

BC Archives Research Guide

QUICK GUIDE TO PRE-EMPTION AND HOMESTEAD RECORDS

PRE-EMPTION

Pre-emption was a method by which colonial or provincial Crown land in British Columbia that had not been fully surveyed could be acquired by claiming it for settlement and agricultural purposes and improving it. The process was designed to encourage settlement and provided temporary title or permission to occupy land. Companies and partnerships, as well as individuals, could apply. Crown land grants were not issued until specified improvements and residency requirements had been completed and the land had been fully surveyed. The process was formally established under the Land Ordinance of 1870 (although the earliest pre-emptions began in 1859) and was terminated by the 1970 *Land Act*.

Details of the pre-emption process varied over the years, but generally consisted of the following steps:

1. A block of vacant, non-reserved, and often as yet unsurveyed Crown land was selected.
2. The land was staked and a written application submitted.
3. A Certificate of Pre-emption was issued in triplicate (copies were given to the pre-emptor, the local district office, and the lands department/ministry in Victoria).
4. After improvements, meeting residency qualifications, and land surveying, a Certificate of Improvement was issued and the land purchased at a discount rate or at no further charge.
5. A Crown grant was issued and ownership of the land passed into private. The Crown grant had to be registered at a Land Title office and a Certificate of Indefeasible Title issued for the process to be fully completed.
6. Responsibility for keeping records of the land now passed to a Land Title office. If the new owner defaulted on taxes, the land reverted to the Crown.

HOMESTEADING

Homesteading was the process by which land under dominion (Canadian) government administrative control in Western Canada was made available for settlement. Except for the lack of a Certificate of Improvement and different terminology, the homesteading process was nearly identical to the pre-emption process.

Between 1884 and 1930, three blocks of land in BC were homesteaded:

1. the Railway Belt
2. the Dominion Peace River Block
3. the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway Belt

LOCATING PRE-EMPTION RECORDS

The BC Archives holds originals and/or copies of all surviving pre-emption records, many of which are found in [GR-0112](#). The pre-emption registers ([GR-0112](#) Volumes 213-245) have also been digitized and can be viewed at [FamilySearch](#).

[GR-0112](#) does not contain all pre-emptions recorded in British Columbia between 1859 and 1971. If a pre-emption claim cannot be located in the registers or record books in [GR-0112](#), other search approaches may be necessary, such as Crown land grants and additional series of records listed further below.

There is also an incomplete pre-emption card index arranged by pre-emptor last name available in the BC Archives Reference Room.

Crown land grants

If Crown land was acquired through pre-emption, the Crown land grant file will contain pre-emption details. The BC Archives holds Crown grant records in series [GR-3097](#) (1869-1930) and [GR-3139](#) (1851-1878). Both series have also been digitized and can be viewed at [FamilySearch](#).

Note that only completed pre-emptions will be included in the Crown grant records and indexes.

Tantalis GATOR database

[Tantalis Government Access Tool for Online Retrieval \(GATOR\)](#) provides access to the Crown land registry, where you can view, extract, and print Crown grant records. It includes links to several types of scanned Crown land documents, such as the original Crown grant, Crown land survey field notes, and official plans. The [GATOR database](#) allows you to search for Crown-grant records using the following criteria:

- Legal description, primary and subdivision parcel
- File number
- Interest holder name or interested party
- Parcel identification numbers (PIN)
- BCGS Mapsheet number
- Crown grant or tenure document number
- Plan
- Wellsite details and plans

See the [Searching GATOR](#) webpage for further information.

Historic Crown Grants database

The [Historic Crown Grants](#) database (also available from the [GATOR Search Menu](#)) allows you to search Crown grant files from 1860-1930 using additional search criteria:

- Surname or first name
- Business name
- Land district
- Grant date
- Grant number
- Volume
- BC Archives reel number
- GSU reel number

See the [Historic Crown Grants Help](#) webpage for further information.

