

From the Archives

No 1

A WHILE AGO I published a "newsletter" called *Traces* dealing with the burning of the first Whonnock General Store in 1916. Now that I have more time available I want to resume the publication of historical newsletters, but to better reflect the main source of this information I have changed the name to *From the Archives*.

Starting with the "Historical Project" of the summer of 1985 the Whonnock Community Association has continued to collect documents and photographs related to the past of Whonnock. Since 1997, the growing collection, known as the Whonnock Archives, has been kept at the Mission Community Archives to assure proper storage. The collection is accessible to anyone interested in our past.

The Whonnock Community Association invites you to search your files for any documents and photographs relating to Whonnock and Whonnockians. If you don't want to donate the documents or photographs, we would be very happy to just keep a copy or scan in the Whonnock Archives with your permission to use the material at some time.

If you have any comments or suggestions, please call me at 604 462 8942.

This issue of *From the Archives* deals with the early history of the predecessors of Whonnock Elementary School. The text and images published here can also be seen on the school's Web site <whonnock.sd42.ca>. The school has kindly allowed me to help providing a history page. Please visit and revisit the school's history page and see it grow.

Fred Braches

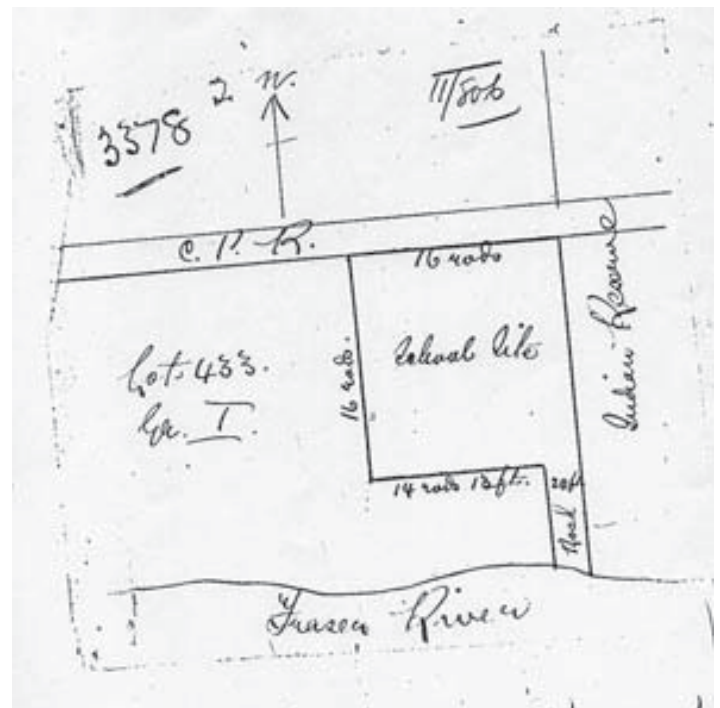
Whonnock BC, March 2004



Whonnock and Ruskin Schools Before 1900

Maple Ridge's First Schools

Maple Ridge's oldest school dates back to 1875, a year after incorporation. It was located at the south end of Laity Street, in what we call today "The Ridge." Ten years later the school in Whonnock was opened and Haney followed in 1888. The next schools followed in 1895 (Yennadon area), 1896 (Websters Corners), 1897 (Ruskin), and 1899 (Hammond).



This is a copy of a sketch on file in the Land Registry Office in New Westminster of the site of the first Whonnock School accepted there in 1884. From the collection of Brian Byrnes.

