

OLD TOWN

Heritage Walking Tour of Yellowknife

Northwest Territories



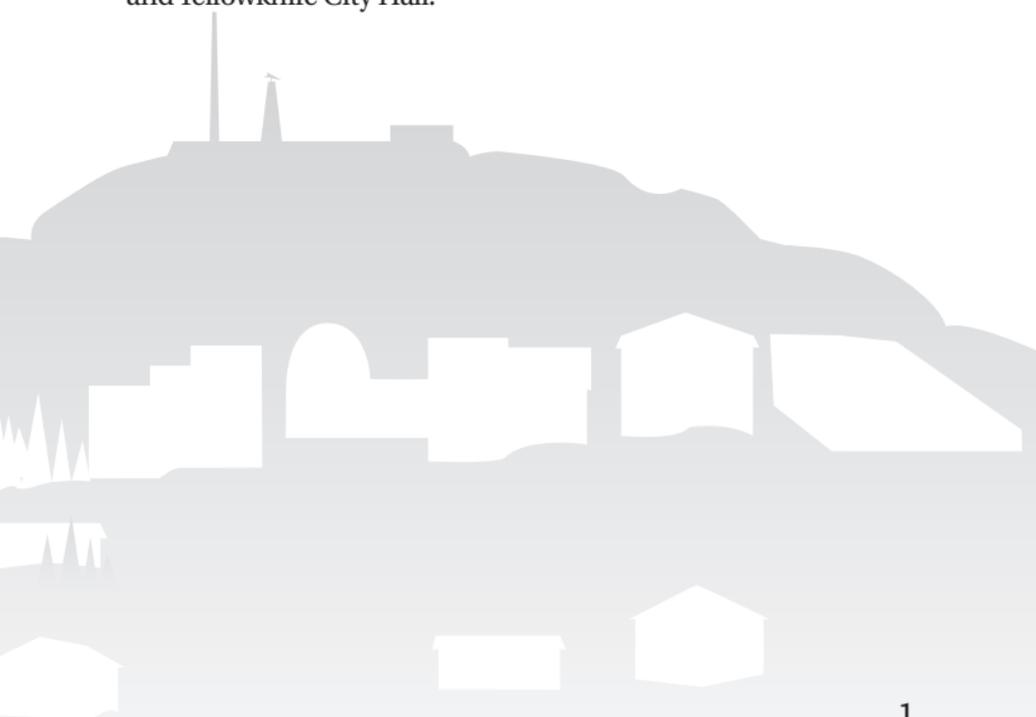
Introduction

The first walking tour guide of Old Town was published in 1987. This 2004 edition is revised to reflect changes in the city. A companion guide published in 2002 covers the New Town area of Yellowknife – the dominant center of activity since the post-WWII boom ushered in modern expansion. The City's roots and pioneer charm, however, rest in the waterfront streets and structures of the Old Town.

On the center pages of this guide is a map for the walking tour. Each consecutively numbered site, street or building in the text is shown on the map. Italicized sub-headings in the text describe the general location or direction of the route. A ■ symbol indicates the site has a descriptive plaque; a ★ symbol indicates the site is one of the City's designated Heritage Sites. Information on these sites is available on the Canadian Register of Historic Places data base at www.historicplaces.ca

You can easily take this tour or the one described in the New Town guide in sections or together – take as much time as you wish for a stroll through our City's heritage.

Sites in the walking tour guides are documented in the City of Yellowknife Historical Building Inventory. It is available at the NWT Archives at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre and Yellowknife City Hall.



Old Town Walking Tour



Photo courtesy of the Ammie Jost Collection

Yellowknife's early waterfront was a hive of activity.

A brief history of Yellowknife

Yellowknife, and the adjacent river and bay on Great Slave Lake, derive their names from the knives once used by Dene of the area. The blades were fashioned from naturally occurring copper gathered along the northern reaches of the also aptly named Coppermine River, near the Arctic coast.

The people of the city's two neighboring communities of Dettah and N'Dilo are the Yellowknives Dene First Nation. Their ancestors – Slavey, Dogrib, and Chipewyan speaking Dene – have inhabited the region since time immemorial, with known archaeological evidence dating back thousands of years.

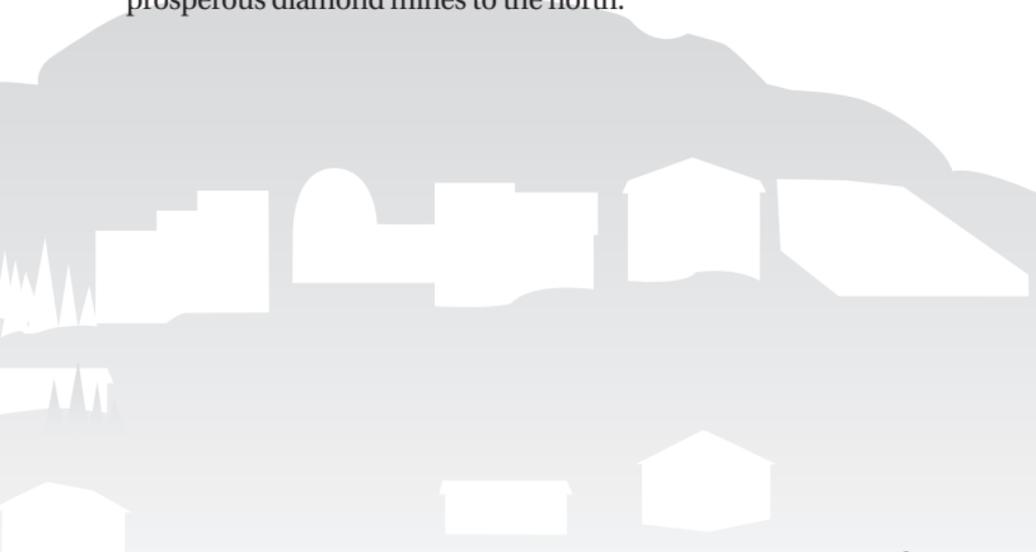
During the late 1700s, newcomers trickled in with the expanding fur trade. First came Metis families connected with the trade, then came the trade company explorers: Samuel Hearne in 1770, Peter Pond in 1786 and Alexander Mackenzie in 1789. During these years an outpost called Fort Providence (not to be confused with a different community of the same name on the Mackenzie River) was established near Wool Bay, south of present day Yellowknife. With the reopening of this post and the help of the Dene, the young John Franklin completed his overland trip to the Arctic coast in 1820. Aboriginal people continued to inhabit the area, eventually congregating at a point of land on Yellowknife Bay's east side – Dettah. Southerners did not come again to stay until the 1930s.

