

# Joseph D. Pemberton's Extraordinary Journey to Fort Victoria

By Calvin Woelke

Here's a survey assignment: Leave everything you know, sail half-way around the world, lose part of your luggage and equipment while en route, have the remaining equipment detained until you get permits, endure extortion from travel guides, get violently ill at sea (what we would probably call norovirus), narrowly escape a massive city-wide fire, be delayed by a month by a well-meaning neighbour, and your bosses need a proper cadastral survey performed because the last surveyor didn't do as good a job as he claimed he could. This is what happened to British Columbia's first Surveyor General, Joseph Despard Pemberton.

J.D. Pemberton was employed by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and was told that he was to leave London within two days and be on a ship, the RMS Thames heading to Panama via Chagres (Atlantic side of Panama, west of Limon Bay). From Panama (the canal wouldn't be opened for another 63 years) he was to take the first steamer to San Francisco, up to Astoria, then further up to Fort Vancouver, then finally up to Fort Victoria, reporting to Chief Factor James Douglas.

Pemberton's bosses in HBC wanted to have an accurate survey of Victoria and the surrounding area. The first surveyor they hired to do the job was to be 'Company-Colonial Surveyor in the Northwest and Settler,' Captain Walter Colquhoun Grant. It turned out Grant wasn't as qualified as the

HBC wanted. After a while and an incomplete map, Grant and HBC parted ways. J.D. Pemberton was sent out to be Company-Colonial Surveyor of Vancouver Island.<sup>1</sup>

Before Pemberton arrived in Victoria, he had quite the trip; Part of his luggage didn't go with him after Panama, and the luggage that did was detained at various offices in Panama. Once he boarded the steamer California going to San Francisco, many people fell ill including himself. Due to picking up passengers at every port, the California became overcrowded. In Pemberton's own words:

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*"The 'cuisine' became gradually vile, often 'dunce' of the worst description, and cleanliness in the cabins utterly neglected; anything to drink at four times its value, and persons in fever could not obtain any light drink, nothing but bad wines, ales, spirits...*

*When I got here (San Francisco) I was just able to walk without assistance, hands trembling, & ankles swelled out, and unable to speak distinctly. The first night I had a spasmodic fit. I am now, thank God, getting all right again."*  
(A6/120:MF47 p.11) \*

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Pemberton arrived in San Francisco on April 23, 1851 and left there on the steamer Sea Gull in the afternoon of

May 3, 1851. That night San Francisco was consumed by fire which destroyed three quarters of the town, including the hotel where Pemberton had stayed. No one aboard the Sea Gull knew of the fire at the time. When Pemberton arrived at Humbolt Bay (220 miles north of San Francisco) the Sea Gull came across another ship carrying 200 passengers heading to San Francisco that was wrecked. The Captain of the Sea Gull persuaded Pemberton and 40 others to go ashore at Humbolt Bay, so the Sea Gull could go back to San Francisco with the 200 passengers from the wrecked ship. The delay was only to be a few days, but due to the fire in San Francisco, Pemberton was delayed for more than a week. (A6/120:MF47 p.14)

After more delays, on May 20, 1851 Pemberton arrived at Fort Vancouver and was received by Mr. Ogden, the Representative of the Board of Management. According to Pemberton, Ogden "was informed of the nature and circumstances connected with my engagement under the Company, but did not feel justified in going to the expense of sending me express." (A6/120:MF47 p.14,15)

Pemberton eventually arrived at Fort Victoria on June 24, 1851 via the Cowlitz and Nasqually (sic) Rivers, seeing the Puget Sound Company's farms en route. He reported to Douglas who treated Pemberton warmly and said he would help the new surveyor any way he could. Pemberton wrote to his superiors back in London:

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*"From the conversation I had with him (Douglas), a survey of the Fur trade reserves and Puget Sound lands is much wanted, and we propose at once surveying the country from a point west of Esquimalt Harbour to Cordova Bay, including the lands lying on Victoria harbour, Cadboro Bay, Oak Bay, etc etc. Although I have not all the instruments required for the extended survey, I shall find no difficulty in executing this part of the survey in such a manner as to connect and make it uniform with the Trigonometrical survey which is to follow. Some delay in reconnoitering [sic] etc takes place, but I hope to make preliminaries as short as possible, and to be at work in a few days, and shall lose no time in dispatching this part of the survey, including range of about 20 miles, as quickly as possible."*  
(A6/120:MF47 p.15,16)

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Pemberton didn't waste any time and immediately got to work. The fires didn't help his survey, but he still managed to make great progress. He also asked for more assistance as he pointed out in his letter dated August 8 to Andrew Colville (HBC):

