

John Sullivan Deas: A Black Entrepreneur in British Columbia Salmon Canning*

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The presence in colonial Vancouver Island and British Columbia of a Black community has attracted the attention of several historians as well as a shoal of journalists. Most of the Blacks in the two colonies came from San Francisco in an organized migration in 1858, the year of the gold rush to the bars of the lower Fraser River. The exodus was prompted primarily not by the gold excitement, but by fears of a worsening of the discrimination against Blacks in the state of California.

The position in law of the small Black community in pre-Civil War California was by no means a secure one. Although the state constitution of 1849 prohibited slavery, slaves already in the state or brought in by their masters were not automatically free. Anomalies in the fugitive slave law of 1852 seemed in fact to menace the position of Blacks already freed. Even more pervasive in their effects were laws of 1851 banning Black testimony in civil and criminal cases. The Black community agitated with some success against discriminatory legislation, but early in 1858 its campaign appeared to be losing ground as a fresh wave of hostility against Blacks mounted. The virtual suspension of action against fugitive slaves ended with the famous Archy Lee case in which a slave was returned to his master in circumstances of doubtful legality. The year 1858 also saw a revival of attempts to prohibit the immigration of Blacks into the state, in a bill which was only with difficulty killed by the adjournment of the legislature. A further blow was the reversal by the San Francisco board of education of its decision to admit the daughter of Black merchant Peter Lester to an all-white school.

A portion of the Black community reacted to these threats by organizing a migration out of the state. Choosing "liberty under the 'British lion,'" as Mifflin W. Gibbs, one of their leaders, later phrased it,¹ and attracted by

*An expanded and somewhat modified version of "John Sullivan Deas," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 10 (1871-1880), pp. 216-17.

¹ Mifflin Wistar Gibbs, *Shadow and light; an autobiography with reminiscences of the last and the present century* (Washington, D.C., 1902), p. 63.

the Fraser River excitement, they decided on the colony of Vancouver Island and several hundred moved to Victoria in the spring of 1858 as the rush from California to the new diggings built to a climax.²

The expectation of "liberty under the British lion" was in the main fulfilled. After ten years Gibbs himself could still say to Black readers in the United States, even though he was shortly to leave British territory, "upon the great questions of human rights she is still head and shoulders above you, proclaiming and maintaining from her flagstuffs planted around the world, 'Equality before the Law' — all honor to Old England."³

The Black migrants received official support from Governor James Douglas of Vancouver Island and the newcomers were welcomed by the Reverend Edward Cridge of the Church of England. As early arrivals they were able to make advantageous purchases of land and their labour, especially that of the skilled tradesmen, was in demand. Other Blacks followed them and soon a community was established as an important element in boom-town Victoria.

Equal before the law though they may have been, their presence was resented by many whites and a series of incidents revealing white prejudice followed. Blacks became embroiled in Island politics by voting when as aliens they were not entitled to; their presence in various church organizations was resented; a flour-throwing incident occurred in a local theatre; their militia unit, although first in the colony, was derided and snubbed. Unpleasant as they were, these events did not however prevent the Blacks from sharing in the general prosperity to Vancouver Island from successive gold rushes in the neighbouring colony of British Columbia. A grudging acceptance of them developed although reminders of the deep-rooted prejudice continued. An alien act permitted them to become naturalized and their leader, Mifflin Gibbs, was elected to Victoria city council by the whites of the fashionable James Bay ward.⁴

After 1865, with the decline of the gold fields, a general exodus took

² These paragraphs are based on Rudolph Lapp, "Negro rights activities in gold rush California," *California historical society quarterly* 45, no. 1 (March 1966): 3-20, and Kenneth G. Goode, *California's black pioneers: a brief historical survey*, Santa Barbara, McNally and Loftin, 1974, chapters 4, 5, and 6.

³ M. W. Gibbs, "Bell's letter," *San Francisco Elevator*, 8 May 1868, as cited in James William Pilton, "Negro settlement in British Columbia 1858-1871" (unpublished M.A. thesis in history, University of British Columbia, 1951), p. 224.

⁴ This account based on Pilton, "Negro settlement," *passim*; Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: a history* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), chapter 9, "West of the Rockies," pp. 272-87.

place from British Columbia. For Blacks the added attractions of the end of slavery and of the Civil War in the United States, with its apparent opening of new opportunities, were a magnet to draw them back to the land of their birth. The Black presence in British Columbia slowly faded, leaving behind only a relative handful of people, objects now not of prejudice but of curiosity, and unable to sustain the vigorous community life of the 1860s.

