

## Historical Overview of Capilano Suspension Bridge Park

Ever wonder where the name Capilano comes from? It is actually a First Nations name belonging to the Squamish Nation and originally spelled Kia'palano, meaning "beautiful river". Kia'palano was the name of a great Squamish chief who lived in this area in the early part of the 1800s. Over time "Kia'palano" was anglicized into "Capilano": a word that has become the namesake of our bridge and park as well as the river and surrounding area.

First Nations history on the North Shore and Lower Mainland dates back to about 8000 years before first contact with the explorers. And it was just over 200 years ago that the First Nations of this area caught their first glimpse of Europeans. However, it wasn't until around 1860 when a sawmill was built to harvest the trees that the first pioneers actually settled here. The pioneers of North Vancouver cleared parts of the rainforest to build homes and businesses. They relied heavily on the abundance of lumber that the rainforest provided for shelter, household amenities and prosperity. The pioneer lifestyle was quite different from what they were used to back home in Europe. Explorers, pioneers and settlers were attracted to what we now call North Vancouver for many of the reasons we still are today - the natural setting and a chance to shape a new life for themselves in a beautiful coastal rainforest. One of them was George Grant Mackay.

The year is 1889. John A. McDonald is our Prime Minister and Alex Edmund Baston Davie and John Robson successively hold the title of Premier of BC. The Canadian Pacific Railway arrived in Vancouver just last year, Queen Victoria is on the throne and the area presently known as North Vancouver is starting to take shape....

George Grant Mackay, a civil engineer, had arrived from Scotland the year before. By this time, a neighbourhood called "Moodyville" (the name given to the area east of Lonsdale) was already thriving. The Capilano area, which was part of the District of North Vancouver (incorporated in 1891), was not far behind, but still challenging to reach. Mackay bought 6000 acres of land in this area from the Crown. Not quite knowing what he was going to do with the land at the time, George bought it stating tourism, mining and logging purposes. The land spanned both sides of the Capilano River. George bought all this land for approximately \$1.00 an acre! What a real estate deal!

In order to cross the 230-foot deep Capilano Canyon and access the west side of his property, George decided to build a suspension bridge. Assisted by two First Nations persons, George built the first Capilano Suspension Bridge out of cedar planks and hemp rope. It was secured at both ends to two-cedar stumps buried underground. The bridge was 450 feet (137 meters) long and 230 feet (70 meters) high, making it to this day, the worlds longest/largest combined suspension footbridge! It was also known as the laughing bridge, because of the sound it made when the wind blew through the canyon.

In 1892, one year before his death, George subdivided and sold the property containing the bridge to Bruno Steltzer. Steltzer was a wealthy speculator who saw the money-making potential of Capilano Suspension Bridge. The wilderness of North Vancouver, the Capilano area and the bridge were attracting curious folks from Vancouver, who didn't seem to mind making the adventurous trek to the bridge. To get to Capilano Suspension Bridge in the early 1900s you had to: 1) take the trolley to the Vancouver ferry dock, 2) take the ferry to North Vancouver, 3) take another trolley to the last stop on Capilano Road and 4) Walk 1 mile to

the bridge! This is why the courageous souls who braved the expedition to visit the suspension bridge were called "Tramps": they had to tramp through bushes all the way up the mountainside to reach the bridge!

In 1903 Bruno decided to rebuild the bridge and replace the hemp rope with sturdier steel cables. Bruno also decided that he would charge 10 cents per person to cross the bridge, thus making Capilano Suspension Bridge Vancouver's oldest, as well as one of its most famous, tourist attractions!

The bridge and property were purchased by English businessman, Edward Mahon, in 1910. Like Mackay, Mahon moved to the Lower Mainland in 1888 and dabbled successfully in local businesses. However, he wasn't as successful in love... that is, until he met Lilette Rebbeck. Edward encountered a few hurdles in his courtship of Lilette: firstly, she lived in Victoria; secondly, her mother, Elizabeth Rebbeck, was opposed to their relationship. Yet this was somewhat understandable given that Edward was 29 years older than Lilette - he was 48 and she was 19! But being a savvy businessman, Edward solved his problems by offering a managerial position at Capilano Suspension Bridge to Elizabeth. She couldn't turn down such an opportunity and quickly moved to Capilano, accompanied by her lovely daughter Lilette. Needless to say, Edward and Lilette were married one year later and had a little boy named Bryan.

In 1911, Edward built the Teahouse and had beautiful flower bushes imported to the park from the Orient and Europe. Unsure of the bridge's strength, Edward reinforced it with additional steel cables in 1914. He sold the Capilano Suspension Bridge to Mac MacEachran in 1935.

