

## John Mason and His Neighbours

In this well-known view of Vancouver published in *The World* in 1898, we are looking from north (at the bottom) to south (at the top). What will become Grandview is on the left-hand edge. A strip of cleared land appears along where Clark Drive is, but east and south of that there is nothing but uncleared forest.



But the speculative frenzy of 1889-1891 suggesting a hopeful and prosperous future, must have played some role in persuading the earliest settler and his family to choose Grandview as a home, though the affordability of lots when the market failed to materialize must also have been an attraction. Whatever the proximate cause, sometime during the summer of 1891, John Mason decided to settle his family on “a clearing off a logger's 'snake-out' path” about a block west of the Park Drive trail, and close to a skid road heading west on a steep slope down to False Creek.<sup>1</sup>

John Mason was 35 years old, an immigrant from Scotland. His wife Martha, originally from Nova Scotia and of Irish background, was 47. In the Census that summer, Mason had listed himself as an unemployed farmer. However, soon after, he was hired as a fireman at the newly-opened BC Sugar factory. This new security presumably allowed him buy three lots and to hire Leonard Sankey and Harry Langdale as contractors for his house. They didn't have an easy job. Leonard Sankey said “we had to carry the lumber nearly half a block” from a “logging skid road which was the only access to Grandview east of Campbell.”<sup>2</sup>



**Believed to be Mason's house. CVA BuP 29 1**

What Mason paid for was a plain and simple single-storey two room house. In later years Mason would extend the building to the rear, creating a kitchen and adding plumbing, but for now it was adequate if a little cramped. The landscaping -- an ocean of freshly cut stumps cleared by the road gang laying the interurban tracks -- left a lot to be desired but it was, after all, evidence of the approach of civilization. John Mason's house could, it seems, be perceived in many different ways: From a certain leftist perspective it was a "shack" into which the worker along with his wife and children were "crowded". To an architectural historian it was "a little upright box with side gables and, originally, a tiny pedimented front stoop." Finally, to a liberal sociologist of urban housing this "simple one-family house surrounded by a garden and a fence ... presented a folk classicism as elegant as more expensive structures elsewhere in the city". To John and Martha Mason it was simply home, and they stayed for many years.<sup>3</sup>

One of John Mason's workmates from the sugar refinery used to visit him during those early years. He would bring along his wife and his young daughter. Many years later, Daisy May Peachey could vividly recall her mother's long dress becoming snagged as they climbed over the stumps and fallen logs in their path. She remembered that the hills were "still thickly wooded", and that bear, cougar and deer still roamed through the bush south of False Creek. These trips were quite the adventure for a young girl.<sup>4</sup>

It is impossible to discover now, more than a hundred and twenty-five years later, what motivations drove John Mason to buy the lots and build where he did, well away from the downtown subdivisions. Was he consciously staking a claim in what he expected to become a thriving neighbourhood? Or was it just that the land and materials were cheaply acquired and therefore attractive to a factory worker? Whatever the reason, John Mason and his family would be only the first of very many working people to find a home in Grandview. But they wouldn't come quickly. The failure of the speculation of the early 1890s is clearly

indicated by the fact that between 1891 and the census of 1901 less than twenty-five households with just 54 adults had set up camp in the forests and trails nearby.

In the meanwhile, the hills east of False Creek became something of a pleasure spot for intrepid pioneer Vancouverites who claimed it to be “a beautiful drive through the woods.” Two such tourists were Professor Edward Odlum, alderman of the City, and William Craney whose family was heavily involved in Vancouver’s early development. It was apparently during one of their rides that the district’s name was established. In an article in May 1911, Henry H. Stevens wrote:

“The writer recently undertook the task of ascertaining the origin of the name ‘Grandview’ ... Well, about twenty years ago, two gentlemen, one an alderman of the young city of Vancouver, and the other a member of Parliament, by name Professor Odlum and William Craney, took a walk out into the forests lying eastward of the then City of Vancouver. They stopped on the crown of a hill and, looking westward, they beheld one of the most beautiful views which it was possible to imagine. Under the spell of the vision which unfolded itself before their wondering eyes, they gave expression to their delight in various terms. One said to the other: ‘What a grand view! Let us call this beautiful hill Grandview.’ They agreed at once, and so it was named. Through his position as an alderman and as a newspaperman, Professor Odlum was able to keep the term before the public, and thus by constant reiteration it became a fixed name for that section of the city.”<sup>5</sup>

