more conspicuous 168-foot yacht *Aquilo*; the same year he became the commodore of the yacht club. With the outbreak of the First World War, the *Aquilo* patrolled the west coast looking for German submarines.

Early in 1905 B. T. Rogers decided to become a producer as well as a refiner of sugar by purchasing an ailing sugar cane plantation and mill in Fiji and founding the Vancouver-Fiji Sugar Company. Rogers's main objective of going into the sugar growing business was an attempt to beat out Hong Kong "coolie-refined" sugar. One of Rogers's ads read: "If you would rather buy sugar refined in Hong Kong by cheap coolie labor than sugar refined in British Columbia by well-paid white labor, then there is no further argument, but if you wish to build up your city and its prosperity, you will surely act differently and you will not allow any dealer to sell you sugar other than that which is refined right here in Vancouver." The sugar businessman was appealing to the city's loyalties to hometown workers, who, according to a stipulation contained in the original deal with the city, did not include Asians.

However, to say that workers in the BC Sugar Refinery were "well paid" may have been an overstatement. Rogers, who was able and energetic, ran his company autocratically and was fiercely anti-union. In 1917 the refinery's 206 male and 36 female workers went on strike, demanding a pay increase and better working conditions, especially for the women, who had to do their job—sewing up the sugar bags—standing on their feet for 10 hours every day. Probably mindful of his father's death, Rogers never went near the factory himself during the strike but sent his agents and spies, with whom he was in contact via radio from his yacht *Aquilo*. The bitter confrontation, during which management tried to keep the factory going with scab labour, lasted 92 days, and in the end Rogers agreed only to minimal concessions.

Rogers died suddenly on 17 June 1918 at the age of 52 from a cerebral haemorrhage before the family fully moved into their new home, Shannon. His widow and seven children lived there through the 1920s, but in 1936 she sold out to Austin C. Taylor.



A very well preserved cast iron and wood 19th century sugar cutter.

In Victorian times sugar used to come in cones that were two feet tall tapering from 9 inches at the bottom to 4 inches at the top. Sugar cutters were used for breaking it up in "lumps" or pieces. A person then used a mortar and pestle to crush the lumps into fine grains for use in the kitchen. Sugar cutters are considered very collectible.



Carnegie Library

INDUSTRIALIST AND PHILANTHROPIST Andrew Carnegie funded the construction of over 2,500 public libraries around the world. In 1901 the City of Vancouver approached Carnegie, at the time the second richest man in history after John D. Rockefeller, about donating money for a spacious library. He agreed to donate \$50,000 with the understanding that the city would offer support at the rate of \$5,000 a year. The new library was located immediately north of the original Vancouver City Hall and on the southwest corner of Westminster (Main) and Hastings Streets. Its site had earlier been the home of the City Auction Mart.

According to legend, school friends Carnegie and James Houston ran away together from their homes in Dunfermline (the ancient capital of Scotland) in the early 1850s. Andrew had been born poor, while Houston's parents were wealthy ship manufacturers, owning the White Star Shipping Line. Carnegie, upon his arrival in America, apprenticed to a Pennsylvania blacksmith and eventually built up a steel-works that brought him wealth and fortune. Houston, credited with making the first gold discoveries

on the Fraser River that resulted in the sudden influx of miners into the vast area later to become the Province of British Columbia, had married a First Nations woman and died relatively poor. His son learned in 1935 that the British Government was seeking out relatives of Lady Houston. Bruce A. McKelvie, a noted BC historian and reporter with the *Vancouver Sun*, wrote letters on the son's behalf, and word came back that his grandmother had left an estate of \$30,000,000 and that the hypocritical old gal, shortly before her death, had offered to outfit the British Royal Navy with a "Houston" fleet of ships that was to carry the Houston name. The government turned her offer down. Lady Houston's will did not include any inheritance for illegitimate children, and the son never received so much as a dime from the estate.

By a strange twist of fate Carnegie's life went from "rags to riches," while his rich school chum Houston lived out the remaining years of his life on his Fort Langley farm that included the Derby townsite, the proposed colonial capital of the mainland of the province.