

The Powell in “Powell River”

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I should start this article by explaining who I am. I do not, and have never, lived in Powell River for more than a few weeks at a time. I am an historian who works with the Tla’amin Nation, and I have read many of the historical documents that explain how a large swath of Tla’amin territory became remade as Powell River.



Photo: K. Van't Schip 2021

Tis'kwat was wrested from Tla'amin control as part of a logging license called 'Lot 450' in 1878. This license of Crown Land was granted before the required

identification and survey of Tla'amin reserve lands. In a dishonest and disingenuous twist, the historical records reveal those leading officials in the British Columbia Government, as well as federal officials like Dr. Israel Wood Powell – a physician, a prominent government official, and British Columbia's first Superintendent of Indian Affairs – played key roles in intentionally keeping Indian Commissioner Gilbert Malcolm Sproat from surveying Tla'amin territory to protect industrial and investor interests.

There were several reasons why Powell and Victoria's elite wanted to keep Sproat from meeting with Tla'amin, Klahoose, and Homalco people and surveying their lands. In addition to the region's vast timber stock, gold and other valuable minerals had been found on Texada Island. Before Vancouver was chosen in 1884, Bute Inlet was the most likely terminus of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Lobbyists and speculators did not want government officials to create Indian reserves near where the terminus might be, for fear it would lock up valuable land near the anticipated largest economic hub on Canada's Pacific coast.

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Officials like Sproat were quick to recognize the unjust situation that the Tla’amin found themselves in. Sproat called out “several influential persons” in Victoria who had direct financial interest in keeping him from properly surveying Tla’amin lands. It was in light of this that, in 1879, Powell told Sproat that efforts to survey the Tla’amin’s land would be “futile.”

It is not entirely clear why I.W. Powell was chosen as Tis’kwat’s new namesake, other than that he commented on Tis’kwat’s industrial potential while traveling on the *HMS Rocket* during a survey of the coast in 1880. The *Rocket*’s Captain Orlebar recorded the mighty river as “Powell River” in his honour.

This naming needs to be considered in the broader context of Powell’s role in preventing Tis’kwat in from being included as a Tla’amin Indian reserve. Powell’s connection to Tis’kwat is essentially one of back room deals and political disobedience. Even if we leave out his role as an agent of colonialism who advocated for residential schools and the dismantling of Indigenous culture and governance systems, it is clear that he used his position and knowledge directly in contravention of his role as a public servant to the original inhabitants of British Columbia. In this light, I think the question is not “why should we change the name?” but rather, “why should we keep it?”

As a non-resident, it is not up to me to make that call. But as a settler Canadian, I say it’s time we deal with our colonial past (and present). Residents of Powell River and Tla’amin are all Treaty People – it’s time to make difficult decisions that reflect that relationship.