

How did Panama Flats get its name?

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Skating on frozen floodplain, with Interurban rail line and Hyacinth Avenue visible in distance, between 1913-1923 (Saanich Archives, 1989-017-008)

A popular explanation, often repeated during the past few decades, is that Panama Flats was named by an Englishman named McDonald who was employed as Chief Engineer during the construction of the Panama Canal. Around 1904, he came to the Victoria area and invested his earnings in 1200 hectares of rural land. Because the swampy land and frequent flooding reminded McDonald of the jungles of Central America, he named the area Panama Flats. This is an engaging origin story but no evidence could be found to support it, while quite a bit of contradictory information was discovered.

The first problem with this account is the amount of land that Mr. McDonald was supposed to have purchased. 1200 hectares is equivalent to 2965 acres. For comparison, Kenneth McKenzie's Lake Hill Estate, which from the 1860s until the early 1890s consisted of all of Victoria Land District Sections 48, 50, 64, and 82, was at its maximum only about 850 acres. Factoring in the other well-documented land owners of the area during the late 19th and early 20th century, and the fact that during the first decade of the 20th century much of the surrounding area was being subdivided into smaller acreages, the idea that McDonald owned nearly 3000 acres is unlikely.

The next inconsistency with this version is the presence of Joseph Carey, after whom Carey Road is named. According to tax assessment ledgers from 1889 to 1906, Carey owned all 111 acres of Lake District Section 12 which encompasses half of Panama Flats and all of today's Panama Hill Park.



Detail of Saanich land districts and sections surrounding Panama Flats, 2020 (saanich.ca/saanichmap)

Since we know that landowners such as Carey and McKenzie owned large sections of the Flats and surrounding areas, perhaps the account of McDonald is true but the amount of land he purchased was recorded incorrectly. This is plausible except that no record of a landowner named McDonald or MacDonald was found in this area during this period. There are no McDonalds in the tax assessment ledgers or the directories. The only reference to a MacDonald uncovered so far is a Henry Alexander MacDonald in the 1908 Saanich voters list. He is described as a farmer living on Carey Road. He is not included in the 1909 voters list though, and is not present in the 1908 city directory. A 70 year old retired steel worker named Henry Alexander McDonald died in Victoria in 1950. This may be the same MacDonald who was living on Carey Road in 1908, but it is unlikely that he was the wealthy English engineer and landowner in the Panama Flats story.

Another point worth considering is how the history of the Panama Canal construction fits into the timeline. One account, published in the Times Colonist in 1983 says that around 1904, McDonald used “one of the \$100,000 increments he received while the canal was being dug” to purchase his 1200 hectares in Saanich. 1904 is the year that the United States took over the Panama Canal project from the French, who had begun work in 1881. While it is possible that an Englishman was employed on the Panama Canal during this period, \$100,000 seems like a large sum of money for a project that was sold to the United States in part due to consistent financial problems.

While no reference to an engineer named McDonald working on the Panama Canal prior to 1904 has been uncovered, there was someone named MacDonald recorded as working and living in Panama after 1904. According to a 1993 article published in the Canadian Geotechnical Journal, the Geological Survey relocated a young geologist on their staff, Donald MacDonald, to reside in Panama for the duration of the canal project in order to help manage the frequent landslides disrupting construction. Donald MacDonald did not join the project until 1911 though, seven years after our McDonald is supposed to have returned from Panama to purchase land in Saanich. So again, this does not fit with the timeline of our narrative. Donald MacDonald also



does not appear to have had any connection to Vancouver Island. He was born in Nova Scotia, lived and worked in various cities in the United States and Nova Scotia, and is buried with his wife's family in Kentucky.

Doris Clarke, who was born in 1909 and grew up on Grange Road, overlooking the "grazing fields", has another account of the area that is now Panama Flats. She remembers being told that the area was originally two farms. The northern part, known as Carey farm, was owned by Joseph Carey and the southern part was owned by Captain Warren. Mrs. Clark recounts that sometime later (possibly around the time of Carey's death in 1910), George Jones took over both farms. Between 1912 and 1914, a German bought both farms for \$1000 per acre, subdivided and sold lots. She recollects that some houses were built on the flats but later flooded out. When WWI came, the German's property was seized by the Government and John Edge bought the farm in 1924. The Edge family are well documented as having farmed the fields around Panama Flats until the 1970s.



Edge's barn and flooding of Panama Flats, December 1972 (Saanich Archives, 1982-001-028)

We don't know who first told the story of McDonald giving Panama Flats its name, but it has been shared in the local newspapers since as early as 1983. According to a 1996 Times Colonist article, the Saanich archivist "dug up a historical account of the flats" but no such account has been located in the Archives' collections.

Here's what we have learned about the origin of the place name Panama Flats:

The first use of the word Panama in relation to this land area in the *Colonist* is in a series of advertisements published throughout June 1912 for the sale of residential lots in "Panama Park". In a 1975 Times Colonist Article, Jim Osman writes that around 1910, a developer was intending to develop the Garden City area and that "a large swamp was to be called Panama Park". This version of the history seems to attribute the name to the developers and fits with the timeline of the first appearance of these ads, but again we don't know the source of this information. According to Jim Osman, the 1910s era development of Panama Park was short-lived due to constant flooding.

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The Victoria Colonist 2 June 1912, page 16 / The Victoria Colonist 9 June 1912, page 41

While no record of an Englishman named McDonald purchasing 1200 hectares in Saanich at the turn of the 20th century has been uncovered at this time, the story of how Panama Flats got its name was not necessarily pure invention. The building of the Panama Canal was regularly covered in newspapers at the time and many businesses tried to capitalize on its popularity by using Panama in their name. In 1912, in addition to the new Panama Park development in Saanich, there was a Panama Hotel and Restaurant and a Panama Realty Company operating downtown. Panama was in the public consciousness at this time and the comparison between the swampy landscape in Saanich and the jungles of Panama could have been made by anyone reading a newspaper, not only by someone who had visited in person. The land records at Saanich Archives are not complete, so it is possible that a man named McDonald lived or owned land in the area and that his name became connected to the origin of Panama Flats. Due to the incomplete nature of the historical record, we may never find the definitive answer to how Panama Flats got its name.





Panama Flats, looking west, January 1963 (Saanich Archives, 2015-014-004)

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