Although Major J. S. Matthews, F. W. Howay and Robie Reid wrote on limited aspects of Black history in colonial days, current foundations for scholarly study of the community were laid by James Pilton in an M.A. thesis in history accepted by the University of British Columbia in 1951 and still unfortunately not published. The most recent survey, by Professor Robin Winks of Yale University, added some new material to Pilton's findings, but did not alter his general emphasis.⁵ The work of Pilton and Winks took place against the background of an increasing interest in North America in Black studies and was accompanied by a multiplication of journalistic pieces. Most of these latter concentrated on the same picturesque parts of the story — the California difficulties, the opportunities in 1858, the discrimination, the Black settlers on Saltspring Island and, of course, the Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps.⁶

Very few portraits of individual Blacks emerge from these efforts, the notable exception being that of Gibbs, already a leader in the California Black community, who continued to prosper on Vancouver Island and was elected to public office. But Gibbs himself provided in his autobiography most of the material for an analysis of his long and distinguished career.⁷ Lack of a similar source has prevented emergence of other members of the Black group as distinct figures. It can be argued in any case that the success story of Gibbs does not begin in British Columbia — he had been established in San Francisco, had capital to invest in Victoria, and had a trade as carpenter which served him well in his first days. It therefore seems worthwhile to draw at least an outline picture of the

⁵ James Skitt Matthews, "British Columbia's first troops were Black," Art, historical and scientific association (Vancouver), *Museum notes*, June 1930, pp. 62-65; Frederick William Howay, "The Negro immigration into Vancouver Island in 1858," *British Columbia historical quarterly* 3 (April 1939): 101-13; Robie Lewis Reid, "How one slave became free," *BCHQ* 6 (October 1942): 251-56; Pilton, "Negro settlement"; Winks, *Blacks in Canada*; an earlier survey appeared in the American Negro journal *Phylon* — Robert O'Brien, "Victoria's negro colonists, 1858-1866," *Phylon* 3 (1942): 15-18.

⁶ Vertical file, "Negroes," Provincial Archives of British Columbia.

⁷ Gibbs, *Shadow and light*, *passim*.

fortunes of another Black migrant who was not in the original group of 1858 and who did not start with the same advantages as Gibbs.

John Sullivan Deas was born in South Carolina about 1838,⁸ probably in Charleston, which in common with other southern cities of the time had a community of free Blacks, many of whom were skilled tradesmen.⁹ By 1856 Deas, still in his teens, was himself advertising as a tinsmith.¹⁰ Sometime thereafter he joined the migration to gold-rush California and was by 1860 in San Francisco. The young man was, however, not alone in the California metropolis, but lived with a family of South Carolina-born blacks, Louis and Susan Mortimer. Sharing the same address was another South Carolinian, a Z. Deas.¹¹ Louis or Lewis Mortimer and Zephaniah W. Deas are known to have been partners in a produce business in the Niantic Hotel building at the northwest corner of Clay and Sansone Streets.¹² Zephaniah Deas (aged twenty-three) was possibly an older brother of John Sullivan (aged twenty-one). Susan Mortimer (aged twenty-two) might have been a sister.

During 1860 and 1861 Deas worked in San Francisco at his trade of tinsmith, being employed for at least part of the time by Martin Prag, a dealer in stoves and tinware. This latter connection most likely led to Deas' migration to Vancouver Island, where Prag also had an establishment.¹³

By 1862 Deas was established in Victoria in the colony of Vancouver Island. In September of that year he married Fanny Harris from Hamilton, Canada West. The ceremony was performed by the Reverend Edward Cridge, the then dean of the Anglican Cathedral, at the home of Richard

⁸ 1880 United States Census, State of Oregon, Multnomah County, Original Enumerator's Sheets, p. 425 (microfilm copy in Oregon State Historical Society library, Portland).

⁹ E. Horace Fitchett, "The traditions of the free Negro in Charleston, South Carolina," *Journal of Negro history* 25, no. 2 (April 1940): 139-52; "The origin and growth of the free Negro population of Charleston, South Carolina," *JNH* 26, no. 4 (October 1941): 421-37; "The status of the free Negro in Charleston, South Carolina," *JNH* 32, no. 4 (October 1947): pp. 430-51.

¹⁰ *Charleston (South Carolina) Directory, 1856* (directory search by Virginia Rugeheimer, librarian, Charleston Library Society).

¹¹ 1860 United States Census, State of California, San Francisco, District 2. Original Enumerator's Sheets, p. 757. (Census search by James de T. Abajian).

¹² Communication from James de T. Abajian, San Francisco; cf. Elizabeth Parker and James Abajian, *A walking tour of the Black presence in San Francisco during the nineteenth century*, San Francisco, African American historical and cultural society, 1974, p. 11.

¹³ *The San Francisco Directory for 1860, . . . 1861*, comp. H. G. Langley (San Francisco, 1860, 1861) (directory search by James de T. Abajian); *First Victoria Directory, 1860*, comp. Edward Mallandine (Victoria 1860), p. 50.

