

x^wməθk^wə́əm

Musqueam: An Introduction



Musqueam Cultural Centre. Courtesy of Musqueam Indian Band.

ʔə́mí ce:p k^wətχ^wiləm — Welcome

“ We belong to this land. It’s a part of who we are. ”

čəmq^wa:t — Larissa Grant, 2014

“ Musqueam traditional territory is the area that we’ve lived off of, we’ve fished, we’ve hunted, we gathered, and it’s something that we’ve never given away. It’s something that we still hold and we still believe is our right. We still hold title over the lands, which encompass what is now called Greater Vancouver. ”

čaləχ^wəlenəχ^w — Wade Grant, 2014

x^wməθk^wəyəm

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Our Community

We are the həhqəmiñəm–speaking Musqueam people, part of the broader cultural group known as the Central Coast Salish. We have lived here in our territory for over 9,000 years. Our ancestors moved throughout our traditional territory using the resources the land provided for fishing, hunting, trapping, gathering food and medicines, and to maintain their livelihood. For millennia, Musqueam has maintained strong cultural values and practices tied to the lands and waters of our territory. Our community elders continue to pass on our teachings and history to our youth to keep our culture and traditions strong. Our deep connection to our lands and waters is reflected in our language, our oral histories, our belongings, and our ceremonies. This has always been our way.

Today, we are a thriving community of over 1,300 members. Musqueam’s traditional and unceded territory encompasses much of what is now known as the Lower Mainland. About half of our community members live on a very small portion of our traditional territory in our village of x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), located south of Northwest Marine Drive near the mouth of the North Arm of the Fraser River. Other community members live off-reserve in other parts of the Lower Mainland, and beyond.

Our ancestors had many villages and moved throughout our territory, but their main winter village was always located at the mouth of the Fraser River. Nine thousand years ago, that village was səwq^weqsən (Glenrose). As the river delta grew and the mouth of the river moved, many of our ancestors moved with it. Between 5,000 and 2,500 years ago, our ancient village and burial site of čəsnaʔəm was at the mouth of the river. čəsnaʔəm is located by what is now known as the Marpole neighbourhood of Vancouver. It remained a major village until about 1,500 years ago, when, with the changing delta, most of our people moved to join those already at x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam).

The name Musqueam relates back to the məθk^wəy, a flowering plant that once flourished in our community. Our oral history, passed on from generation to generation, explains how we became known as the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam): people from where the məθk^wəy grows.

We lived in family longhouses called sθe:wtx^w. In our language, the word actually means “a big house.” We grew up surrounded by our grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins who provided us with our snəweyət – teachings from childhood. Our families came together to govern this region. They are still strong and their wisdom guides our community.

Families were interconnected by marriage. These relationships created networks radiating up and down the coast and into the Interior, beyond modern borders. They were part of a sophisticated economy which included long-distance trade that kept resources flowing in and out of the territory. We traded dentalia shell from western Vancouver Island, obsidian from Mount Garibaldi and Oregon, and nephrite from the Fraser Canyon. These are only a few of the resources traded. Our position at the mouth of the river meant that we controlled traders’ access to markets.

Over the past 125 years, archaeologists, collectors, and treasure hunters have mined the ʔəsnaʔəm village and burial ground, as well as other Musqueam village sites, for belongings and ancestral remains, many of which are now in museums and private collections locally and abroad. ʔəsnaʔəm has been given various names since settlers arrived in our homeland. These names include the Great Fraser Midden, the Eburne Midden, DhRs-1, and the Marpole Midden—a name under which it would receive designation as a National Historic Site in 1933. ʔəsnaʔəm was part of a network of villages in our territory and of a larger regional network of familial, intergovernmental, and trade relations.

Community Wealth

Our sniʔ (teachings) are part of who we are. They are expressed in our šxʷtəhimʔ (teachings and customs), in our day-to-day interactions, and in the respect we show to each other and our work. Teachings are passed on when we are sʔəqʔip (gathered together) with our families and elders, listening and asking questions, and being open to learning from others. Through this, we learn our kinship, proper behaviour, and responsibilities. This knowledge is transferred between generations in our homes and during our ceremonies. These ceremonies were banned by the Canadian federal government under the Indian Act from 1884 until 1951. Some ceremonies continued in secret, hidden from the authorities. Our ceremonies and culture are strong today. They are our wealth.