Archibald Dunerick MacEachran, or Mac as he was commonly called, was a handsome young forest ranger. He found himself spending many hours at the Teahouse and in the company of Elizabeth Rebbeck, who was 30 years his senior. Shortly after being introduced a romance sprung up between the two, and in 1921 the couple was married! During the low season Elizabeth managed the park and Mac sought employment elsewhere; for several winters he managed warehouses in Tahiti for rum-running friends. In 1934 Mac announced to Elizabeth that he had a 19 year-old daughter, Irene, whom he wished to bring to Capilano. This news devastated Elizabeth but she agreed to accept Irene. Arrangements to build a new, larger house across the street from the bridge were made; but sadly, Elizabeth died before the house was finished. Today, this house serves as the Bridge House Restaurant.

After Elizabeth's death in 1934 Mac purchased the bridge from Mahon and invited local First Nations artisans, including Kia'palano descendant Mathias Joe Capilano, to come and carve at the park. Thus started the tradition of raising Story (Totem) Poles and displaying First Nations artwork at Capilano Suspension Bridge. To this day Capilano has the largest private collection of Story Poles in the world, featuring both the northern and southern styles of pole carving.

In 1945 Mac sold the bridge to Henri Aubeneau and moved to California. Aubeneau was a prominent land developer. During his time at Capilano Suspension Bridge he kept things running as they were and did not make any significant changes to the bridge or the park. He then sold the bridge to Douglas McRae (Rae) Mitchell in 1953.

A dynamic businessman, Mitchell aggressively promoted the Capilano Suspension Bridge worldwide. Unsure of the 1914 cable strength he completely rebuilt the bridge in 5 days in

1956, encasing new multi-stranded, steel cables in 13 tons of concrete at either end. This is the equivalent weight of 4 elephants on either side. Tying the new bridge to the old one, Rae and his team used a pulley system to pull the new bridge across the canyon. The 4<sup>th</sup> Capilano Suspension Bridge is designed to hold over 1333 persons. This means that the bridge would have be filled with people standing shoulder-to-shoulder, with each and every person carrying an extra 4 people on their shoulders just to reach maximum capacity! It's as long as 2 Canadian hockey rinks and as high as the collarbone on the Statue of Liberty, or a 25-story building. Its length is as wide as the wingspan of 2 Boeing 747s and it is actually higher than Lion's Gate Bridge! Wow! This is the bridge that still stands to this day - the bridge you will cross! Rae also developed the trails on the west side of the bridge and converted the Teahouse into a gift store. However when Mitchell retired, business declined and the Capilano Suspension Bridge faced an uncertain future.

Rae's daughter Nancy Mitchell (now Stibbard) believed she could turn Capilano Suspension Bridge around and in 1983, after working for him at the park as a young girl, purchased the bridge and park from her father. She is the current and 7<sup>th</sup> owner. Since taking the lead at Capilano Suspension Bridge Nancy has transformed the park. Today's Capilano is a destination. The Story Centre, a display filled with life-sized photo-murals, artifacts and antiques together with "voices from the past" and informative flipbooks chronicles the early history of the bridge. Treetops Adventure, which offers guests a squirrel's eye view of the West Coast temperate rainforest, comprises of 7 suspension bridges (some reaching as high as 100 feet above the forest floor!) suspended between Douglas-fir trees. Treetop Adventures was the first venue of its kind in North America and does not damage the trees in any way. In 2011 Cliffwalk was introduced and is the newest, and scariest, adventure at Capilano Suspension Bridge Park. After repelling down the east face of Capilano Canyon into jungle-like ferns and mosses, John Stibbard, Capilano Suspension Bridge Park's Vice President of Operations and Nancy's son, conceived his plan to give guests a new super-thrilling ecological experience. At its highest point, Cliffwalk is 90 metres (300 feet) above Capilano River, taking guests higher than Capilano Suspension Bridge! Nearly 213 Metres (700 feet) in length, the narrow 20" (50cm) wide walkway has fixed handrails supported by steel beams cantilevered from 16 anchor points in the granite rock face of the canyon. Bridges and stairs, occasionally interrupted by landings and platforms, take guests along the cliff edge to previously unexplored areas of the park. Cliffwalk is high and narrow and, in some sections, glass (very strong glass) is all that separates guests from the canyon far below. With just an 11 square metre environmental footprint, Cliffwalk is unobtrusive as it winds its way on a heart-stopping cliff side journey through rainforest vegetation.

Capilano Suspension Bridge has endured natural catastrophes, including Hurricane Frieda in 1962 and, more recently, the windstorms in 2006. In the winter of 2006, a 300 year old, 91.4 metre Douglas-fir tree fell on the bridge. The cables held strong under the weight of the 93, 000 pound tree, but for the first time in its history, Capilano Suspension Bridge Park was closed for three months. During this time, crews removed the tree and repaired, tested and upgraded the bridge's anchoring system affixing the cables into 114 tons of concrete.

Today the bridge is still holding strong and proud! Can you say, *"I made it?"*