H. Johnson, an officer in the Black militia unit, the Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps.¹⁴ The wedding was reported in the San Francisco Black newspaper, the *Pacific Appeal*.¹⁵

Deas continued to work at his trade during the next few years, and he and his wife began raising the first of a numerous brood of children.¹⁶ By 1866 Deas was in business for himself in Yale, a transfer point between water and road transportation on the route to the Cariboo gold fields. A business in Yale could not have hoped to prosper as the gold fields were declining, but Deas stuck it out for at least two years.¹⁷ By late 1868, however, he was back in Victoria and operating a hardware and stove business at the corner of Fort and Broad Streets under the name of Birmingham House. By this time he also owned property on upper Yates Street, presumably his residence.¹⁸

As the gold excitement died away after 1865, efforts intensified to find new resources to exploit. The potential of Fraser River salmon was well known, but a first attempt to export the fish in cans was not made until the late 1860s and it failed through lack of capital. In 1871 Deas was caught up in a fresh start at developing a salmon canning industry. In that year, two separate canning ventures were launched. One of the entrants to the business was Captain Edward Stamp, a ship master and entrepreneur who had already been active as an exporter of spars, a Victoria commission merchant, and manager of logging and sawmilling enterprises on the Alberni Canal and in Burrard Inlet.¹⁹

Stamp had left the sawmill on Burrard Inlet after a disagreement with his principals and proposed to make a fresh start as a canner of salmon. In June 1871 he leased buildings in the former Royal Engineers' camp near New Westminster, which he proceeded to adapt for the purpose.²⁰

¹⁴ Pilton, "Negro settlement," p. 117.

¹⁵ *Pacific Appeal*, 27 September 1862, p. 4.

¹⁶ *Victoria Colonist*, 21 March 1865, p. 3; 25 December 1866, p. 3; 8 September 1868, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Yale British Columbia Tribune*, 16 April 1866, p. 2; *Cariboo Sentinel*, 4 May 1867, p. 4; 21 October 1867, p. 4; New Westminster and *Yale British Columbia Examiner*, 4 April 1868, p. 2; 17 August 1868, p. 4.

¹⁸ *Victoria Colonist*, 8 September 1868, p. 2; *Victoria Directory 1869*, p. 72; *Victoria Directory 1871*, (unpaged advertisement); City of Victoria, Assessment Roll, 1868, *Victoria Colonist*, 14 November 1868, supplement, p. 6.

¹⁹ "Edward Stamp," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* 10 (1871-1880): 664-65.

²⁰ New Westminster *Mainland Guardian*, 20 June 1871, p. 3; PABC, Records of the Colony of British Columbia, Stamp to F. C. Claudet, 29 May 1871, Stamp to B. W. Pearse, 6 June 1871, Claudet to Pearse, 30 June 1871.

The cans for such a process had at that time to be made virtually by hand, and Stamp engaged Deas to make his cans.²¹ During that season's salmon runs, Stamp's cannery produced on a modest scale, but with enough success to encourage him to continue.²² He undertook a trip to England to raise capital for a large-scale canning enterprise, and while there died of a heart attack.²³

Deas continued in canning in 1872 in the aftermath of Stamp's death. Findlay, Durham and Brodie, merchants in Victoria, were involved in the Stamp venture. It's not clear whether they simply acted as agents for the shipping to England by the *Princess Royal* of the salmon canned by Stamp, or whether they purchased the completed product from Stamp and shipped it on their own account.²⁴ In any case, according to Mr. Justice H. P. P. Crease, who was keenly interested in analysing new business opportunities, Findlay, Durham and Brodie ended up by "taking over Stamp's business" "to save themselves" and in the fishing season of 1872 went ahead filling up the rest of the cans that had been made for Stamp.²⁵

The scanty information on the 1872 season is confusing. Evidence from Crease is that Findlay, Durham and Brodie carried on their salvage operations in the Royal Engineers' camp, leased the season before by Stamp. But Crease also says that they "set up Deas that contracted for making Stamp's Tin Cans." Other evidence indicates that Deas' operations in 1872 were not at New Westminster but some miles downstream at Cooperville on the south bank of the main channel just opposite the head of what is now known as Deas Island.²⁶ This choice of location seems to have been prompted by the availability of a suitable building, built in 1870 for Capt. James Cooper for a short-lived venture in salting and barrelling

²¹ *Victoria Colonist*, 3 March 1871, p. 3; *Victoria Standard*, 9 June 1871, p. 3; E. O. S. Scholefield and F. W. Howay, *British Columbia from the earliest times to the present* (Vancouver: S. J. Clarke, 1914), vol. 2 (by F. W. Howay), p. 585. Howay mentions Deas by name but the two contemporary sources do not.

²² *Victoria Colonist*, 2 November 1871, p. 3, gives a total of 50,000 pounds, or something over 1,000 cases calculated in the standard equivalent of 48 one-pound tins to the case. This source also says Stamp canned in both one- and two-pound tins, which might partially account for the large percentage of spoiled tins mentioned by Crease (cf. footnote 24 below).