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*"Since my arrival here I have been actively engaged preparing the plans alluded to in my last, in doing which, I am confident you will hear from Mr. Douglas, there has been no want of energy on my part. "The Fires" broke out this season earlier than usual, viz. on the 12th of July, giving me only*

*18 clear days; notwithstanding this disadvantage I have surveyed the "fur trade reserve," and am now occupied with the Puget Sound, tracings of which with my report on these districts I shall forward (the) moment they are complete. Mr. Douglas has shewn since my arrival a disposition to assist as much as possible; we have some difficulty in finding men sufficiently active and intelligent, to act as chainmen...Immediately after the annual rain has ceased, the undergrowth of Fern, brush, wild peas etc., in the woods is comparatively low, later in the season it grows to a considerable height, often over one's head. Every exertion should therefore be made to forward the survey immediately after the rain has ceased. There has been but a single shower since my arrival, and from inquiries I have made, even in wither I hope to make considerable progress..."*

*"You will shortly be able to judge at what rate I am able to progress singly, and should you hereafter think it desirable to increase the means at my disposal, I think you will not altogether disapprove of the Pupil system, in which in a great measure, I believe consists the secret of the dispatch with which English Engineers usually execute their engagements. You will also recollect how very indifferently Capt'n Grant's assistant, who had nothing at stake, turned out, and I can assure you that any Engineer has a great deal of trouble, often amounting to annoyance, to make such recruits of service." (A6/120:MF47 p.15)*

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*A. Barclay Esq, etc etc  
September 11, 1851  
Fort Victoria.  
Vancouver's Island*

*Dear Sir  
I beg to enclose to you my Report on the Victoria District, with map of Victoria and Esquimalt districts, sketches of the principal timbers etc, and shall [be] much obliged by your placing same before the Governor and Committee at your convenience. I have likewise procured a box of specimens [margin: specimens] of rocks and soils, to which I would particularly invite your attention, as such remittances might be made in time to form an interesting Geological Cabinet.*

*I remain etc.  
Signed J. D. Pemberton*

*PS. The tracings are unavoidably rough: the error into which they would be most likely to lead an artist or London draughtsman is executing the trees on too large a scale, thereby making the content of land appear very much less than it is – this is a point of much importance, and I would earnestly request the gentleman who shall copy these tracings to consult the execution of an Irish Ordnance map of the same scale, so as to correct me in this and some other particulars. In copying these maps the grouping should be preserved, but the artist should have considerable latitude in other respects.  
(A6/120:MF47 p.16)*

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## Why is this map so important?

5 Locker L isn't just a large, pretty map, and it isn't the oldest map of the south Island. In 1842 Douglas and Aldolphus Lee Lewes made up a sketch map of the south portion of Victoria from Cadboro Bay to the east around the tip and over to Portage Inlet on the west. 5 Locker L happens to be the oldest original map in the LTSA collection. Pemberton's reference to "tracings ... sent along with soil and mineral samples" implies we have the original. What makes this map so interesting is that it and various samples - soil, mineral, vegetation etcetera - were prepared by a surveyor who meant not only to enlighten the HBC of the Cadastral extent of their property on Vancouver Island and Douglas Treaties, but also to be prepared in order to persuade British subjects to colonise Victoria.

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*"It is the opinion of the Governor and Committee that the first objects of survey should be the district around and westward of Fort Victoria, comprehending the tract of country with the natives of which Mr. Douglas has made arrangements in regard to any right which they may have supposed they possessed..."*

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"In making your surveys you will keep in view that they will form the materials or groundwork out of which an accurate map of the island is afterwards to be constructed on the principle stated in the memorandum prepared by you, and as the main object for which these surveys are undertaken is the colonization of the Island,



5 Locker L, Surveyor General Division of Land Title and Survey Authority

you will be careful to note the external features and geological formation of the several localities which you examine, mentioning the nature and qualities of the soil and subsoil, the different kinds of timber and other vegetable productions, and, in short, all such particulars as it may be useful for settlers to be informed of."

Pemberton was also to take charge of the Register of all grants and transfers from one individual to another. (A6/120:MF47 p.8)

In spite of delays, norovirus, extortion plots and one of the most ravaging fires in San Francisco's history, Joseph Despard Pemberton made it to Vancouver Island to become our first Surveyor General, and this plan of Victoria District and part of Esquimalt became the first of many produced by Pemberton and his staff. ❖

### Footnotes

1: Ruggles, Richard I. A Country So Interesting: The Hudson's Bay Company and Two Centuries of mapping, 1670-1870. McGill-Queens University Press, 1991, pp 95-96

\*Provincial Archives of Manitoba, H.B.C. Archives, J.D. Pemberton's Correspondence A6/120: Microfilm 47 (Transcribed)