

## THE STAVE RIVER SCHOOL IN WHONNOCK<sup>1</sup>

In 1992 the Whonnock Elementary school celebrated what they thought was their centennial since government records showed the name “Whonnock” for the first time for the school year 1892–1893.

In fact the first Whonnock School was opened in 1885 next to the Whonnock Reserve on the shore of the Fraser River. That school was oddly named “Stave River School” and it continued to carry that name until 1892 when its official name changed to “Whonnock School.” The name “Stave River School” was later passed on to the school in Ruskin when it opened in 1897, adding to the confusion.

At the time the school started “Whonnock” was not yet an established place name. The post office with the name Whonnock only opened in August 1885, the same year and month the school started. Moreover, the school not only served Whonnock, but also Glen Valley across the Fraser. Only after Glen Valley opened its own school in 1892 did the name of the school change from “Stave River School” to “Whonnock School.”

The name “Stave River School” stems from an attempt by Marcus Cox of Silverdale to get a school for his children. Cox’s plan failed because he could not find land that could be deeded to the government to build a school. Cox also counted on pupils from across the river to fill his school, but the assignment of a school to Mt. Lehman put an end to his hopes. Worse, when a Stave River School district was established in the summer of 1884 it did not even include Silverdale.

From this point onward Noble Oliver took charge to get a school for Whonnock. Oliver was the owner of the first general store in Whonnock. He had four children of school-going age, but he did not have land to give to the government for a school. His neighbour Robert Robertson had five children of school age, and as soon as he got the deed for his land, he released about an acre in the southeast corner of his property between the railroad tracks and the Fraser for a schoolhouse.

Not everyone was pleased with the choice of this property. The Reverend Alexander Dunn was willing to donate land north of the tracks instead but nothing came of that. Noble Oliver wrote to the superintendent of education in Victoria: “The people are in favour having it on the old site as soon as it is possible to have it put there as the children are suffering for the want of a school.” So it was decided to build on the originally reserved property.

Lands and Works contracted the building of the school to Samuel Calbick of New Westminster for the sum of \$789. The original dimensions are recorded as 16 feet by 24 feet or 400 square feet.

The school started in August of 1885 with Miss Melrose Dockrill as the first teacher. “We have good attendance at school,” Noble Oliver reported. The enrolment number for the first school years was surprisingly high. The answer to the high number of children registered may be found in a letter written in February 1886 by Miss Dockrill to the superintendent of education in Victoria. It seems that aside from the European settlers’

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children, a good number of children from First Nations families, such as the Cheers, had been registered.

Miss Dockrill writes: “When the school was opened last August most of the scholars were small natives who could not speak or understand a word of English. However I have found them very clever at learning. They speak nothing but English now...”

That proficiency in English was perhaps not due to Miss Dockrill’s teaching skills or the intellect of her “small natives.” Probably children with no or insufficient command of English just stayed away leaving Miss Dockrell with only students “...who spoke nothing but English.” Doubtless she also forbade her pupils to speak Halkomelem at school.

The Whonnock School remained at its original site until 1908 when it was moved to a new location at 272<sup>nd</sup> and 100<sup>th</sup> Avenue. It was there that in 1992 the “centennial” celebrations took place. One of the events was giving the students the experience of learning in a one-room school where children from kindergarten through grade seven shared the same classroom. It must have been fun.

#### Caption

*A sketch of the land deeded by Robert Roberson to the Crown in 1884 for the first school in Whonnock.*