

Mayors of Vancouver

Donna-Jean MacKinnon

First Election

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THE FIRST VANCOUVER civic election, May 3, 1886, was a crooked affair and, though the "good guy" won, only the chaos of the Great Fire saved it from being declared null and void.

There were two candidates for mayor—Richard H. Alexander, the manager of the Hastings Sawmill, and Malcolm Alexander MacLean, recently arrived and virtually unknown in Vancouver, who was approached and persuaded to run.

It was an "anybody but Alexander" campaign and about forty men cajoled and concocted the election results in favor of MacLean that day. Those who worked at Hastings Sawmill were "sore" at Alexander as he was arrogant and a bit of a tyrant as well. A few days before the election, at a strike at Hastings Sawmill, Alexander, threatening the workers and revealing contemporary racism, said he could run the mill more cheaply by using native and Chinese labor and that Canadians were "North American Chinamen" anyway.

Alexander's arrogance didn't make his employees inclined to vote for him, and retaliating forces went to work to ensure he didn't win the election. Vancouver pioneer Mr. Haywood told the story, "We wanted to put MacLean in and we did. There was a lot of people who voted who did not have a vote. Lots of people stopping in hotels had no qualifications." Hoteliers went along with the ruse to exaggerate the number of tenants in their rooms and also backdated receipts so that more pro-MacLean people could satisfy the residency requirement.

The Hastings Sawmill people coerced the Chinese employees and sent them up to vote for Alexander. But there were a lot of anti-Alexander navvies (laborers) hanging around Granville on election day and they threatened the Chinese and prevented them from voting.

At the end of the day, 499 votes had been cast and MacLean was elected by a margin of 17 votes. The citizens were said to have been so excited that they "took him in the back seat of a buggy and hauled him all over what there was of the little town."

Before a judgement could be made on the validity of the election, however, the Great Fire of June 13, 1886, occurred. In the confusion that followed, the protestations were dropped and Mayor MacLean went on to become elected for a second term.

Malcolm Alexander MacLean 1886–87

(b. Aug. 14, 1844, Tiber, Scotland; arr. Vancouver 1885; d. Apr. 4, 1895, Vancouver)

Though the man who was to be first mayor of Vancouver had only recently moved from Winnipeg and had to be persuaded to run, he grew into his role and established the office of mayor with a combination of pioneer spirit and distinction. MacLean, a realtor, was practically unknown to voters in Vancouver's first election, but he presented himself well, had travelled widely and was not Richard H. Alexander, MacLean's only opponent. Alexander was the unpopular manager of the Hastings Sawmill, the biggest employer in Granville. The city's first election was as honest as could be expected for the time, which is to say, not very. There was chicanery on both sides. MacLean won by 17 votes and "people were so elated that they took him in a buggy and hauled him all over what there was of the little town." Less than a month later the Great Fire of June 13, 1886, destroyed most of Vancouver. Mayor MacLean lost all his possessions but plunged into organizing relief efforts and distributing rations sent from New Westminster. It became obvious he was willing and able to guide the citizens through the crisis. After the initial shock of the fire MacLean called council together in a tent at the northeast corner of Carrail and Water Streets, and resumed the direction of civic affairs "without five cents in the bank, without an assessment roll and without even a chair to sit upon." Challenges to his mayoralty were dropped and he went on to win the next election fair and square. Just one year after the Great Fire, MacLean greeted the first train and the first steamship into Vancouver on behalf of its proud citizens.

David Oppenheimer 1888–91

(b. Jan. 1, 1832, Bieiskastel, Germany; arr. Vancouver 1860; d. Dec. 31, 1897, Vancouver)

Often called the "father" of Vancouver, this wealthy entrepreneur believed public works operations belonged to the taxpayers. During the election campaign of 1888 he promised a sceptical electorate its own water service, public transportation and a sewage system. Within two years, streetcars were running along city streets and a water connection from the Capilano River had been installed. Oppenheimer personally paid the water fees and liberally donated money for the construction of Alexandra Orphanage and the YMCA. He also donated land for city parks including East Park (later Exhibition Park, now