²³ *DCB* 10:665.

²⁴ *Victoria Colonist*, 3 October 1871, p. 3; H. P. P. Crease to A. R. Roche (Colonial Securities, London) 10 June 1872, p. 383; 28 August 1872, p. 422, letterbook correspondence outward, 1870-73; Crease collection, PABC.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

²⁶ *Victoria Colonist*, 25 July 1872, p. 3.

salmon.²⁷ Whether this means that there were two separate operations, or that Deas was in charge of both, cannot be said with certainty.

Nothing is known about the success of the first season of operations at Cooperville, but it encouraged Deas and his backers to expand. There was an immediate problem — access to the Cooperville site was only by water and the approach for steamers was not easy, likely because of the characteristically shelving banks and marshy edges of the Fraser River delta.²⁸ The main channel, however, with its deep water, curved along the outer edge of the nearby island (it has in the succeeding hundred years steadily eroded the head of the island).

In April 1873, Deas pre-empted on the island which now bears his name and there proceeded to erect a cannery which was likely ready to operate in the season of 1873.²⁹ (His contemporary statements about the scale of his operations in 1873 and 1874 tend to confirm this, and later accounts date the foundation of the cannery to 1873.)³⁰ In any case, before the 1874 season about seven acres had been dyked on the north end of the low-lying marshy island and a complex of buildings had been built. Two large structures housed the cannery and its associated warehousing space, and a third was a dwelling house, possibly a bunkhouse. There were also a number of smaller buildings. Since fish collection as well as shipping the product depended on the river frontage, the whole was completed by a substantial wharf.³¹

Deas was, of course, unlikely to have financed this rapid expansion from his own resources. The key to his obtaining the necessary backing lies in his relations with Findlay, Durham and Brodie. The practice in the Pacific

²⁷ New Westminster *Mainland Guardian*, 18 June 1870, p. 3; *Victoria Standard*, 15 September 1870, p. 3, and *ibid.*, 6 March 1871, p. 2. Cooper pre-empted Lot 96A, Group 2, New Westminster District, 9 April 1870. The pre-emption was transferred to John Alfred Webster, from whom Deas leased. Webster purchased the lot 23 September 1873 and received a Crown Grant 25 September 1873. (British Columbia, Department of Lands, Crown Grant Records no. 1381 G vol. 3). "Webster's Fishery" is marked at about where the corner of this lot touches the river on a sketch map showing Deas' pre-emption (see fn. 29 below).

²⁸ New Westminster *Mainland Guardian*, 14 November 1877, p. 3.

²⁹ Deas pre-empted the island (sixty acres) which is Lot 136, Group 2, New Westminster District on 24 April 1873. He paid \$1 an acre plus a \$10 survey fee, which was paid 11 May 1875. He received a Crown grant 20 June 1875. (British Columbia Department of Lands, Crown Grant Records no. 1556/3).

³⁰ Letter by J. S. Deas, *Victoria Colonist*, 6 May 1874, p. 3; *Williams British Columbia Directory*, 1882-83, p. 246.

³¹ British Columbia, Department of Lands, original field survey book 37/74, P.H. 2, group 2, New Westminster District (survey and sketch of the island are dated 13 June 1874); New Westminster, pre-emption records, pre-emption record no. 1008-Declaration, 17 December 1874, by J. S. Deas, J. A. Webster, G. McKenzie, PABC.

Coast canning industry at the time was for commission merchants to handle the export of the product, which in British Columbia was virtually all shipped abroad, chiefly to England. The canner received his money on shipment from the merchant who discounted the bill of lading, holding it and collecting the face value when the cargo was delivered to the consignee. In addition to acting as agents these firms also often provided financial advances to carry cannery operations through the long cycle from ordering Welsh tinplate to completion of the season's pack. Those advances were usually secured against a chattel mortgage. Probably Deas' financing was arranged in this way, although no such document is known in his case.³²

Still there is little doubt that Deas himself was, within these limitations — common to many businesses — the actual owner of the cannery. He acquired the land through pre-emption and the improvements were in his name. The canned salmon produced by the plant was also marketed in Deas' name, if we accept the evidence of a gaily coloured salmon label — the earliest of its kind to survive from the British Columbia industry — bearing the legend "Fresh Salmon, John S. Deas, Frazer [sic] River, British Columbia."³³ This label was lithographed for Deas by G. T. Brown & Co. of San Francisco, a firm owned by California Black artist Grafton T. Brown.³⁴

Deas had an early start in what was to become in the 1870s a thriving business. Stamp's cannery had been one of two operating in 1871. The other firm — a partnership between fishermen Alexander Ewen and James Wise and New Brunswick canner Alexander Loggie and tinsmith David Hennessy — had started operations at a site opposite and slightly below New Westminster, later known as Annieville.³⁵ The building there had been originally put up in 1864 as a saltery and was subsequently used in 1867 and 1868 by James Syme for the first attempt at commercial canning in British Columbia.³⁶

³² H. K. Ralston, "The 1900 strike of Fraser River sockeye salmon fishermen" (unpublished M.A. thesis in history, University of British Columbia, 1965), pp. 18-20; Henry Doyle, "Rise and decline of the Pacific salmon fisheries" (unpublished typescript, UBC special collections), vol. 1, pp. 22-26.

