

# Rollicking Boomtown



Take a glimpse into an era that was wild and got even wilder when Gold Rush madness descended on Victoria. There was plenty of drama in a town known for opium smuggling, gambling and prostitution.

## Sealing Pirates of Victoria

*"My first impression...was...of his strength...a strength we are wont to associate with things primitive..."*

*Jack London – The Sea Wolf*

Many claim that Wolf Larsen was based on the life of a real sealing captain, Alex MacLean. He was legendary for his prowess at catching seals...and for his brushes with the law. Sealing in the North Pacific was tough and unpredictable, where one could easily win a fortune or lose a life.



The Sealing Schooner Vera Homeward Bound

In 1886, the American government illegally declared the Bering Sea their territorial waters in order to protect their sealing interests. They began to seize vessels and this became a new hazard for Canadian sealers. The sealers risked losing all their catch and possibly being jailed in Alaska. This is when Alex MacLean's "outlaw" reputation began.

The fleet continued to grow to 124 ships, most sailing out of Victoria. Many feared that war would break out, but overharvesting soon affected the seal population and industry began to decline.

In 1904, high pelt prices lured MacLean back to sealing and the Americans were after him again! Jack London had just published his novel *The Sea Wolf*. Once the press learned that the main character was based on the pirate McLean, they went wild. At sea, McLean's crew lost its resolve and he reluctantly retreated to Canada and gave up sealing for good.

**1 Inner Harbour** – Imagine the excitement when the SS Commodore steamed into the Inner Harbour on April 25, 1858, with a boatload of what looked like pirates! They were the first gold miners from San Francisco and by the end of the year, almost 20,000 more had passed through Victoria heading for the Fraser River Gold Rush. The Inner Harbour was bigger then, stretching inland under where the Empress Hotel is now. Soon a wooden bridge spanned the water and eventually the bay was filled in.

**2 901 Government** – Up Government Street, amid the boomtown of tents and wooden buildings, rose the **Windsor Hotel**, one of BC's first brick buildings. It's now covered in mock Tudor siding. George Richardson built the original in 1858 to appeal to a high-class clientele. His bar literally "boomed" one night when Richardson noticed an odd smell. Not recognizing it as a leaking gas pipe, he took a candle and crept downstairs to investigate. This set off a mighty explosion that blew out all the windows and part of a wall. Miraculously, he survived!

**3 Government Street** – Mud in the winter and dust in the summer – Victoria's Gold Rush streets were primitive. Horses sank up to their bellies in places, and it was said jokingly that men wore hip-waders to cross the street. **Government** was the main street, but it was just as bad as the others.

**4 1022 Government** – "There are strange things done in the midnight sun by the men who toil for gold." These are the opening words of a famous gold-rush poem, *The Cremation of Sam McGee*. Robert Service wrote it in the Yukon in 1907 during the Klondike Gold Rush. In 1903 he was a teller here at what was then the **Bank of Commerce**. He lived above the bank where he is said to have slept with a loaded revolver under his pillow to protect the bank from "strange things" throughout the night.

**5** **1002 Wharf** – Boom and bust was the pattern of Victoria's progress in the 1800s as five separate gold rushes came and went. BC joined Canada in 1871 and the Canadian government built the **Dominion Customs House** on Wharf Street a few years later. During the Klondike Gold Rush miners lined up here to get permits to pass from Skagway, Alaska, into the Yukon Territory in Canada.

**6** **Wharf Street Waterfront** – The gateway to Victoria for most gold miners was the **Enterprise Wharf** (now a parking lot below Wharf Street). To feed the hungry miners, cattle were unloaded from ships and kept in large corrals, then herded through town to the slaughterhouses. Ships from around the world brought goods that were stored in warehouses that lined the waterfront.

The **Hudson's Bay Company's brick warehouse** was the biggest building in the colony when it opened in 1859. Gold pans, flour, frying pans, boots, blankets and ammunition were sold here. The enormous building was demolished in the 1940s, but the stone and brick foundations still form part of the Wharf Street retaining wall opposite Bastion Square.

**7** **1100 Block Wharf** – Gold Rush Victoria looked a lot like old San Francisco. **Commercial Row** was a string of shops and warehouses built in 1862, designed by sometime undertaker Richard Lewis. Several facades were decorated with ornate cast-iron columns made in a San Francisco foundry, the name of which you can see at the bottom of each column.

**8** **Bastion Square** – The centre of action in Gold Rush Victoria was **Bastion Square**. Miners passing through town were a wild bunch. Most were single men who resorted to drinking, gambling, womanizing and fighting. Not surprisingly, one of the first buildings was the police barracks and jail (present site of the Maritime Museum). Many rowdy miners ended up there and were often forced to work on the chain gang.