Within [Historic Crown Grants](#) database search results, click on the green arrow in the 'Details' column of the grant you want to access. If digitized copies of the grant and associated coloured map are available, click on the images to open, save, and/or print the .pdf records. Those records that have not been digitized are available on microfilm at the BC Archives. Look for a BC Archives microfilm number (e.g., B12345). Note the volume and grant number to help you locate the record on the BC Archives reel. "EARLY VOL" refers to records in series [GR-3139](#).

The database, populated by volunteers, contains inaccurate information (transcription errors) and missing or incomplete data for many Crown grants. More complete indexes are found in [GR-3096](#), but the indexes do not provide reel numbers and can be difficult to use.

If you know the pre-emptor's name and geographic location

- Search the [Historic Crown Grants](#) database for a BC Archives microfilm number, volume, and grant number. Use those details to locate the record on microfilm within the BC Archives Reference Room.
- If the name is not found in the [Historic Crown Grants](#) database, check the card file in the BC Archives Reference Room and the pre-emption registers ([GR-0112](#) Volumes 213-245 on microfilm in the Reference Room or online at [FamilySearch](#)) according to your geographic location. You may need to consult a map to find your location and determine the appropriate pre-emption register (there may also be more than one register for a geographic area).

Each pre-emption register begins with a list of pre-emptions by pre-emption number and then an alphabetical index by pre-emptors' last name. Names are recorded in pre-emption record number order; the pre-emption record number order corresponds to the date of the pre-emption application, so the lower the number the earlier the pre-emption. If you find a name, keep searching until the end of that section of the alphabetical index. Some individuals made multiple pre-emption applications within a register.

Pre-emption registers typically include the following information:

- Record no.
- Date of Record
- Name
- Lot No.
- Acres
- C. of I. [Certificate of Improvement]
- File No. [Correspondence file no.]
- Crown Grant No.
- Remarks

If the pre-emption was recorded before 1927, there may be a Certificate of pre-emption record available in [GR-0112](#). Use the pre-emption register information to locate the Certificate of pre-emption record. Note that, except for some Vancouver and Victoria district volumes, most of the pre-emption record books end in December 1913.

Correspondence file numbers for pre-emptions recorded between 1912 and 1917 will have a suffix of "/12" that may not be noted in the pre-emption register. The main correspondence series for 1858-1872 are [GR-1372](#) and [GR-2900](#) and for 1873-1917 are [GR-0868](#), [GR-1088](#), and [GR-1440](#). File numbers for pre-emptions recorded between 1918 and 1970, always starts with "0" and correspondence is found only in [GR-1441](#). For further information on lands-related correspondence records, see the BC Archives *Land Records* guide available from our [Guides, Indexes, and Inventories webpage](#).

If you know the pre-emptor's name but not their geographic location

- Search the [Historic Crown Grants](#) database for a BC Archives microfilm number, volume, and grant number. Use those details to locate the record on microfilm within the BC Archives Reference Room.
- If the name is not found in the [Historic Crown Grants](#) database, you will need to determine where the person pre-empted in order to follow the steps outlined in the previous section. See the BC Archives *Genealogy* guide available from our [Guides, Indexes, and Inventories webpage](#) for suggestions on ways to determine such information.

A selection of land district maps can be found in the Land Registers section of Inventory 15, Guide to Lands Records, located within the BC Archives reference room. The pre-emptor's series of lithographed maps are available on self-service microfiche. No personal names are noted on the maps, only locations available for pre-emption between 1911 and 1969.

- If you are unable to determine a location or find the pre-emptor via the [Tantalis GATOR](#) or [Historic Crown Grants](#) databases, but are certain that they pre-empted and were granted title to a property, it may be that the land was part of the Dominion land in BC and was homesteaded.