³³ PABC, Colonist Printing and Publishing sample book of salmon can labels, n.d., n.p.

³⁴ On Grafton Tyler Brown (1841-1918), see Parker and Abajian, *Black presence in San Francisco*, p. 8.

³⁵ Howay, *British Columbia* 2:585. Howay, who was a nephew of Alexander Ewen, says this partnership started in 1870, but no contemporary evidence has yet been found to support this claim to priority over Stamp.

³⁶ *Victoria Colonist*, 28 June 1864, p. 3; *New Westminster British Columbian*, 9 July

These pioneer canners had to contend with marked annual fluctuations in the abundance of salmon on the Fraser River. A pronounced four-year cycle characterized the races of sockeye salmon, the species favoured by the early canners. In those years the dominant year ran on the pattern 1869-1873-1877, with a sub-dominant year following each heavy year and two light years in between.³⁷ Yet in the earliest years the difficulty of mastering the canning process itself rather than the abundance of fish determined the size of the pack. According to Deas, in 1872, a light year, the runs were so small that the 300,000 cans (6,250 cases) prepared for the pack could not be filled.³⁸ But even in 1873, a heavy year when good packs might be expected, both Deas and Loggie and Company, as the partnership was commonly called, could together put up only a little more than 4,250 cases.³⁹

Canning as a process, however, became sufficiently established to attract additional capital to the industry. Not only the example of the Fraser River, but the soaring packs on the nearby Columbia River, which by the early 1870s reached the order of 200,000 to 250,000 cases, inspired would-be canners.⁴⁰ By 1874, New Westminster merchants Henry Holbrook and James Cunningham had leased and re-opened the former Royal Engineer premises used by Stamp.⁴¹ They were joined by a British-incorporated firm, the Vancouver Island Company, put together by Gilbert Malcolm Sproat, then agent-general for British Columbia in London, which had a cannery building constructed at Brownsville opposite New Westminster.⁴² This latter firm seems to have lasted only one season.

Throughout these early years of development Deas was the leading canner on the Fraser River. For the seasons of 1872 and 1873, he could

1864, p. 3; *New Westminster British Columbia Examiner*, 23 November 1867, p. 2; *British Columbian*, 9 May 1868, p. 2; 3 October 1868, p. 3.

³⁷ F. J. Ward and P. A. Larkin, *Cyclic Dominance in Adams River sockeye salmon*, 1964, International Pacific Salmon Fisheries Commission, progress report, no. 11, pp. 4-12.

³⁸ *Victoria Colonist*, 6 May 1874, p. 3.

³⁹ *Victoria Colonist*, 30 September 1873, p. 3; Canada, *Sessional Papers 1874*, sessional paper (hereafter SP) no. 4, fisheries appendices, p. 205.

⁴⁰ John N. Cobb, *Pacific salmon fisheries*, 4th ed., 1930. U.S. department of commerce, bureau of fisheries, fisheries document no. 1092, p. 562.

⁴¹ *Victoria Colonist*, 23 October 1874, p. 3; Canada, *SP 1876*, SP 6, appendices, p. 174.

⁴² *Victoria Colonist*, 23 October 1874, p. 3; Great Britain, Public Record Office (London), Board of Trade series 31/1942/8103-Vancouver Island Company Ltd., 1874.

boast that he had canned twice as large a pack as any other "Fishery."⁴³ The published figures for 1874 and 1876 show him maintaining his lead and the 1875 figures, though not available, would no doubt confirm the trend.⁴⁴ But as the "big" cycle year of 1877 approached, this lead was threatened — a firm market and anticipation of heavy catches produced a minor "boom." The partnership known as Loggie and Company had in 1875 been reorganized as Ewen and Wise with the withdrawal and subsequent death of Loggie. During the winter of 1876-77, Ewen and Wise built a new cannery on Front Street in New Westminster.⁴⁵ Two new firms also prepared for the coming season. A partnership headed by Marshall M. English set up in buildings constructed by New Westminster merchant Ebenezer Brown, MLA, on his property at Brownsville across the river from the city.⁴⁶ James Finlayson and Colonel C. C. Lane adapted a collection of buildings on the New Westminster waterfront for a cannery.⁴⁷

Deas must have watched the opening of additional canneries with some uneasiness. He was already on record, in his first years as a canner, as having a limited view of the potential of the Fraser River. There were, he said in 1874, "not three good drifts on the river" — already fishermen were having to wait for half a day for their turn on overcrowded drifts. The Fraser River, he argued, ought not to be compared to the Columbia, "for on the last-named the season and run are twice as long, and the drifts extend for miles, whereas on this river the run is short and irregular."⁴⁸

If Deas had premonitions of more intense competition from extra fishermen and boats, they were realized early in the season of 1877. The New Westminster canneries, led by English & Co., ranged up and down the river seeking fish. English & Co. operated from the mouth of the river to Langley, above New Westminster, and at various times during the season

⁴³ *Victoria Colonist*, 6 May 1874, p. 3.

