

TOWARDS A MORE WELCOMING, INCLUSIVE NEW WESTMINSTER MUSEUM



Barbershop exhibit opening night, 2015. Hairdressers and barbers from across New Westminster set up chairs outside the museum for on-the-spot haircuts and shaves.

Photo credit: New Westminster Museum and Archives.

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"Museums tend to think about inclusivity and representation as an afterthought, not a priority."

Kai Frazier, Curated x Kai

When I started working at the New Westminster Museum (NWM) in 2011, a member of the City's Multicultural Advisory Committee told me that most people did not see themselves reflected in the museum. Another community member told me that there was nothing in our historic Irving House that would make her visit a second time. Despite the NWM staff's work during the 2000s to better understand the Indigenous baskets in the collection and to develop the *Yi Fao* exhibition and book about New Westminster's Chinatowns, many gaps existed in our efforts to engage with and represent the City's different cultural communities (e.g., Sudanese, Filipino).

On the surface, New Westminster looks very quaint with its well-preserved heritage buildings. Yet, this perception overlooks its very diverse history. One of the first barbers in town was Black. The earliest land deed in the archives is from a purchase by Black residents in 1860. There were two Chinatowns. The first Japanese person in Canada originally settled in New Westminster. The Indigenous narratives and memories of the area are virtually non-existent in the public realm.

NWM staff have been working diligently over the past two decades to change how the City's history is documented and shared. We are moving away from the white, male, colonial narrative that permeates our galleries, seeking information to tell the stories of underrepresented communities. Here I share our approach towards developing a more welcoming and inclusive NWM.



Engaging the Community

The NWM's first step was to update its mandate and mission. The importance of exploring the diverse and longstanding Indigenous and multicultural connections within the City is now emphasized. We eliminated the 1985 cutoff date for collecting, which permits the inclusion of newcomer groups and a contemporary reflective lens on the past.

Next we formed a community advisory group, which is involved in different aspects of the NWM, from policy-making to exhibitions and programs.

We recruit from local businesses and non-profits, past museum partners, and City committees. In addition, we have started working with short-term advisory groups comprised of experts and those with lived experience to develop exhibit content.

Nishiguchi family on a beach, 1930s. The museum's exhibit advisory committee requested that images like this, long hidden in the archives, become more visible in exhibitions.

Photo credit: New Westminster Museum and Archives, IHP8034-050.



An important part of the NWM's collections, exhibit, and program development approach is to ensure space for people from the City's diverse communities to lead the process.

NWM staff attend City committee meetings: we sit on the Multicultural Advisory Committee and Heritage Commission. This provides us with opportunities to engage with other committees, ranging from the youth committee to the environmental committee, for input. NWM staff are also involved with the Welcoming and Inclusive New Westminster (WINS) Local Immigration Partnership Council. We are actively collecting stories and lived experiences from community members such as the Latin American mothers' groups, men's card-playing clubs, knitting groups, and Powwow workshops. Sometimes we reach beyond New West's borders; NWM staff are meeting with Indigenous groups from across southwestern B.C. as part of the City's reconciliation process.

An important part of the NWM's collections, exhibit, and program development approach is to ensure space for people from the City's diverse communities to lead the process. Exhibition advisory committees have identified our blind spots and pushed us to balance the stories we tell. We also try to maintain and continue to develop relationships with these communities instead of letting them stagnate. NWM staff stay in touch with the community members we've worked with, keeping them informed about our projects, seeking their input, and/or asking them to get involved with the NWM again.



Ornamenting the Ordinary South Asian exhibition, 2016.

Photo credit: New Westminster Museum and Archives.

Hiring

In her June 24, 2020 webinar, [#MuseumsAreNotNeutral: White Supremacy in Museums and Calls to Immediate Action](#), and in this issue, Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra points out that arts/culture/heritage organizations should include permanent budget line items for hiring BIPOC/IBPOC individuals. Over the past decade, the NWM has been working with guest curators, such as Naveen Girn, who curated a small exhibition on Mewa Singh in 2014. More and more, the NWM pays people from the immigrant, refugee, and Indigenous communities to compensate them for their generosity in sharing their knowledge and their time.

Our work on the Mewa Singh exhibit helped develop relationships, eventually leading to a larger exhibit on New West's South Asian population, *An Ocean of Peace: 100 Years of Sikhs in New Westminster*, guest-curated by Naveen

Girn and Paneet Singh. Community members loaned belongings, recorded and shared family stories that are components of this gurdwara exhibit. Throughout the collaborative process, NWM staff listened to what the community needed, ensuring that the exhibition text was multilingual and following important protocols to open and close religious texts in the gallery each day.

The NWM also hires summer students and interns who have a passion for uncovering and sharing the stories of the City's diverse communities. We welcome newcomer volunteers looking to add experiences to their resumes. NWM staff provide one-on-one training tailored to help them succeed in their chosen career.