Additional pre-emption and related records

The following BC Archives series also contain pre-emptions and related records:

- [GR-0039](#) - Crown lands records, 1874-1944
- [GR-0214](#) - Pre-emption applications, 1900-1916
- [GR-0514](#) - Register of land pre-emptions and other material, 1867-1884
- [GR-0718](#) - Pre-emption certificates and other material, 1913-1947
- [GR-0766](#) - Pre-emption records, 1861-1886
- [GR-0892](#) - Miscellaneous papers referring to pre-emptions on Vancouver Island, 1861-1873
- [GR-0894](#) - Shawnigan Land District lot register, no date
- [GR-1014](#) - Pre-emption records, 1885-1929
- [GR-1041](#) - Pre-emption records signed by Assistant Commissioner of Lands and Works, 1871-1873
- [GR-1045](#) - Records related to land disputes arising from conflicting claims and applications for the purchase of unsurveyed lands and pastoral lands, 1890-1891
- [GR-1050](#) - Correspondence relating to cancellation of pre-emption applications, 1919-1920
- [GR-1054](#) - Lytton Gold Commissioner's records, 1859-1874
- [GR-1058](#) - Letterpress reference books of surveyed land, 1908-1914
- [GR-1067](#) - Similkameen District land records, 1900-1912
- [GR-1069](#) - Herald Street collection, ca. 1849-1970. See the final section of the [GR-0112 finding aid](#) for a list of possible pre-emption records located in series [GR-1069](#)
- [GR-1084](#) - Records of the Assistant Land Commissioner and pre-emption certificates, 1884-1887
- [GR-1128](#) - Record book of land examinations and miscellaneous applications, 1919-1925
- [GR-1132](#) - Correspondence and memoranda, 1895-1903
- [GR-1142](#) - Record of pre-emption records cancelled in Barkerville Assessment District, 1911-1923

- [GR-1156](#) - Pre-emption record of Joseph Trainer at Oyster Bay, Cowichan District, 1873
- [GR-1182](#) - Pre-emption records, 1860-1874, 1884

LOCATING HOMESTEAD RECORDS

With the exception of the Crown grants (Letters Patent), the federal government homestead records for BC were transferred to the BC Archives. They include:

- [GR-0436](#) - Land settlement records for Railway Belt and Peace River Block (1885-1949), which consists of correspondence, applications for homestead entry, application for patents, and registers relating to land settlement
- [GR-0437](#) - Land surveys relating to the Railway Belt and Peace River Block (1885-1930), which consists of correspondence files relating to surveys in British Columbia, files relating to surveys of quarter sections, and Dominion Land Surveyors' diaries.

Dominion Land settlement records for the Railway Belt and Peace River ([GR-0436](#)) are divided into three sub-series:

1. [GR-0436.A](#) - BC lands (correspondence) files
2. [GR-0436.B](#) - Index maps and township general registers
3. [GR-0436.C](#) - Homestead grant registers

See the [GR-0436 finding aid](#) for detailed instructions on locating records within the series and a nominal (name) list of the correspondence files. The series has also been digitized and can be viewed at [FamilySearch](#).

Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway Belt (E&N)

Beginning in 1887, land settlement within the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway Belt (E&N) was administered by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company following transfer of the land grant from the Canadian government. Most of the E&N records held by the BC Archives pertain to commissions of inquiry held between 1897 and 1916 as a result of disputes between settlers within the E&N Railway land grant prior to 1884 and the E&N Railway Company.

To search E&N records held by the BC Archives, visit the [Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway Belt Authority record](#) and click on linked results. For further information, see the Railway Belt section in Inventory 15, Guide to Lands Records, located within the BC Archives Reference Room.

In addition to original land sales records held by the [Land Title and Survey Authority](#), the [Canadian Pacific Railway Archives](#) also maintains copies of land sales records within the E&N Railway land grant.

Land Grants of Western Canada database

The Library and Archives Canada [Land Grants of Western Canada, 1870-1930](#) database can be searched by name and geographic location for references to Dominion land grants issued for the Railway Belt of British Columbia as well as Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.

The database can be useful for searching by location (section, township, range, meridian) to identify a name, or for searching by name to identify a location. Many records have map sheet images attached. Microfilm reel numbers refer to Library and Archives Canada reels, which are not held at the BC Archives.