

A History, and Examination, of Finn Slough as a Cultural Heritage Landscape

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Summary Submission

The inhabitants of Finn Slough first settled in a different marshy backwater. The first Finnish fishing settlement was in Green Slough, which is now known as Woodward's Slough. The oppressive Russification of Finland in the late 19th and early 20th century increased Finnish immigration to North America, although the new arrivals frequently had little savings with which to start their new life. The community in Richmond found work in the fishing industry, and began to set down roots. They built their houses on piles in the marsh bed, or else lived in house boats, which proved an inexpensive way to build a home semi-legally.

In the early 20th century, damming and dyking measures along the Fraser River forced the fledgling settlement to move. The Finns landed on an undeveloped stretch of marsh just east of Green Slough. The area had gone by a variety of names, all linked to whomever owned the land around it- Anderson, Whitworth, Gilmore, Tiffin- but as the community began building their stilt homes and mooring their boats, the slough took on a new name: Finn Slough.

The slough was perfect for the community. The channel allowed their fishing boats access to the Fraser River, and the land around the slough provided them the space to build net rack floats for drying their fishing nets, bluestone tanks to treat their gear against salt corrosion, and net shacks to store it all. The slough was only accessible on land via footpath that lead to nearby Finland Road, which provided a quiet safety to the community, who strengthened and grew living intimately connected to the landscape that sustained them.

Life in Finn Slough was not without its hurdles, however. Tensions between the community and "outsiders" have been prevalent since its inception, with adversaries including governments at municipal, provincial, and federal levels, and developers. The fishing industry has waxed and waned, and with it have the fortunes of the Slough. The community has fought off multiple attempts to evict them from the land, and now are fighting a losing battle against rising sea tides caused by climate change. The majority of structures in Finn Slough have seen flooding from rising seasonal high tides, and the boardwalks are often submerged, restricting access to homes. The City of Richmond has invested in dyke infrastructure to attempt to counter these changes, but as Finn Slough is not within the City, it does not benefit from this work. Furthermore, the City says that the Slough is Crown land, and thus falls under the purview of the provincial Ministry of Forests, Lands, and Natural Resources. The Ministry considers the residents of the Slough to be trespassers, and has no plan to aid them with their concerns. Left to turn to each other for help, the residents have begun to engineer DIY solutions. Using hydraulic jacks, some residents are slowly lifting their homes and installing taller stilts to move the structures out of the reach of flood waters. The work is slow, arduous, and is more of a band-aid solution than a proper plan.

Some recognition has been forthcoming for the cultural heritage value of Finn Slough- the City of Richmond recognised the site as the Finn Slough Heritage Area, and noted it holds a high level of

historic integrity but stopped short of designating it as a cultural landscape. Currently, the site appears tentatively safe from development, and a visit to the community still evokes feelings of harmony and integration between the residents and the natural environment. Throughout its existence, the community in Finn Slough has proved time and time again that they are resilient, and combat challenges head on, even when uprooting and moving would be a far simpler solution. The connection fostered between the landscape and the community is a powerful one, and it drives their spirit for preservation and longevity. As a cultural landscape, Finn Slough highlights prominent themes from the history of British Columbia: immigration, resource extraction industries, labour organising, counter-cultural movements, and environmentalism to name a few. It is high time it was recognised as an integral part of the rich tapestry of British Columbian history, and given the protection, and aid, it deserves.

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