

Lesson Plan: Proto British Columbia: Our Early History

Grade Level: High School (Grades 10–12)

Subject: Social Studies, Canadian History

Duration: 1-2 class periods (50–60 minutes each)

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will:

1. Understand the early history of British Columbia, what we can call Proto British Columbia, including its governance by the Hudson’s Bay Company and the factors leading to the 1846 Treaty.
 2. Analyze the multicultural and economic contributions of the Columbia region and its transition to British Columbia.
 3. Evaluate the impact of the 49th parallel border decision on indigenous and settler communities.
 4. Reflect on how historical events shaped the identity and values of modern British Columbia.
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Materials Needed

1. Video called [Proto British Columbia: Our Early History](#) or Video Script.
 2. Map of the British Columbia region before and after the 1846 Treaty.
 3. Timeline handout of key events (Hudson’s Bay Company governance, 1846 Treaty, establishment of British Columbia).
 4. Discussion prompts and reflection worksheets.
 5. Whiteboard/Smartboard for visual aids.
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Lesson Outline

1. Introduction (10 minutes)

- **Hook Question:** Begin with, *“What makes British Columbia unique in Canada and North America? How do you think its early history shaped its identity?”*
 - Encourage brief student responses to establish curiosity.
- Provide a brief overview of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s role in governing Columbia and the 1846 Treaty.

2. Storytelling: Early History of British Columbia (15 minutes)

- **Video/Reading:** Show the Video and share additional insights from Video Supplementary Notes. Highlight these themes:
 - Governance by the Hudson's Bay Company as both business and government.
 - Multicultural society in the original Columbia.
 - Indigenous partnerships and the development of Chinook Jargon.
 - The events leading to the 1846 Treaty and the establishment of the 49th parallel as the border.
- Use a map to show the territorial changes before and after the treaty including the trading communities that were abandoned.

3. Group Activity: Mapping Society and Economics (15 minutes)

- Divide students into small groups and assign each group a focus area:
 1. **Governance and the Hudson's Bay Company:** How did it function as a government?
 2. **Indigenous Contributions:** What role did indigenous communities play in the economy and society?
 3. **Multicultural Society:** How did diverse ethnicities interact in Columbia?
 4. **Economic Centers:** Why was Vancouver (on the Columbia River) significant?
- **Task:** Each group creates a short presentation or poster summarizing their findings.

4. Class Discussion: Impacts of the 1846 Treaty (10 minutes)

- **Guided Questions:**
 - What were the consequences of the 49th parallel decision for the people living in Columbia?
 - How did the treaty affect indigenous communities, settlers, and the Hudson's Bay Company?
 - How might British Columbia's history have been different if the border had been drawn elsewhere?

5. Reflection and Connection (10 minutes)

- **Individual Reflection Prompt:** Students write a response to one of these questions:

1. How does the early history of British Columbia inspire us to create a better society today?
 2. What lessons can we learn from the multicultural and peaceful society of Columbia?
- **Discussion or Sharing:** Volunteers share their reflections with the class.
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Assessment

1. **Participation:** Evaluate engagement in group work and discussions.
 2. **Presentations/Posters:** Assess the depth of understanding and creativity in group work.
 3. **Reflection Responses:** Use a rubric to assess critical thinking, historical understanding, and personal connection.
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Key Terms and Concepts

- Hudson's Bay Company
 - Columbia Department
 - 1846 Treaty and 49th Parallel
 - Multicultural society and Chinook Jargon
 - Indigenous partnerships
 - Economic and cultural centers
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Extension Activities

1. **Research Project:** Investigate the history of a specific place name in British Columbia that reflects its early history.
2. **Debate:** Should the Hudson's Bay Company have raised an army to defend Columbia?
3. **Creative Writing:** Write a journal entry from the perspective of an indigenous trader, a Hudson's Bay Company officer, or an immigrant in 1840s Columbia.

Video Script of Proto British Columbia: Our Early History

If you trace back the government of British Columbia, before it became a province of Canada, or a colony of the United Kingdom, before the 1846 Treaty that separated the United States from

British North America, the powers of government were held by the Honourable Hudson's Bay Company, which ran the Columbia Department from Fort Vancouver. The title Honourable meant "representing government"; it was both business and government. As the first modern administration accountable to the government in Britain, it established the culture that continues to influence British Columbia to this day.