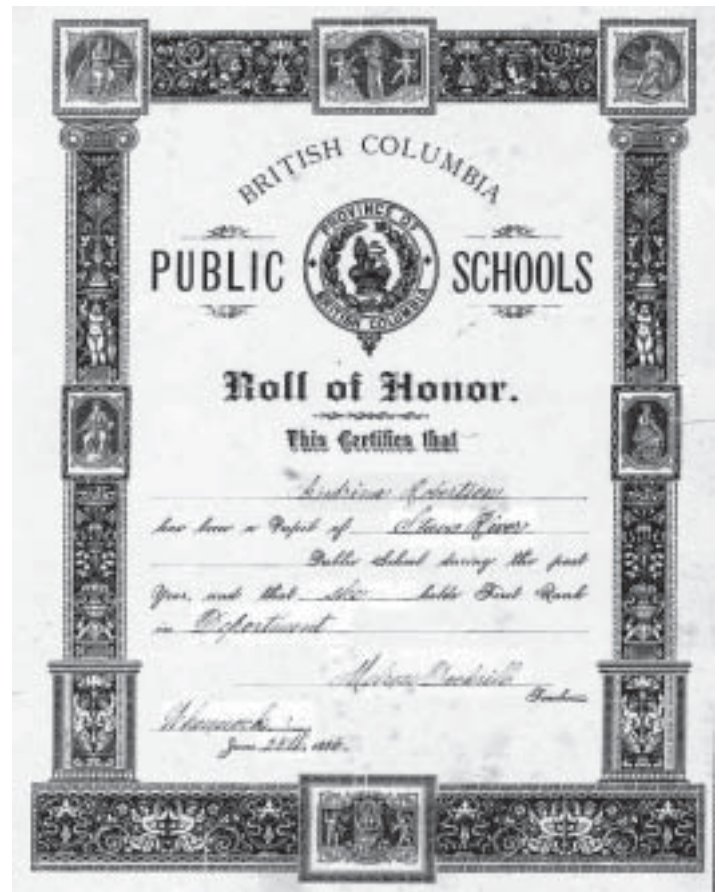
EDUCATION BRANCH OF PROVINCIAL SECRETARY'S DEPARTMENT.

Children 3 School age, Stave River, Resident within the limits of the proposed School District at Stave River.

Names of children	Christian name or name	Age last birthday	Name of parent or guardian
Seabert A.	Thompson	17	Mr Thompson
Walter S.	Thompson	13	" "
Colon C.	Thompson	11	" "
Fannie	Thompson	9	" "
Lilly	Thompson	7	" "
William	Tier	6	Daniel Tier
Harry	Tier	5	" "
John	Tier	4	" "
Georg	Tier	7	Daniel L.
Samuel	Cromarty	15	James Cromarty
Fannie	Oliver	14	Noble Oliver
Annie M.	Oliver	12	" "
Robert E.	Oliver	4	" "
Noble M.	Oliver	6	" "
Charlotte	Robertson	17	Robert Robertson
Christina B.	Robertson	15	" "
Adelina	Robertson	12	" "
Jenny E.	Robertson	8	" "
Mary	Robertson	4	" "

461/84

Above: This is a copy of the list of potential pupils mailed by Noble Oliver to the Superintendent of Schools in Victoria in 1884 to convince him that Whonnock needed a school. The children are from the Thompson, Cheer (here written Tier), Cromarty, Oliver, and Robertson families. The original is in the BC Archives in Victoria.



Above: The text reads: "This certifies that Andrina Robertson has been a pupil of Stave River Public School during the past year and that she holds First Rank in Deportment." This "Roll of Honor" is signed by Melrose Dockrill, Teacher and is dated "Whonnock, 25 June 1886," only a year after the school opened.

Andrina, then about 13 years old, is one of the first students of the Stave River School in Whonnock. She was a daughters of Whonnock's first white settler, Robert Robertson from the Shetlands, and his wife Tselatsetenate from Nicomen Island.

Lyn Ross, descendant of the oldest daughter of Robert Robertson, is the custodian of this and other interesting family documents. For more on our the Robertson family read Whonnock Notes No. 7, "Robert Robertson & Tselatsetenate." All Whonnock Notes are available at the Whonnock Post Office courtesy Sue Schulze.



Left: The Whonnock School on the river bank around 1900. Thomas Mercer was the teacher. Top row from right to left: Thomas Hodgson, Geoffry Hodgson, Bessie Henderson, Jenny Boyd, Kate McCarthy, Ella Owen, Gladys Fancher, William Owen. Bottom row from right to left: George Owen, Constance Hodgson, Constance (or Monna?) McCarthy, Pearl Boyd. Ruth Rolley, Maisie Owen. This image was given by Ruth (Rolley) Ferguson to the Maple Ridge Museum and Archives in 1968.