Governance

In our culture, the rights to names and other hereditary privileges and responsibilities are passed down through both one's mother's and father's families. In Musqueam villages, families lived together in large cedar longhouses. Decisions impacting the community were made by the most knowledgeable people on the topic at hand. Decisions were made by listening to all knowledge holders and building consensus. Colonial agents worked to disrupt this system by banning our ceremonies, imposing a governance system with an elected chief, and telling us who was considered Musqueam and who wasn't. Today, we continue to work towards self-determination.

Language and Stories

“They're not stories, they're not legends, they're our truths.”

taxʷtəna:t — Wendy Grant-John, 2014

“Language is the truest identifier of who you are and where you come from.”

sʔəyətəq — Larry Grant, 2014

hənqəmihənəm, our ancestral language, is important because it represents our culture and our ways of knowing. Language is the heart of our culture; it is through language that we have passed down teachings and kept our traditions alive. Oral history has preserved our cultural traditions. Our deep connection to our lands and waters is reflected in our language, our oral histories, and our ceremonies.

Ancestral Territory

“ *The stáləw (Fraser River) is the heart and soul of Musqueam people. We are tied to this river that has nourished us for centuries.* ”

θəliχ^wəlwət — Debra Sparrow, 2014

“ *The water is really the heartbeat of our community. It really is the giver of life for us. If we understand all of the stories and legends, which to me are truths — they’re not stories, they’re not legends, they’re our truths — the majority center around our connection to the water, whether it was food, whether it was trade, or whether it was war.* ”

tax^wtəna:t — Wendy Grant-John, 2014

stáləw, the river now known as the Fraser River, is one of the largest salmon-producing rivers in the world and it is the lifeline for our community. It is used as a highway, a food source, and shapes the land we live on. The river is also a symbol that represents the many ties that it creates and facilitates — the interconnections of different village sites and connections to family, trade, and resources. The river provides a sense of place, a sense of home, and a strong tie to the land. This land, our home, is central to our culture, our families, and to our lineages.

Plants

We show respect for all the resources we harvest. We harvest plants from early spring through the fall. Each species has its own harvest time and different uses. Our ancestors used digging sticks to bring roots and bulbs to the surface for food. Fruits and berries were gathered in baskets and enjoyed fresh and dried. t^θəχ^wt^θəχ^w (stinging nettles) provided fibres for netting to catch fish and waterfowl. wi:f (tule) were gathered and sewn into mats. We used these to divide houses into apartments or to create temporary summer dwellings.

Our st^θəlməχ^w (medicines) treat more than our physical sicknesses, they treat our spirits as well. Our specialists perfected their skills over thousands of years of research and practice and they passed this knowledge down to us. Specialists gathered plants to prepare medicines for their families and the community. This knowledge persists, but most of our harvest locations are paved over, polluted, or have been made into parks where harvesting is not permitted.

Tall, cedar forests used to surround our ancient villages and provided for us in many ways. Cedar trees continue to be important in our daily and ceremonial lives. The wood can be split using mauls and wedges into long planks for house boards and roofing. Skilled carvers create canoes, boxes, house posts, carvings, and tools using cedar. We travel into the całəq^w (inland) to strip bark from living cedar trees in May and June. sləwəy (inner cedar bark) is separated from the outer bark, dried, and later softened for use. We use these materials to create belongings such as hats, capes, baskets, and ropes. Look around Vancouver today — where are our forests?

ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ — Hunting and Fishing

Our ancestors hunted and fished these lands. They trained their bodies, hearts, and minds so they would be able to provide for the community. Each family had private knowledge and powers that assisted them. Youth learned their kinship and how to conduct themselves to earn their familial rights and privileges, which included access to hunting, fishing, and gathering sites. ᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (elk) and ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃ (deer) lived in the nearby forests. We travelled into the Salish Sea (a name we now use to refer to the ocean waters surrounding us) for ᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (seals) and ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃ (sea lions) and to the North Shore Mountains and Howe Sound for ᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (mountain goats). Our weavers used mountain goat hair and woolly dog hair to create ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ, the intricate blankets that were, and still are, part of our wealth.

We harvested all five species of salmon: ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (spring), ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (coho), ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (pink), ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (sockeye), and ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (chum). Our ancestors from the time of ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ also developed specialized fishing techniques for ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (flounder), ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (herring), ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (eulachon), ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (halibut), ᓂᓃᓃᓃᓃᓃ (sturgeon), and other species. We built sturgeon traps along the mouth of the Fraser River to harvest at low tide. From our canoes we used seine nets, gill nets, herring rakes, or fishing lines, depending on the species, season, tide, and river flow. From the beach, teams of men used seine nets to capture rock fish and starry flounder.

Today, overfishing and habitat loss restrict the resources we can harvest. We are proactively working to conserve endangered and threatened species.