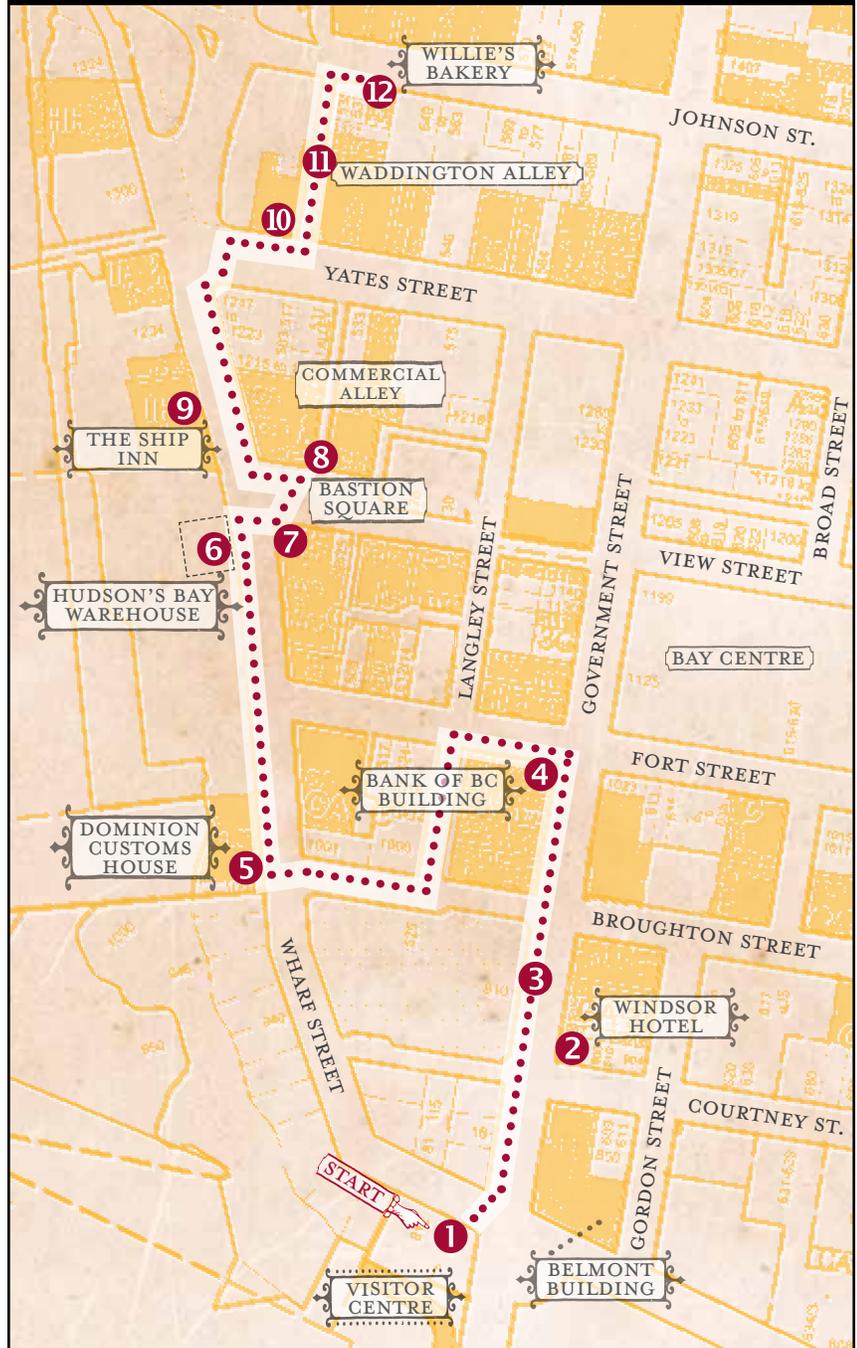
Fire was a constant threat to the flimsy wooden buildings and tents that made up most of the early gold-rush city. In 1859 the first fire department, the **Union Hook and Ladder Company**, was started by volunteers. Its tiny wooden fire hall faced Bastion Square, next to Helmcken Alley. Two other fire brigades followed in 1860: the Deluge Engine Company and the Tiger Engine Company. Once they both arrived at a fire at the same time. Instead of working together, the rival firemen started a fist fight for rights to put out the fire and the building burned to the ground!

**9** **1218 Wharf** – Miners were a thirsty lot and many headed straight for **The Ship Inn**, operated by James Yates at the corner of Wharf and Yates Streets. Founded in 1853, it was the colony's first tavern. As demand grew, Yates moved here to the harbour side of the street. He built his new pub of stone and brick, with cast-iron columns which you can still see in front of the building.

**10** **515 Yates** – Gold flowed into Victoria from many gold rushes around British Columbia. In 1864, one occurred only a few miles from Victoria at **Leechtown**, near Sooke. Samuel Booth, an Afro-American prospector, found a nugget as big as a hen's egg and sent it into town. It was displayed in the window of Wells Fargo and Company here at the foot of Yates Street.

**11** **Waddington Alley** – Just up Yates Street on your left is **Waddington Alley**. After 1858, the number of saloons, gambling dens and dance halls in Victoria soared. Many were located along nearby Johnson Street where Alfred Waddington owned several properties. He built Waddington Alley to encourage customers to come over to his establishments from Bastion Square and Yates Street. Years later, the muddy alley was paved with wooden blocks, many of which are still visible today.

# ROLLICKING BOOMTOWN



**12** **Lower Johnson Street** – The Klondike Gold Rush that started in 1897 changed the face of **Johnson Street** forever. Wooden structures were replaced by the present brick buildings along the street. Saloons were at almost every door, and hotels – some of dubious reputation – operated upstairs. The places along Johnson Street did a roaring business and it was a busy time for Victoria.

For 40 years gold rushes put a unique stamp on the complexion of the city, one often forgotten as Victoria assumed its more dignified image.

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