Another early visitor remarked on the “little trails leading down to Trout Lake; some of them were passable, but in places they were overgrown and one could not see ahead. I went down one on my bicycle one day, and before I knew it I ran right slap bang into a bear eating berries beside the trail. The bushes obscured him, and I was travelling fairly fast, and my bicycle tire hit him square in the middle. He went, ‘Woof, woof,’ and ‘beat it’ as fast as he could.” Unfortunately, the natural beauty was not to last. By the end of the 1890s, the loggers had left behind a devastated wasteland of stumps and rough undergrowth.<sup>6</sup>



The clearances, however, gave other settlers the space to move in. One of the first families was that of Charles Burns, a mill worker, his wife, 2-year old son and 6-month old daughter who moved into a speculatively-built house, probably in January 1893. Mrs. Burns later explained:

“The way we went to live in Grandview—what they call Grandview now; it was without a name then, so far as I know—was that we were paying sixteen dollars a month rent for a house on Barnard Street. Then the Royal City Planing Mills reduced all wages, and that made Mr. Burns furious, and he left them; he was without work for almost twelve months except an occasional odd job; and the little place—without a number then, but 1732 Kitchener Street now—was advertised for sale; three rooms and a cedar shake kitchen lean-to. There was a water well, but no electric light, sewer, sidewalk, and the road was a trail from the Vancouver-Westminster interurban. Where Kitchener Street is now there were great big logs, three, four, or five feet through—dozens of them—lying all over the place, crossways on top of each other in heaps; cedar, fir, all sorts; there was lots of wood. Our fuel cost nothing, but to saw the logs.”<sup>7</sup>

It would be good to know who built a house on spec in such an isolated location but that, alas, has yet to be discovered. Charlie Burns paid \$375 for the lot and house, with one hundred dollars down and the balance in small quarterly payments. Mrs. Burns finally settled in but it was clear she was unhappy at first: “[W]hen you looked from my place to Victoria Drive, it was all trees, and logs lying on top of one another, and burned; an awful place.”

Joseph Hamilton and Franklin Shunn were also workers at the Royal City Mill who are first listed as residents of “Grand View” in 1894. Frank Shunn was still an active resident, writing to the Board of Works for example, in the early years of the new century, but Hamilton had moved away before the 1901 Census was taken. So too had George Williams, a labourer, listed in the Directory as living in Grandview in 1894 but on Westminster Avenue [Main Street] by 1897.

Another early neighbour was a gentleman called B.M. Cronk who moved to Grandview in 1893 or 1894. According to Mrs. Burns, he owned several lots from the Park Drive trail along what would become Grant Street to Victoria Drive. He is an unfortunately elusive character. In the Census for 1891, he appears as a lodger in Vancouver, occupied in real estate. The City Directory of 1894 shows him in Grandview as a carpenter, and that for 1899 as a gardener on Grant Street. In the summer of 1902, a series of properties along Grant Street bearing his name are listed as being sold for unpaid taxes. Other than these brief notices he is unknown.

In 1894, a J.W. Smith is also listed as living in Grand View. Mrs. Burns remembered “an elderly woman named Smith—she was a music teacher, with a frail looking husband, tall, dark; and once in a while she would come into my place when it was cold in the morning, and stay for a while.” A 52-year old engineer named Thomas Smith appears in the 1901 Census and may well be the husband.

Mrs. Burns long interview with City Archivist Major Matthews in 1939 sheds some interesting light on the life led by these early settlers. Getting to town to buy groceries, for example, became an art form, especially when there were young children to mind.