⁴⁴ *Canada, SP 1875*, SP 5, supplement 5, pp. 169-70; *Canada, SP 1877*, SP 5, supp. 4, p. 340.

⁴⁵ *New Westminster Mainland Guardian*, 20 November 1875, p. 3; *Victoria Colonist*, 27 February 1876, p. 3; *Canada, SP 1877*, SP 5, supp. 4, p. 341.

⁴⁶ *New Westminster Mainland Guardian*, 11 August 1877, p. 3 — whether these were new buildings or just an extension of the ones used in 1874 by the Vancouver Island Company is not clear. Henry Doyle, English's son-in-law, says that English built "the first really modern salmon cannery" ("Rise and decline" 1:36), but it is clear that the buildings belonged to Brown, cf. PABC, British Columbia, department of finance, assessment rolls for New Westminster District, September-December 1879, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁷ *New Westminster Mainland Guardian*, 18 April 1877, p. 3; 17 August 1877, p. 3; 20 March 1878, p. 2.

⁴⁸ *Victoria Colonist*, 6 May 1874, p. 3 (letter by J. S. Deas).

brought fish by steamer from as far away as Harrison River and Yale and even used wagons to transport the catch from Mud Bay.⁴⁹ The fishermen of Finlayson and Lane followed them, using a dwelling on floats that could be moved from place to place.⁵⁰ Holbrook & Co. had stations both above and below New Westminster.⁵¹ But it was with the fishermen of the remaining New Westminster cannery, Ewen and Wise, that Deas clashed most spectacularly.

At the height of the season, a complaint laid by Ewen and Wise before two New Westminster justices of the peace charged Deas with using "violent and threatening" language to their fishermen. The charges were laid when Deas attempted to prevent encroachment on a drift near his cannery that he had had especially cleared of snags. Deas, not present at the hearing, was sentenced to three weeks in prison and brought up to New Westminster in custody. He was admitted to bail, however, and the case was later thrown out on appeal to county court judge Peter O'Reilly.⁵² The local newspaper attacked the justices of the peace and maintained editorially that the whole incident was a "stragem" by the accusers to disrupt production of a rival company by embroiling its superintendent in a time-wasting dispute in the busiest part of the season.⁵³

Whatever troubles Deas had in the season of 1877 — and his pack dropped from first to third place, behind English & Co., who packed 24,000 cases to his 11,000, and Finlayson and Lane, who were slightly ahead at 12,000 — more was yet to come.⁵⁴ Three more canneries were planned for the coming season of 1878 and — the worst blow — one was to be erected at Ladner's Landing, not two miles below Deas' plant.⁵⁵ This last provoked him to a final effort to protect his stretch of the river. He applied to A. C. Anderson, Inspector of Fisheries for the federal department of marine and fisheries, for an exclusive lease of drifts near his cannery.⁵⁶

The application provoked opposition in both the provincial legislature and the Senate in Ottawa. In Victoria, the House passed unanimously a

⁴⁹ New Westminster *Mainland Guardian*, 21 July 1877, p. 3; 11 August 1877, p. 3; 8 September 1877, p. 3; 8 October 1877, p. 3.

⁵⁰ *Mainland Guardian*, 30 May 1877, p. 3.

⁵¹ *Mainland Guardian*, 25 July 1877, p. 3; 3 November 1877, p. 3.

⁵² *Mainland Guardian*, 14 July 1877, p. 3; July 1877, p. 3.

⁵³ *Mainland Guardian*, 14 July 1877, p. 3; 28 July 1877, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Canada, *SP 1878*, SP 1, supp. 5, pp. 287, 306-07.

⁵⁵ *Victoria Colonist*, 24 March 1878, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Canada, *SP 1878*, SP 1, supp. 5, p. 290.

motion moved by W. J. Armstrong, member for the New Westminster district, and seconded by E. Brown, New Westminster City member, calling on the federal government to refuse to grant any “exclusive rights to fish for salmon in the waters of British Columbia” and alleging it would be “a great injustice to the fishing interests” (with which interests the worthy seconder was, as we have seen, deeply involved!).⁵⁷ In Ottawa, three British Columbia senators spoke against the application.⁵⁸ The result of this weighty opposition, echoed in the press,⁵⁹ was that the proposal was effectively dead.

