

To live and die in Bastion Square

By Vince Lunny

IT WAS A BLEAK winter morning — Jan. 28, 1885, to be exact — and the seasonally weak sun had not yet erased all the darkness of the night as C. J. Rogers plodded nervously toward the gallows in the northwest corner of the jail yard in Bastion Square.

The blood ran ice-cold in his veins and the staccato beat of his chilled heart echoed like a ticking time bomb in the chambers of his mind.

"The twisting and working of the muscles of his face told plainly of the stress under which he was laboring," reported *The Times* of that afternoon.

Rogers had been charged with the murder of a fellow prisoner while the accused and his victim were incarcerated in the penitentiary at New Westminster. Rogers gave himself up to Jim McNamara, a jailer, after firing two revolver shots at his fellow convict in the prison washroom. He was committed to trial at the Fall Assize in Victoria.

How Rogers came into possession of a revolver in the pen was never fully explained. Certainly there was great laxity somewhere in the administration of the prison to permit such a flagrant breach of common sense, if not regulations.

At his trial, Rogers pleaded not guilty but said, "The deceased had told vile lies about me and, on the day of the shooting, had called me a vile name."

The jurymen were not impressed by Rogers's rhetorical defence. They found him guilty and an application to have his death sentence commuted to life in prison was denied.

Three guards sat up with Rogers during his last night on earth. Apparently he was cheerful . . . as cheerful as could be expected under the circumstances . . . and he ate a hearty break-

fast, as usual, in the wee hours of the dismal day.

At 7:30 a.m., Rogers was pinioned by the chief jailer over the prisoner's strenuous objections; he wanted his arms left free. Precisely at 8 o'clock, he was brought from his cell. Walking reluctantly across the yard, he mounted the gallows, attended by the archdeacon of Victoria, who offered prayers and provided what little solace he could.

There were some 40 spectators in the jail yard and, according to *The Times*, "quite a number of people on the roofs of adjoining buildings."

Twenty-one minutes after the trap was sprung, Rogers was dead.

He gave no pre-death statement, muttering only, "I have nothing to say. I'm sorry I committed the act." In his cell, he left some books as a present for the sheriff.

Today, beneath the pavement of old Bastion Square, there is believed to exist (if that is the right word) a graveyard where the bodies of criminals like Rogers, executed in the colonial jail, find eternal peace amid the bustle of pedestrian traffic above.

People scurry back and forth, in and out of the shops, restaurants, offices and other commercial establishments with seldom a thought of the past, despite enduring links. In fact, the court house in which C. J. Rogers was convicted is now the Maritime Museum, with some exhibits dating back as far as 200 years, relics collected from around the world even before there was a Bastion Square.

Actually the history of the square goes back only a little more than a century. Victoria, of course, began on the waterfront and Wharf St. was created as a wholesale area. By 1862, there were fewer than 2,500 permanent residents, although during the gold rush in British Columbia transients outnumbered the settlers. Some pitched tents on the square.

Harry Gregson in his *History of*

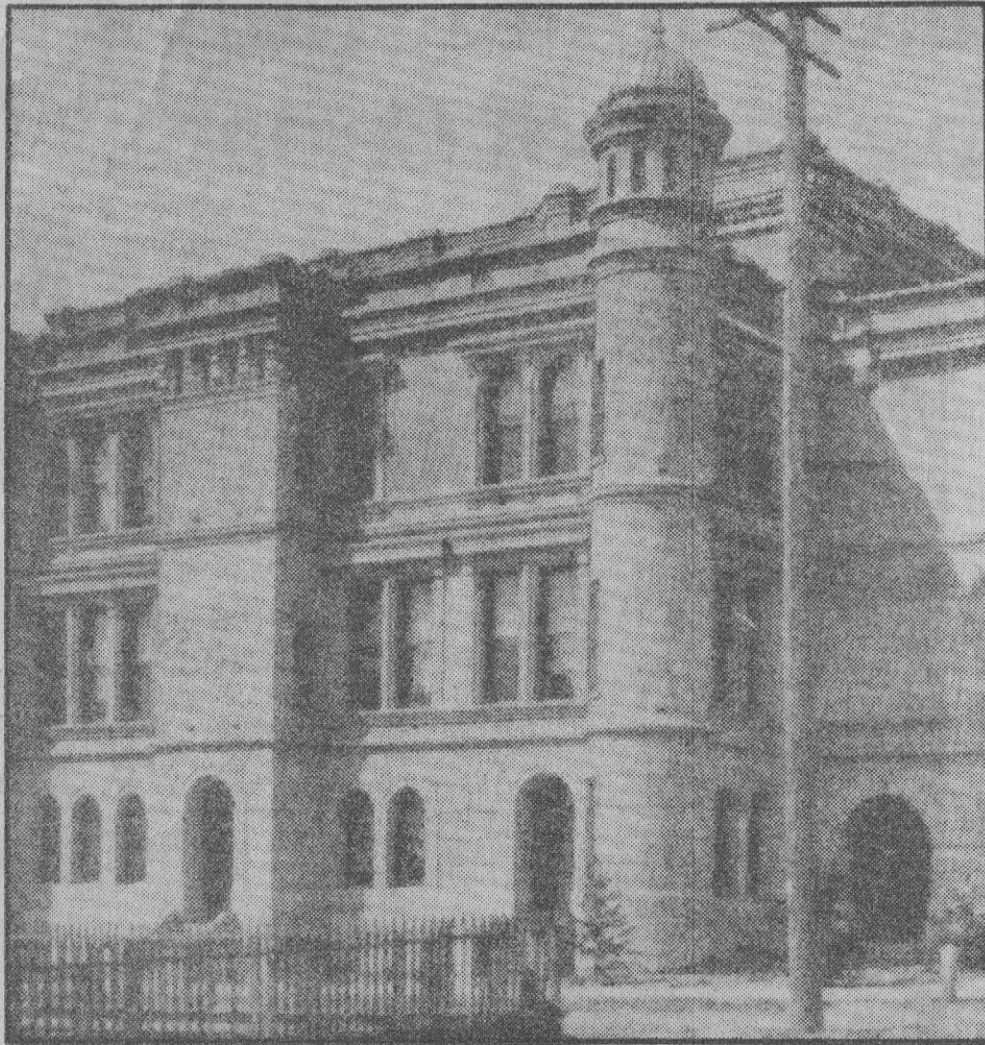
Victoria, writes, "Stepping ashore on Wharf St., the visitor would have seen a dusty open space, littered with cow and horse dung . . . today's Bastion Square."