"Whonnock" and "Ruskin"

Early pioneers did not know Whonnock and Ruskin by those names. They would describe the place where they lived as "near (Fort) Langley" or "near the Stave River." Only after 1885, when the new post office and the new railway station were named "Whonnock," did people identify the place where they lived as "Whonnock." The railway station initially showed a different spelling and several pioneers were writing "Warnock" for a few years. The area they called Whonnock covered today's Whonnock, Ruskin, and the Stave Falls area. Also the Glen Valley people across the river, who received their mail from the Whonnock post office, initially referred to their place as "Whonnock."

The Stave River School in Whonnock

In 1883, settler Marcus Cox from Silverdale (Mission) took the first step to get a school for the area around the Stave River by writing a letter to the Superintendent in Victoria. When the new Stave River district was established on 5 June 1884, it became clear that Silverdale was outside its boundaries. Therefore a very disappointed Marcus Cox could not be a school trustee of the new Stave River School and his children could not even attend the Whonnock school. Noble Oliver, Whonnock's first postmaster and shop keeper, took over where Cox left off. Oliver remained the secretary of the board of trustees for more than ten years.

The first schoolhouse in Whonnock was ready in the summer of 1885. It stood on land between the Fraser and the railway tracks, west of the Whonnock Reserve, and it stayed there for some fifty years. Its official name was Stave River School, but in 1897 this name was given to a new school in Ruskin.

The Long Way to School

There were only a few families living in the Stave River school district and only children who lived close to the Whonnock school could attend classes on a regular basis. There were no roads to speak of and the winter rains made the tracks impassable. Under the best of circumstances for many children reaching school was a chore: "A number of students have a walk of three miles or over," reports the first teacher, "and some have to cross the river and that makes [attendance] uncertain." The annual school reports show an enrolment of between 25 and 36 students, but the average attendance would be at best half of that, depending on the weather and also parents would keep children home if they were needed for work there.

Growing up without education

The transcontinental railway brought a steady stream of new settlers to Maple Ridge and children everywhere in the district needed schooling. We know from an 1893 letter that there were only three schools in the municipality: Maple Ridge (The Ridge), Port Haney, and "Warnock." Three miles was the maximum distance child was allowed to travel to the schoolhouse, and many children living beyond three miles were growing up without public education. In the following years, the number of schools in Maple Ridge grew from three to seven with new schools starting in the Yennadon area (1895), Websters Corners (1896), Ruskin (1897), and Hammond (1899).

The "Front" & North Whonnock—where should the school be moved?

The children from North Whonnock hardly ever attended school, as the distance from their homes, although within the three-mile limit, was prohibitive. Therefore, when in 1892, Glen Valley, across the Fraser River from Whonnock, got its own schoolhouse, attendance at the school in Whonnock reached an unacceptable low and a new location for the school was considered.

It was proposed to move the schoolhouse to what is now 104th Avenue, halfway between 272nd Street and Whonnock Creek, but even this compromise did not satisfy either the "Front" or the "North." The parents from North Whonnock had a place ready at the northeast corner of today's 272nd Street and 112th Avenue, not too far away from where the present Whonnock Elementary would be built more than a century later.

In May of 1884 rapid melting of an unusually high snow pack combined with widespread rainfall in the interior resulted in immense flooding all over the Fraser Valley delta. Fortunately Whonnock, lying on higher ground except for some land on the riverbank south of the rail track, was out of danger and even its little schoolhouse was spared.

However, disaster of a different kind struck the parents from the "Front." A special school meeting was called in June 1894 to agree on the move to 104th Avenue. The meeting took an unexpected turn when the "North" managed to force and win a vote to rather move the school house to 112th Avenue. Noble Oliver, then secretary of the school board, later asked the Superintendent of Education in Victoria for "compassion" adding "...the school is now going to be placed where it will do duty only to a few Norwegian settlers." Those were the Lee and Nelson families.

In the end all remained the same—the Superintendent did nothing and the schoolhouse stayed where it was between the tracks and the Fraser River. Also, as some new settlers arrived, and several residents, who initially had wished the school to be at 112th Avenue, moved closer to the river, the attendance levels went up again.