After this defeat, Deas was to remain only one more season in the canning business. And indeed there is evidence that he planned to leave even before his application for a lease was rejected. In November 1877 his wife, Fanny, bought in her own name a rooming house in Portland, Oregon, for which she paid \$2,700 in U.S. gold coins.⁶⁰ Perhaps other factors were at work in addition to Deas’ pessimism about the future of Fraser River canning. In a dispute over school taxes in the summer of 1877, he is alleged to have said that he would pay only if the money were returned for a teacher and a school on Deas Island.⁶¹ Maybe he and his wife were worried about educational opportunities for their growing family — the elder children were into their teens. Possibly his health was beginning to fail; tinsmithing was a notoriously unhealthy trade, and the rooming house looks like an attempt to provide his wife with an income. It could be that it was the start of a move to what he saw as the better opportunities on the Columbia River.

The prologue to the season of 1878 could only have served to confirm in Deas a gloomy view of the future of the Fraser River industry. The boom in canneries and the disputes between fishermen as well as alleged waste of fish and use of low-quality raw fish transported from upper reaches of the river all combined to decide the federal department of marine and fisheries to impose a set of regulations on the previously unrestricted operations of the canneries.⁶² A wrangle followed between the

⁵⁷ British Columbia, Legislative Assembly, *Journals 1878* (1st session), p. 15.

⁵⁸ Canada, Parliament, Senate, *Debates 1878*, pp. 287-92.

⁵⁹ *Victoria Colonist*, 14 February 1878, p. 2.

⁶⁰ Deed records, Multnomah County, Oregon. Multnomah County department of records and elections, county courthouse, Portland.

⁶¹ British Columbia, *Sessional Papers 1878*, pp. 497-98.

⁶² New Westminster *Mainland Guardian*, 28 July 1877, pp. 2, 3; 19 September 1877, p. 3; 22 September 1877, p. 3; *Victoria Colonist*, 20 June 1878, p. 2; Canada, *SP 1878*, SP 1, supp. 5, p. 289 et seq.; *Canada Gazette*, 1 June 1878, p. 1258.

Ottawa authorities and the canners, with the latter generally maintaining that the Fisheries Act could not be applied to British Columbia conditions, and specifically opposing regulations designed to prevent disputes between fishermen such as the one involving Deas in the previous season. They also opposed a 48-hour weekly closed time included in the proposed federal regulations. Although the canners were successful in modifying the orders, any restriction was seen by them and their supporters as an unwarranted intrusion into affairs of the industry.⁶³

The season of 1878 saw a continuation of the boom of 1877: eight canneries operated on the Fraser and the pack on the river rose from 65,000 to 105,000 cases, even though in this sub-dominant year fish were not so abundant.⁶⁴ The pack at the Deas Island cannery was the smallest of all, but then Deas waited only until the peak of the season was over before making his move to withdraw. On 19 August 1878 he announced he had "sold all right, title, and interest in the fishery on Deas' Island, Fraser River to Messrs. Findlay, Durham and Brodie and my connection with the same ceases from this date." The publication of this notice in the local newspaper followed another asking that claims against Deas be sent to him care of the new owners in Victoria.⁶⁵

It is not possible to give an exact value for the interest that Deas sold to Findlay, Durham and Brodie. The price he received is not known, and the registration of the sale of the island lists only a nominal figure for the transaction.⁶⁶ In the next year, 1879, however, the valuation of the cannery for tax purposes was \$10,000 for the plant and \$3,000 for the land.⁶⁷ This compares closely with the estimate of \$15,000 for the worth of the Deas Island operation made in 1881 by the Inspector of Fisheries as part of an evaluation of all the canneries. It was the lowest amount for any Fraser River cannery, and coupled with a report that year that it was the only one still cooking its cans in boiling water rather than using the newer steam retort, it indicates that machinery and equipment had not been updated,⁶⁸ all of which suggests an old-fashioned plant needing considerable expenditure — yet another reason for selling.

⁶³ *Mainland Guardian*, 23 March 1878, p. 3; 29 June 1878, p. 2; Canada, *SP 1879*, SP 110, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Canada, *SP 1879*, SP 3, supp. 4, pp. 292, 302.

⁶⁵ *Mainland Guardian*, 21 August 1878, p. 2; 28 August 1878, p. 2.

⁶⁶ British Columbia, Land Registry, New Westminster district (search of Lot B of D.L. 136, Group 2, Section 14, Township 6, Plan 24608 by Elspeth C. Gardner).

⁶⁷ PABC, British Columbia, department of finance, assessment rolls for New Westminster District, September-December 1879, pp. 26-27.

⁶⁸ Canada, *SP 1882*, SP 5, supp. 2, p. 223; *Victoria Colonist*, 29 July 1881, p. 3.