There was no city hall in those days and the council, a loose organization headed by Victoria's first mayor, Thomas Harrison, a 150-kilo Englishman from Herfordshire, met in the police barracks, which was later the lockup in which Rogers spent his last days awaiting his fateful march to the gallows.

Gradually, in the late 19th century, the crude buildings that lined the

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The law courts at 28 Bastion Square circa 1891.

Shoppers and diners may walk on graves of criminals

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 square gave way to more imposing structures. Victoria's first skyscraper was erected there in 1893 by the old British Columbia Board of Trade. An elegant edifice, it was topped by a tower that afforded a fine, unobstructed view of the harbor, the settlement pathway to the world, its doorway to trade and commerce.

A civic banquet was held to mark the opening of the new building. On the menu there were a variety of tasty soups, crisp salads, Atlantic oysters, turkey stuffed with truffles, prime rib of beef, spring lamb with mint sauce, oodles of vegetables and tempting desserts. Cigars and brandy bought the affair to a staggering close at 4:45 in the morning.

The *Colonist* reported it was strictly a stag affair, although the ladies were toasted, God bless 'em!

With the grand new building acting as a fulcrum, Bastion Square became the commercial heart of Victoria: the site of the Hudson's Bay Company's major fur warehouse, the American Hotel, the Bull's Head Tavern, a busy brothel and a public bathhouse, called the San Fran-

cisco Baths, to attract the miners who had wended their weary way up the coast from that California outpost in search of elusive gold.

But times change. In this century, the city centre has crept slowly north and east, relentlessly seeking land for bigger buildings and wider streets.

Bastion Square became little more than a wide street, sloping down to Wharf and serving mainly as a parking lot for Government St. shoppers. The gold-rush hotels were dilapidated; the decaying office buildings fell vacant or were used as warehouses; the other premises were rundown.

According to Stuart Stark, a Vancouver-based preservation consultant and an eloquent advocate of restoration, the potential of revitalizing the square was suggested by several preservationists in the early 1960s.

"Action to implement their ideas and capitalize on their foresight now seems like an excellent investment in the past as well as the future," Stark says.

In *History of Victoria*, Gregson says, "The city was indebted mainly to three men for modernization of downtown Victoria, including Bastion Square: Ro-

derick Clack, former city planner, former Mayor Dick Wilson and Thomas Shanks McPherson, after whom the McPherson Playhouse is named."

Yielding to Clack's foresight, energetically backed by Mayor Wilson and with the aid of a bequest by McPherson, who died in 1962, the City of Victoria signed an agreement with the federal government in 1965 to start work on the project.

"Two years and some \$250,000 later, with further assistance from the provincial government and B.C. Hydro, the work was completed," says Stark. "The city closed the square to vehicles, purchased some of the surrounding properties and resold them to purchasers willing to restore them."

Landscaping was carefully designed and executed, brick and slab paving was laid, historic lighting standards were installed and the square became the Mecca it is today for visitors and residents alike.

This month, it is 102 years since C.J. Rogers died at the end of a rope . . . and Bastion Square is a far cry from the gallows and burial grounds it was then.