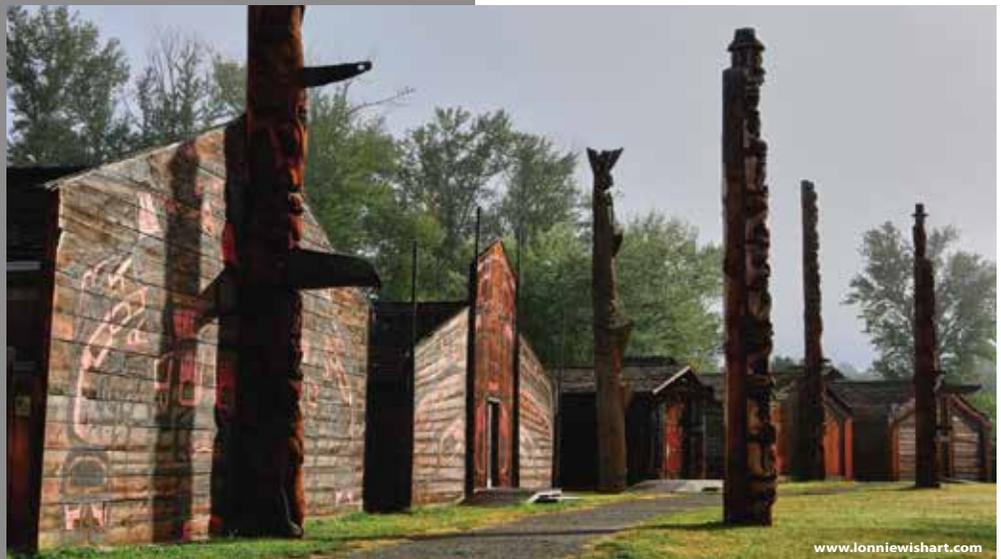


The Village of Hazelton, often called Old Hazelton, lies at the confluence of the Bulkley and Skeena rivers. It is located near the site of the ancient Gitksan village of Gitanmaax, and is one of the oldest communities in northern British Columbia.

The village of Gitanmaax stood here in the shadow of the Rocher Déboulé Range for thousands of years, a rich fishing site and a vital trading crossroads.

Trails converged here that linked the Gitksan with the nations on the Skeena and Nass rivers, and far inland through the territory of the Wet'suwet'en.

The importance of Gitanmaax as a trading centre became even more pronounced with the arrival of the Hudson's Bay Company and other European traders in the 19th century. European fur trade goods were added to the powerful trade networks many years before the arrival of the first Europeans at Gitanmaax.



White settlement at Gitanmaax began with an attempt to establish a communications link between North America and Europe through creation of the Collins Overland Telegraph. The intention of this project was to link America and Europe by building a telegraph line through the BC and Yukon wilderness to link with Russian telegraphs in Siberia. Work parties reached Gitanmaax in 1866, but the following February the whole enterprise was abandoned when it was learned that a competing transatlantic telegraph cable had been successfully completed. However, work on the Collins Overland Telegraph led to the birth of Old Hazelton, as members of the work party were impressed by the prospects of gold in the area and stayed to seek their fortunes.



Hints of gold in the Northwest had been smouldering since the 1850s, but Gitanmaax became one of the main supply points for the Omineca Gold Rush in the 1860s and the Cassiar Gold Rush in the 1870s. Two former Hudson's Bay Company traders, forming the company Cunningham & Hankin, seized the opportunity to capitalize on the flood of miners moving up the Skeena River to the gold fields. At the beginning of the 1871 season Robert Cunningham founded the community of Port Essington at the mouth of the Skeena, while Thomas Hankin, who had previously manned a temporary Hudson's Bay Company post at Gitanmaax, dashed up the Nass and over the old grease trails to establish a partner trading post. Hankin named the community for the hazel trees that sprinkled the flats at Gitanmaax, and his store marked the beginning of the modern Village of Hazelton.

The village grew out from the river. As more and more Europeans came into the region the volume of trade increased. Supplies for the whole region were landed here by brigades of freight canoes brought up the Skeena River by First Nations freighters, and were then transferred to pack trains that carried their loads hundreds of miles into the interior by mule train in summer and dog team in winter. As more and more people arrived in the interior, river freighting increased in great volume, and manpower to work the brigades declined with the establishment of salmon canneries on the coast around the mouth of the Skeena and the resulting demand for workers. The Hudson's Bay Company placed their first sternwheel riverboat, the Caledonia, on the river in 1891. Later that summer she was the first steamboat to reach Hazelton, to be followed by many others operated by both the Hudson's Bay Company and their independent competitors. Although the era of the paddlewheel riverboats lasted just two decades, it helped shape the identity of Hazelton. Today a replica of the S.S. Hazelton stands adjacent to Polly Sergeant Park, and the park displays other artifacts of the steamboat era.



Hazelton in fact holds many memories of the old Northwest frontier. These memories dwell in many of the historic buildings of Old Hazelton, recalling the riverboat era and the days of the Hudson's Bay Company. Famous residents of the past bring to mind a sense of rugged independence that can still be found in Hazelton today. One of these was Jean Caux, or "Cataline." Cataline was a legendary packer, known for his daring and reliability, who first ran pack trains during the Cariboo Gold Rush in the 1850s and moved gradually north as demand for his services developed. Cataline packed until the arrival of the railway in 1913, and then retired to Hazelton. Another of Hazelton's most famous stories centres around Simon Gunanoot, a Gitksan falsely accused and presumed guilty of murdering two white men in 1906, who for 13 years evaded a \$100,000 manhunt. He was only taken into custody when he voluntarily surrendered in 1919, and he was found not guilty the following year.

A new era was ushered in at Hazelton with the decision to build the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway through northern British Columbia. This second transcontinental railway was fraught with controversy in its relations with the federal and provincial governments and residents of the north. The railway was projected to follow the Zymoetz Valley to the Skeena, but the province forced the company to instead follow the Bulkley Canyon to the existing community of (New) Hazelton. The GTP, which relied on townsite sales for profit, followed this direction only to a point and bypassed Old Hazelton in favour on creating their own town. Anticipating the route of the railway, entrepreneur Robert Kelly established a settlement that became known as New Hazelton, while the Grand Trunk Pacific established their own settlement at what became known as South Hazelton. Today the three communities are collectively known as "the Hazeltons."

Old Hazelton was incorporated as a village in 1956, and according to the 2014 Village door to door survey, 229 people reside within the Village of Hazelton municipal boundaries.