In any case the financial settlement required by the sale would have been complicated, involving not only the payment of outstanding accounts, but also of advances for the 1878 season and receipts from the season's pack. So while Deas' family left British Columbia almost immediately, he himself travelled back to New Westminster a number of times between August and the end of the year.⁶⁹

Tragedy was soon to strike the Deas family in their new home in Portland. On 22 July 1880, less than two years after he sold his cannery, John Sullivan Deas died, aged only 42 years.⁷⁰ Cause of death is not recorded, but indications are that he had been ill for some time.⁷¹ Besides his widow Fanny, he left a family of seven children, the eldest being sixteen years old and the youngest four years old.⁷²

Seven seasons in salmon canning in the first decade of continuous operation on the Fraser River entitle John Sullivan Deas to a prominent place among the founders of the canning industry in British Columbia. His fifteen or so years in Vancouver Island and British Columbia were indeed marked by substantial material prosperity. In addition to owning several businesses, he acquired property by purchase and Crown grant, some of it considerable in value. He became a citizen of his adopted land and a provincial voter.⁷³ He seems to have been well liked by his contemporaries, including those who worked for him.⁷⁴

Deas' career is a typical immigrant success story. What is difficult to

⁶⁹ *Victoria Colonist*, 20 August 1878, p. 3; 10 November 1878, p. 3; 11 December 1878, p. 3; 12 December 1878, p. 3; 28 December 1878, p. 3; 1 January 1879, p. 3; *New Westminster Mainland Guardian*, 24 August 1878, p. 3; 6 November 1878, p. 3; 11 December 1878, p. 3; 28 December 1878, p. 3.

⁷⁰ *Portland Oregonian*, 23 July 1880, p. 2.

⁷¹ 1880 United States Census, State of Oregon, Multnomah County, original enumerator's sheets, p. 425 (microfilm copy in Oregon State Historical Society library, Portland). The enumeration on 5 June 1880 gives his age as 41 years and lists him as unemployed.

⁷² *Ibid.* The family continued to live in the house at 251 Sixth Street for some years. Fanny remarried, her second husband, Edward F. Warren, being a printer. As the younger daughters grew up, Amy became a music teacher and Adaline (Addy) a kindergarten teacher, while son James Z. worked at various jobs. Fanny seems to have fallen on hard times at the end of the 1890s — she lost the house at Sixth and Main, by that time owned jointly, and appears to have been living apart from Warren. By 1905, aged about 60, she is listed as living by herself in a rooming house. (*Portland Directory*, various issues, 1880-1910; Deed records, Multnomah County, Oregon.)

⁷³ British Columbia, *Lists of Voters in the Several Electoral Districts in British Columbia in force on the First August 1874*, Victoria, Government Printer, 1874, p. 3; British Columbia, *Sessional Papers*, 1878, p. 210 (List of persons entitled to vote in the electoral district of New Westminster).

⁷⁴ *New Westminster Mainland Guardian*, 14 July 1877, p. 3; 14 November 1877, p. 3.

estimate is what influence his being Black had upon it. He would today be completely forgotten except that a major highway crosses the Fraser River onto the island bearing his name. But other early salmon canners whose careers were even more distinguished than that of Deas are also forgotten. Some indication, however, of the problem of being Black may be seen in —admittedly isolated — contemporary attitudes to him. While saying he is well liked and defending him in the fighting between fishermen in 1877, the New Westminster newspaper implies that he is only manager of the cannery, not the owner. Other instances of people regarding Findlay, Durham and Brodies as the real owners, and not just Deas' agents, also occur. It was just too difficult to believe that a Black could be a major entrepreneur in an industry whose success was so devoutly wished for. The social attitudes to Blacks are also prominent in an episode involving Deas and his family — the “haunting” of a house into which they had just moved. The stereotype about Blacks and fear of ghosts, and the readiness to see the Black as an object of merriment and even derision, both come through in reports of the incident in the leading newspaper of Victoria, the *Colonist*.⁷⁵

The position of Blacks in Vancouver Island and British Columbia in the 1860s and 1870s, as the case of Deas exemplifies, was clearly better than that of the Chinese, the largest group of non-white immigrants. Blacks were behaviourally assimilated to the white community and were therefore not perceived to be as “alien” as their Asian counterparts. No anti-Black laws prevented them from using their talents to prosper, but the potential for discrimination was nevertheless there and was manifested on a number of occasions in the early 1860s. Social pressure against them diminished only as their numbers dwindled after 1865. The fading of the community memory about unpleasant incidents involving Blacks should not, however, allow present-day British Columbians to look back in a complacent belief that the treatment of this minority differed in kind rather than just in intensity from that given other non-white groups.

⁷⁵ *Victoria Colonist*, 20 October 1871, p. 3; 21 October 1871, p. 3; 22 October 1871, p. 3.