The Honourable Company developed mutual relations with hundreds of independent indigenous communities, improved their quality of life with manufactured products, reduced warfare and slavery, developed functions of a modern state, and supported the aspirations of people from dozens of immigrant ethnicities. It even supported a new language to enable the many indigenous and nonindigenous people to communicate together.

The tragedy of its story would inspire British Columbians to build a society worthy of its lost past. This is part of that story...

Until 1846, British Columbia was just called Columbia; it stretched from California to Alaska including the Panhandle. Its capital was Vancouver on the Columbia River. It was the largest settlement on the west coast, governing over 30 trading communities connected by brigades, bringing furs to Vancouver and trade goods back every summer. The New Caledonia Brigade; the California Brigade, the Snake River and Langley brigades; all centered on Vancouver. A fleet of Vancouver ships served its coastal communities, including the first steamship the 'SS Beaver'. Vancouver was the original Terminal City with brigades coming and going from the Hudson's Bay and Montréal. Almost everyone entering or leaving Columbia did so through Vancouver. Its ships traveled to Honolulu and London with products from its farms, sawmills, fisheries, distributed around the world.

Vancouver was the cultural center of the west coast. It had the first school with students from 1000 km away; the first theatrical plays, library, hospital; the first teachers, doctors; supported the first artists and scientists of renown.

Vancouver was Columbia's industrial center with shipbuilding and mills operating through the night; it had blacksmiths, millwrights, coopers. Its farms, herds, orchards and industrial bakery served all of Columbia and beyond.

Vancouver had 35 ethnic groups, 30 per cent were Hawaiian. A new native based language, Chinook Jargon fully developed in Vancouver and from there, spread throughout Columbia.

The first Governor of Columbia was John McLoughlin, part French; his Deputy was James Douglas, part black. Both married aboriginal women and their families lived in the Governor's Mansion. First Nations Indian Bands were central to the economy, providing most of the export goods, protecting the trading communities. Restrictions on religious missions and European

settlement in western British territories helped maintain peace and traditional native cultures, until this was overturned by the Parliament in London in the 1830s.

US efforts to establish a presence on the west coast were short-lived. Britain extended its laws there; the US did not, and it imposed foreign import duties on goods from the area. McLoughlin authorized intensive trapping near the eastern border to create a 'fur desert' leading American fur traders to decrease from 500 to 50. McLoughlin outcompeted US trading ships, which eventually abandoned the coast.

For almost half a century Columbia, this Proto British Columbia, sustained a multicultural society around its capital Vancouver living in peace with indigenous people. Its presence was so powerful that the United States and ambivalent British politicians had to accept the reality of a Columbia on the west coast. To these people we owe the existence of British Columbia.

Would negotiations or war determine the US border? A US agent described Willamette Valley farmers as "loyal Canadians", their farms show the Canadian influence; a French report agreed that the Columbia River area should remain British. Almost all US newcomers stayed south of the Columbia River, which they assumed would be the border. But US President Polk refused to decide the border through an international tribunal.

In London, Parliament defended British commitment to the Columbia River, but an election saw a new government that was committed to free trade and saw no need for more colonies.

US President James Polk was a slave owner who wanted to expand slavery in the South. He needed to resolve the northern border so he could attack Mexico; he couldn't risk war with both Britain and Mexico. He knew that any added northern territories would not allow slavery, so he was not motivated for them to be large.

When negotiations began, no Americans lived north of the Columbia River. Although he had campaigned for taking over British Columbia with the slogan "54'40" or fight" Polk made his aggressive opening offer – just to the 49th parallel. Given the pressure he was under, he clearly wanted a deal. The British ambassador refused to even forward it to London, so no counteroffer could be made. Polk withdrew his offer and threatened war. Aberdeen agreed so hastily he left Point Roberts and the San Juan Islands in the US. Britain could not offer the Whidbey Island option, which would have given the US its strategic goals of access to Puget Sound and kept the whole Fraser Valley.

What Douglas called "that monstrous treaty" abandoned Columbia and 90% of his people and infrastructure which he had devoted his life to building; it was ratified just before the old government returned to power. With Britain neutralized, the US declared war on Mexico and annexed enough land to offset its northern 'nonslave' windfall.

The Hudson's Bay Company had discouraged slavery in indigenous communities, purchasing the freedom of slaves when necessary. When Oregon's first Governor, a slave owner, arrived in the state, James Douglas, who descended from slaves, prepared to leave. On May 19, 1849, Douglas left Vancouver and Columbia for good, leading a caravan to his new capital Victoria. He left behind a land full of place names, lasting reminders of the Columbia that was. But he brought Chinook Jargon, the trade language that symbolized the old Columbia, its multicultural values and respect for native people.