“[M]y husband used to get home from the Royal City Planing Mills by the six p.m. interurban car, and I used to arrange it so that, the minute he got in—the car used to run every hour, and lay on the switch, it was single track railway, at First Avenue and Commercial Drive, and in those days the grocery stores, but not the butchers, used to stay open—I would go in on the interurban, and take

perhaps twelve dozen eggs with me [from the hens she kept] — I used to go irregularly, whenever I wanted to do any shopping— and Mr. Hogg, who had a grocery store on Westminster Avenue, would send a man to put the groceries on the car for me, and I caught the seven p.m. interurban back home.”<sup>8</sup>

There was of course no City water supply in these early years, and bathing was an issue for a large family. “We used a great big tub—a huge thing of wooden staves about twenty-four inches high—and bathed in front of the kitchen stove; it was quite a business on a Saturday night when there were four or five youngsters.” The lack of water was also a source of danger as the Burns family discovered in 1898 when their house was destroyed by fire.

“It was a Saturday morning, and the three children were playing outside, and it had been a very dry summer, and lots of fires around, there was a lot of burning in the clearing going on then, and there was only a stove pipe chimney in our cedar shake lean-to kitchen, and I had started the fire to get lunch ready, and I heard some crackling above me on the roof, so I went out, and here was the smoke curling up from the roof. I got a bucket of water, and a dipper, and I got a ladder and climbed up, but had not the strength to put it out; I was too weak ... Mr. Cronk came but it was too late; the fire was too far gone. The fire cleaned up about everything; all we had left was taken to town in an express wagon. It was noon, and they stopped the passing interurban car, and the passengers all got out, and helped to pack stuff out of the house.”

In time, the Burns family rebuilt their house but they were still living outside the neighbourhood on Westminster Avenue when the Census was taken in March of 1901. In that enumeration, John Mason, Frank Shunn, and Thomas Smith were joined as residents of Grandview’s core by twenty-one other households for a total of 54 adults and 56 children. Many of the adults were mill workers, teamsters, or general labourers, but there was also a confectioner with a shop on Powell Street, a dressmaker from Cedar Cove, two clerks, an accountant, a bookkeeper, and a barrister. The count also included the first Italians in the district, Frank and Victor Pennimende – an early indication of the diversity that would become a hallmark of Grandview over the years.<sup>9</sup>

The wild hopes of the real estate speculators and railway promoters of 1890 and 1891 were clearly not sustained given that just two dozen households had settled down a decade later, But the corner was about to be turned, and within months the real creation of Grandview as a thriving neighbourhood would begin.

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<sup>1</sup> L.T. Sankey interview in Matthews, CVA AM54,.013.03120

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Census 1891; Sankey interview in *Highland Echo* 1962 Jan 18, p.1. Mason purchased lots 22-24 in Block 54 of DL 264a. He built his house on lot 24 which was subsequently addressed as 1617 Graveley Street. Sankey lived to be 97 years old, dying in 1964: *Highland Echo* 1964 Feb 6, p.1

<sup>3</sup> “crowded”: Elaine Bernard, *Working Lives* (1986, Vancouver), p.92; “upright box”: Michael Kluckner & John Aitkin, *Heritage Walks Around Vancouver* (1992, Vancouver), p.83-84; “simple one-family”: Deryck Holdsworth, *Cottages and Castles for Vancouver Home-seekers* in *BC Studies* 69-70, 1986), p.11 passim. John Mason’s house existed until 1967 when it was demolished to make way for a nondescript apartment building; there were no heritage activists around to mourn the loss,

<sup>4</sup> Daisy May Peachey’s reminiscences are from Sun 1972 Nov 14, p. 71

<sup>5</sup> The “beautiful drive” quote is by Harold E. Riley in Matthews, Vol 3, p.75-85; the naming story is in *Western Call* 1911 May 19, p.1. By 1893, John Mason was listed in the City Directory as in “Grand View”.

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<sup>6</sup> Trout Lake trails story from George Jamieson interview, Matthews Vol VI, p.98; image below is CVA Str P396

<sup>7</sup> Information about the Burns family is primarily from a long interview Mrs. Burns gave to Major Matthews in 1938: Matthews Vol 4, p.81-84. Mrs. Burns told Matthews they had moved in January 1892; however, Jenny was not born until the summer of 1892, so January 1893 for the move is more likely. Mr. Burns would eventually go back to work with Royal City Mills.

<sup>8</sup> Matthews, Vol 4, p.82

<sup>9</sup> 1901 Canada Census