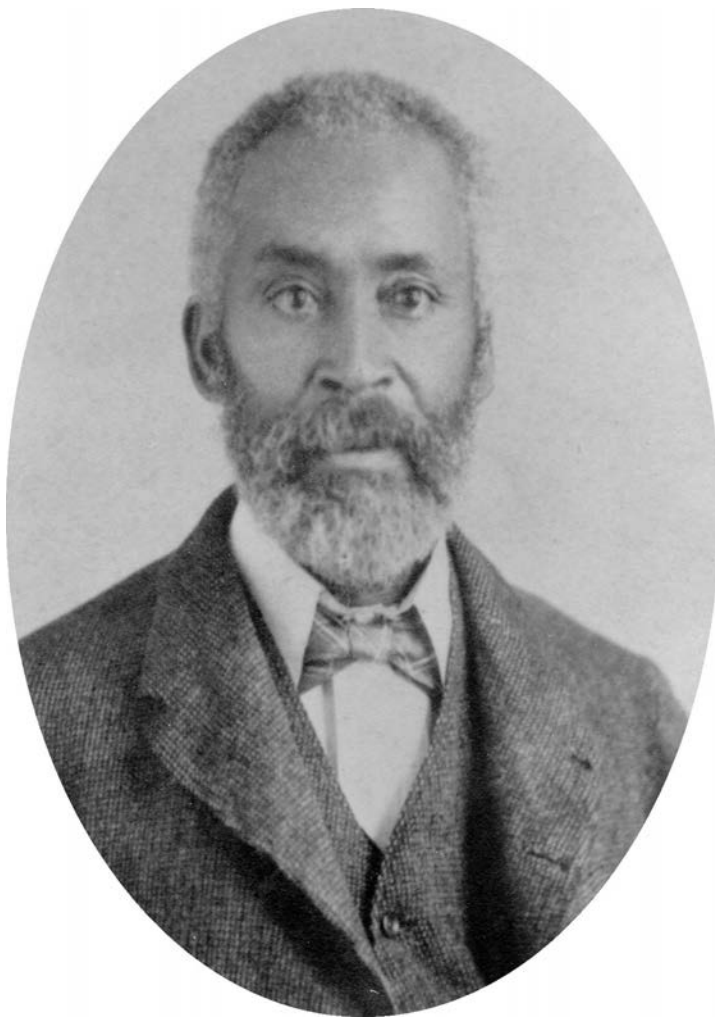
Archives and Collections

"When do people of colour enter the archive?"
"When we're buying property or breaking the law."

Manjot Bains,
The Nameless Collective Podcast

New Westminster's archives and museum collection still tell a lopsided history focused on the Euro-Canadian Settler experience. Staff are working with families representing the City's diverse cultural communities to record their histories, including those of their ancestors. Our approach includes writing family profiles for incoming donations, conducting oral history interviews, taking notes during informal meetings, and filming activities, such as the community kitchen. Loans from the Sikh, Chinese, and Black communities have greatly enhanced past exhibitions. The NWM is transparent about the items chosen for display and how people can access them while they are on display.

In collaboration with Simon Fraser University, the NWM has undertaken a *Decolonizing Municipal Monuments and Landmarks* project. As part of the project, team members have created an inventory of street and place names, monuments, parks, landmarks, and other commemorative sites using a combination of oral history, ground truthing, and archival research. The project team is analyzing the data to determine which multicultural narratives and places may have been overlooked or omitted in the City's previous colonial approach to recording and presenting its heritage.



The NWM's next goal is to work with diverse community members and groups to redevelop the permanent gallery and to re-interpret Irving House. We want to continue collecting community stories, listening to citizens, identifying and fixing our blind spots, while ensuring more space for BIPOC/IBPoC coworkers and diverse community leaders. This ongoing work will take time, patience, and perseverance; we are deeply committed to decolonizing the City's history.

Tom Forrester, 1860s. Forrester and his partner's 1860 land deed is one of the earliest documents in the NWM archives.
 Photo credit: New Westminster Museum and Archives, IHP2426.

Recommended Resources

The New Westminster Museum and Archives Mission and Mandate, www.newwestcity.ca/services/arts-and-heritage/museums-and-archives#mission-mandate.

Owen, Patricia and Jim Wolf. *Yi Fao: Speaking Through Memory, A History of New Westminster's Chinese Community 1858-1980* (Victoria: Heritage House Publishing, 2008).

New Westminster's Sukh Sagar Gurdwara, [www.newwestcity.ca/database/files/library/Gurdwara_\(Fall_2019\).pdf](http://www.newwestcity.ca/database/files/library/Gurdwara_(Fall_2019).pdf).

You Are What You Eat: Community Food Security, www.newwestcity.ca/services/arts-and-heritage/museums-and-archives#you-are-what-you-eat-exhibit-2019.

The Witness Blanket, witnessblanket.ca/.



The Witness Blanket at the NWM, 2016-2017.
Photo credit: New Westminster Museum and Archives.



Oana Capota

Oana Capota is the curator of the New Westminster Museum and has been working in the museum sector for 16 years. She received her undergraduate degree in Asian Studies, with a focus on Chinese language and history, from the University of British Columbia. Oana also has a diploma in Cultural Resource Management from the University of Victoria. She came to Canada as a refugee.