In 1897 a new school was built in Ruskin, which was given the name "Stave River School." From that time the school in Whonnock was officially known as the "Whonnock School."

The Stave River school at the Ruskin

In 1896, the Canadian Co-operative Society (CCS) started lumbering and sawmilling at the Stave River. The number of children of the families attached to the co-operative warranted the establishment of a school at the mouth of the Stave River, where the mill was and where they lived. The new school opened on 1 April 1897 with an enrolment of 30. The government records refer to the new school as "Stave River" until about 1910, when it starts to be listed as "Ruskin."

The Rise and fall of the CCS

The name Ruskin Mills was given to the place at the mouth of the Stave River by the members of the Canadian Co-operative

Society (CCS). The society was established in 1893, but it was not until 1896 that they started their colony and their work in Ruskin, probably inspired by the Ruskin Co-operatives in Tennessee. John Ruskin, after whom Ruskin is named, was an English author and critic who encouraged co-operatives.

According to a newspaper report of May 1897, the CCS had 54 members, 35 of whom lived and worked at or around the mills. The same report lists, in addition to a "well-equipped sawmill...with machinery to turn out all kinds of lumber," a boiler house, shingle mill, dry kiln, boarding house, general store, public school, smithy shop, shoemaker's shop, barns, and homes for the members. A post office was added on New Year's Day the following year. An instant community was created overnight with amenities equal to those of Whonnock and with employment right in their midst. In 1898, Henderson's directory acknowledged the birth of a new community called Ruskin by giving it a separate entry. The year before, the residents had been listed as residents of Whonnock.

The co-operative seemed to flourish but an exceptionally rainless summer in 1898 dried the Stave up and logs could not be moved to the plant. The CCS lacked the money to survive the crisis and it folded in 1898. It surrendered its assets to E.H. Heaps & Co. in the spring of 1899. Some of the members continued working in Ruskin and other members moved away. Many became later active in British Columbia's labour movement.

Charles Whetham

Charles Whetham was a justice of the peace and a distinguished school trustee. He was a scholar, who previously had taught at colleges in Ontario and Vancouver. Whetham granted permission to the Canadian Co-operative Society to build a permanent schoolhouse on his land, away from the mill. He took an active part in frequent discussion meetings where Ruskin's philosophy and socialist ideas were explored. It is said that Whetham became the counsellor and friend of all the settlers wise enough to seek his advice.

The young idealists who formed the Canadian Co-operative Society were eager to widen their scope. A Ruskin pioneer, remembering Ruskin School's earliest days, writes: "...this period was, perhaps, the liveliest in the history of the school. The Socialists were keen and aggressive about their experiment, and this spirit carried over to the children at school."

Moving away from the noise

The place used for the first classes at the centre of the industrial activities in Ruskin could only have been a temporary solution. The racket from the sawmill was too much for both teacher and pupils. "It maked the teacher craze" settler Jim Donatelli later said about it. Some say that the school stayed there for a few years, but recent studies suggest that when classes resumed after the summer recess in 1897 the students would have returned to a rural school on Whetham's land, away from the noise and dust. This was the place where in 1916 the school building was constructed that is still there.

—Fred Braches

FIRST STUDENTS REGISTERED AT THE STAVE RIVER SCHOOL IN RUSKIN IN 1897

Ball, David	12
Donnelly, Mamie	11
Donnelly, Harry	7
Douglas, Mabel	7
Douglas, Wallace	9
Douglas, Thomas	12
Douglas, Edgar	14
Downey, Lancelow	6
Downey, William	5
Downie, Hannah	14
Fancher, Gladys	9
Farmington, Stanley	11
Martin, Margaret	11
Martin, Kenric	13
Meorn, Arthur	14
Ostrom, Darwin	11
Smith, Lillian	10
Watson, Mary	12
Watson, Lewis	7
Watson, Allan	11
Watson, John	9
Watson, Arthur	5
West, George	9
West, Lena	7
Wilband, Burns	12
Wilband, Laura	11
Wilband, Jennie	10
Wilband, Bellamy	6
Wilband, Seward	5
Wilbrand, Hesson	8

