



VICTORIA HIGH SCHOOL Alumni News

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Historian John Adams with BC's first Governor General's Medal

JOHN C. NEWBURY – HEAD OF HIS CLASS

by Denis Johnston and John Adams (both VHS '67)

Do you remember that list of honour? As you climb the marble steps of Vic High and enter the front doors, there, high on the wall, are the Heads of School – those young men and women who led their classmates in the graduating exams. Maybe you look for your own grad year and recognize the name.

Were you ever curious about the first name on the list? John C. Newbury, who led the school at Christmas 1876 and Midsummer 1877. Who was this pioneer who topped the first Canadian high school class west of the Great

Lakes? Did he have a sense of the history he was making?

We learn a bit about Master Newbury in a biography of British Columbia's first provincial Superintendent of Education, who was instrumental in creating the province's first high school. In the spring of 1876, high-school entrance exams were held in the province's 21 public schools, testing the applicants in Arithmetic, Grammar, Spelling and Geography. Only 68 of 160 candidates passed the exams, and Newbury led them all with an average of 92 per cent.

Less than two weeks after the school opened in August 1876, it received an enormous honour: a visit from Governor General Lord Dufferin and Lady Dufferin, who had just begun an official tour of British Columbia. Lord

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Dufferin praised the role of education, and offered three medals – one silver and two bronze – to be competed for in the ensuing year. It was later decided that the bronze medals would honour the boy and girl with the highest standing in Victoria’s public schools, and the silver medal would go to the province’s leading high-school student. Master Newbury was again the winner – and the tradition of the Governor General’s medal continues to the present day.

And what happened to Newbury after he finished high school? BC historian John Adams takes up the story at this point:

“In 1982 and 1983 I had the pleasure of working on a project to restore and furnish the original school room at Craigflower Schoolhouse National Historic Site, the oldest standing school structure in western Canada. It is located beside Admirals Road in Saanich, at the north end of the bridge that crosses the Gorge. Opened in 1855 to serve the children of Craigflower Farm and other rural areas nearby, it closed in 1911 and became the residence of a caretaker who worked at a new school across the street. In 1927 it was taken over by the Native Daughters of British Columbia to be restored and set up as a museum. They turned it over to the provincial government in the 1970s and the Heritage Branch undertook an extensive restoration. That’s when I came into the picture and soon discovered that the venerable building had a fascinating history and a very interesting link to Vic High.

“The first teachers in Craigflower’s single classroom were men. Accommodation was provided for them on the second floor, a necessity at the time because it was very remote from Fort Victoria, accessible only along a tortuous forest trail, or by boat along the Gorge (when the tide cooperated). In 1878 John Cowper Newbury was appointed teacher and, like his predecessors, he took up residence upstairs. Unlike them, however, he was not married at the time, not surprising since he was only sixteen years old. He moved in, bringing with him his parents, one brother and four sisters.

“Newbury had just graduated from Vic High. Though he had no formal teacher training, he was going to acquire practical experience on the job, as was customary at that era. Around the time I discovered this fact I ran into an old classmate from Vic High, Neil Goldie (Class of ’67, 1949-2003). He mentioned that his boyhood home at 140 Government Street in James Bay was owned by Newbury’s son, Cowper Newbury, and



Among the treasures which Cowper Newbury presented to Craigflower Schoolhouse for display was this watercolour painted by one of his father’s pupil-sisters.

he arranged to put me in touch. Cowper Newbury lived in North Vancouver and at a subsequent meeting proved to have a wealth of information.

“John Cowper Newbury was eager to accept the Craigflower job partly to get his own father, William Newbury, a saddle maker, away from the saloons of downtown Victoria. Young Newbury proved to be capable and popular, and during his five-year stint at the school was able to attract students from farther afield. In preparation for Christmas one year he took his students into the woods behind the school and dug up several Douglas fir seedlings which they planted in front of the schoolhouse along Admirals Road. Now towering giants, a few of them are still standing, probably BC’s oldest living Christmas trees.

“Newbury discovered that teaching was not for him and left his position in 1883, after which he found a job with the Canadian Customs Department. In 1889 he bought the house at 140 Government Street and lived there for many years, eventually moving to property he had acquired and subdivided along the north shore of the Gorge. Newbury and Cowper streets in that district were named by him.”

John C. Newbury died at St. Joseph’s hospital on May 5, 1934, at the age of 72 – the last 71 of them in Victoria – and was buried at Ross Bay Cemetery. The *Daily Colonist* made the following comment on the day of his funeral:

“A well respected and exemplary citizen has passed on in the death of Mr. J.C. Newbury. He had become known to a large number of people during some

eighteen years when he was Collector of Customs at this port, and to know him was to admire his many good qualities. Quiet and efficient in the discharge of his duties, he was possessed of those characteristics which inspire confidence. In every sense he was a good citizen and one who will be widely missed. The deepest sympathy will go out to his widow and surviving relatives.”

The *Colonist* did not mention Newbury’s winning the first-ever Governor General’s medal in British Columbia, nor his topping the first-ever class of western Canada’s oldest high school. But as if to comment, that same day’s paper printed two stories pertaining to Vic High: one noted the passing of the man who had built it, contractor R.C. Dinsdale; the other trumpeted the upcoming celebration of the present building’s 20th anniversary. The city’s evident pride in this event makes it clear that Vic High was considered a landmark to BC education in 1934, just as it is today.

Denis Johnston is currently Director, Outreach and Engagement, for the Provincial Capital Commission. Prior to that he spent 12 years as Audience Outreach Director for the Shaw Festival, and 11 years teaching theatre at Vic High and UBC.

*John Adams runs **Discover the Past**, a historical company in Victoria. John describes the work done by **Discover the Past**:*

*Little did I know when I sat through history classes with **Tommy Mayne** and **Cec Nesmith** at Vic High that I would be a historian one day. After working in the fields of museums and historic sites for more than thirty years I founded my own company, **Discover the Past**, as a retirement project, not realizing that it would end up being more than a full-time activity. It specializes in historical research and writing (mainly about Victoria and British Columbia), but is best known locally for its walking tours. These are offered year-round on many topics, including heritage neighbourhoods and Chinatown, but the most popular tour of all is Ghostly Walks which examines the haunted alleys, courtyards and buildings in Victoria’s Old Town. For full details about tour schedules check out www.discoverthepast.com or call 250-384-6698.*

Denis and John have recently collaborated on several projects about the history of Victoria and British Columbia: visit www.bcpsc.com and look for their Social Studies units and their series of 2-minute historical videos.