The U.S. Army began three decades of wars against the indigenous former allies of Columbia. Native violence was directed at US settlers; Columbians, former Company men with indigenous wives were suspected of being collaborators and were arrested. Some former employees and supporters of the Hudson's Bay Company tried to help their old allies. William Tolmie returned from Victoria to defend Chief Leschi, whose brother had been killed in the office of the first Washington Governor, Isaac Stevens. But the Chief was executed as a criminal.

Columbia was gone, as was its capital Vancouver. But soon a new Columbia and a new Vancouver would arise in the north.

There were two territories in early Proto British Columbia under the North West Company.

New Caledonia, governed from Fort St James, and Columbia, governed from Fort George, now Astoria. The Hudson's Bay Company government knew that the most valuable furs were in the colder north, so it considered abandoning the south but occupied it as a strategic buffer to increase its bargaining position to ultimately protect New Caledonia from becoming part of the US. The two territories amalgamated under the name Columbia, governed from Vancouver on the Columbia River.

In 1841 a new government in London rejected long-standing British policy for a Columbia River border. The Foreign Secretary wrote his Prime Minister about Columbia "Its real importance is insignificant".

But the Hudson Bay Company lobbied hard for Columbia. A US Secretary of State said, "if it were not for the Hudson's Bay Company, Britain would give us the whole country up to 54'40". A British envoy confirmed to the US government, "the Hudson's Bay Company has Rights which must be protected".

US President Polk prepared for war. The Hudson's Bay Company committed to raising an army of 2000 to fight the US for Columbia, but it wanted them led by British army officers. Britain wanted Company Officers to lead the soldiers, but they would contribute to the costs.

Britain called for an international tribunal. The Secretary of State confided "The British government wants to be clear of the question on almost any terms; If the arbitrator should award the whole territory... it would yield it without a murmur".

Congress took the first step towards declaring war. At the same time Mexican relations worsened; it seemed the US might have to fight two wars. The tone in the U.S. Senate changed encouraging Britain to resume negotiations.

US politicians believed "the people of the US would not be willing to sustain a war for the country north of the 49th". And.

British Columbia was "wholly unfit for agriculture and incapable of sustaining any considerable population. Almost its only value is in the furs collected; and even in this, it is not of much importance."

The Americans were anxious for a treaty. The British proposal was quickly accepted word for word with much elation. The US immediately declared war on Mexico.

Prime Minister Peel said, "A single month of war, would have been more costly than the value of the whole territory". The Times agreed, "What we abandoned was not worth a moment's regret, what we retained was no great cause of exaltation".

The HBC government had occupied the south to protect New Caledonia from the US. In the end, this is exactly what happened. British Columbia exists today because of Honourable Hudson's Bay Company.

British Columbia had its beginnings in the economically prosperous, multicultural society created by the Hudson's Bay Company in partnership with indigenous people around the original capital of Vancouver on the Columbia River. This came to a sudden end when the UK and the US agreed to a border at the 49th parallel.

But people did not forget the society they had created. They moved north and created a new society inspired by the one they left behind. But they brought their memories and the Chinook Jargon language that had developed in their midst.

We can continue to be inspired by our history. We can take up their challenge to build a prosperous and peaceful society worthy of our past, that enables its citizens to live quality lives in freedom, prosperity and mutual benefit in this new British Columbia.

Video Supplemental Class Notes

Many histories of BC start with the founding of the Vancouver Island Colony in 1849 or just before. But there is a very important part of our history that is rarely covered, which had a profound impact on the province we know today.

It is important to remember the communities that existed before Columbia. There were hundreds of villages that were independently governed. There were no groups of villages that were governed as a unit, in which several villages would look to a government that could make decisions for them.

People were divided by language. In British Columbia alone, there are 36 separate indigenous languages, and almost 100 distinct dialects. People were also divided by geography. There were no roads at all, and the wheel was not known. There was also a lot of warfare. Many villages would make raids on other villages to kill the males and take the women and children as slaves.

They were also very poor. They had no iron tools or good, widely available blankets. The first traders said they had an insatiable for these. Hudson's Bay blankets must have improved their quality of life immensely. They did not have any significant agriculture. Starvation was an ever present possibility.
