

**Statement of Significance**  
**Navvy Jack Thomas House**  
**1768 Argyle Avenue**  
**West Vancouver, BC**  
**May 2008**



### **Historic Place**

The historic place is the Navvy Jack Thomas House and its grounds, located at 1768 Argyle Avenue, facing English Bay and adjacent to John Lawson Park. Built around 1873-74, the house was moved slightly west and south of its original site in about 1921 to allow for the opening of Argyle Avenue. It is owned by the District of West Vancouver, with life tenancy to the current occupants.

### **Heritage Value**

The Navvy Jack Thomas House has built value for its age, architectural qualities, and landscape setting; and historical value for its associations with numerous themes in West Vancouver's history, including the earliest white settlement and the role of the Squamish people.

The historic place is believed to be the longest continually occupied house in the Lower Mainland of BC. It was built ca. 1873-74 by 'Navvy Jack' (John) Thomas, a Welsh deserter from the Royal Navy. The house has been considerably changed over the years, but basic gabled form and early materials remain and many changes are easily identified. The continuing history of change to the house has value and merit commemoration.

Navvy Jack married Rowia, a Squamish Nation woman, in the early 1870s. They raised their four children, Sampson, Christine, Mary, and Emma, in this house. Christine married Chief Henry Jack. Their daughter Amy married Chief Dan George, the renowned community leader and actor. The histories of mixed-race

families like the Thomases are important in many ways. Marriage between First Nations women and European settlers were common at the time and tell us much about life in early BC; how native and non-native people adjusted, in very personal ways, to colonization; and how race affected lives. It asks us to re-think who the ‘pioneers’ were (i.e. Rowia as a pioneer), and to look at the history of West Vancouver and the Coast Salish as being about shared family histories.

Navvy Jack was important to the development of West Vancouver. He operated an on-demand ferry service. He also made a direct contribution to the construction of the built environment of the region by supplying clean gravel from the mouth of the Capilano River. The term ‘Navvy Jack’ continues to be used by the Vancouver building trades today to describe clean, high quality gravel. (Men who laboured at excavations were called ‘Navvies.’)

The setting on the water and the surrounding landscape also have heritage value. The former reminds us of the importance of water access in early settlement. The landscape includes a remnant of the Swy-Wee lagoon to the east, now a duck pond, which Navvy Jack used to berth the sloop he transported gravel in. The Thomases maintained a garden and orchard. When visited in 1931, cherry and walnut trees were growing there.

The subsequent history of the property also has value. John Lawson, another ‘pioneer’, bought the property in 1907 (it had been sold by Thomas’ estate in 1905 to another contributor to local development, J.C. Keith). Lawson lived there until 1928. Lawson and his family made a significant contribution to West Vancouver. Known as the ‘father’ of West Vancouver, John Lawson was the first postmaster, second reeve, and founder of the scheduled West Vancouver ferry service. He donated land for first municipal hall. Lawson planted a holly near the house and named the place ‘Hollyburn’. (Holly for the tree, burn for the Creek. The hollies do not survive.) He added a small peaked dormer on the front and two brick chimneys. He is remembered at adjacent John Lawson Park.

Subsequent owners and occupants have also played a role in the growth of the West Vancouver community. The property was owned by Emma Macfarlane and then by the Hookham family. The latter were there by 1928 (likely renting from Macfarlane, they obtained title in 1943). Leonard Hookham was a cabinetmaker. The role of the Hookhams in the community has not been established; they lived in this house for 43 years. The Hookhams sold the property in 1971 to Lloyd Williams. The Williams family has a long history in the Vancouver-area. Lloyd’s uncle, Alfred, lived in West Vancouver in 1891 and was rescued from drowning at the mouth of the Capilano by Navvy Jack’s son. The District now owns the house and the Williams have a life tenancy.

## **Character-Defining Elements**

The character-defining elements of the Navvy Jack Thomas House include:

- Features that represent the original 19<sup>th</sup>-century house, including the gable roof, with the ridge parallel to the water
- Construction materials and methods from the original house, including clear old-growth fir and cedar, sheathing and sub-floors a full 1 inch thick and 12 inches wide, floors of edge-grain fir, the exterior finished in moulded cedar siding, and the interior finished in V-jointed panelling.
- Features that represent the changes made early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the extended dormer facing the water, the second gable on the west side, and the chimneys
- Features that represent the changes made late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the vertical cedar siding, the carport, and the deck
- Discernable changes to the building, allowing one to read the evidence of the many different building phases; this is particularly visible in the basement
- Long-standing use as a residence
- Site in Ambleside, facing the water

## **Sources**

Hugh Johnston's research was used to prepare the history. See also West Vancouver Museum and Archives, Destinations Time Walk – Hollyburn, Navvy Jack House. West Vancouver Heritage Inventory, updated to 2003 West Vancouver Heritage Inventory Worksheets and Evaluation Sheet; West Vancouver Museum and Archives, Rupert Harrison Fonds, Noteworthy People – 'T' and Subject File for 'Hollyburn,' Subject File, 'John T. Thomas; City Directories for 1934, 1940, 1945. Other information provided by the District of West Vancouver.