What brought them back was gold. Though the presence of the metal was first noted at Yellowknife Bay in 1897, by a prospector on his way to the Klondike, the area was too remote to create sustained interest.

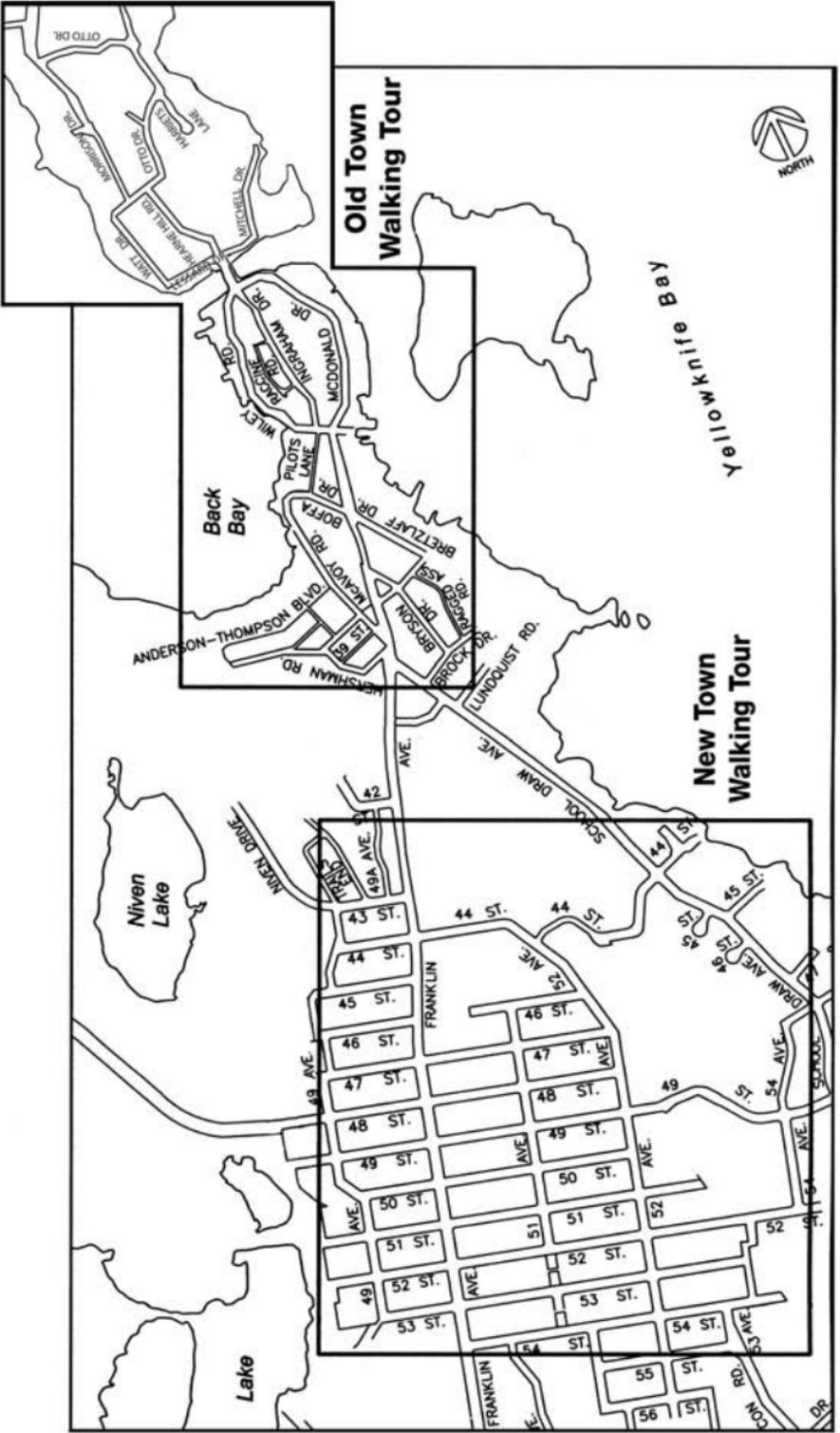
By the 1930s, new transportation systems over water and by air were established and the Yellowknife area became more accessible. When the prospectors and mining companies arrived the stage was set for Yellowknife settlement. In 1933, Johnny Baker and Herb Dixon made the first free gold discovery up the Yellowknife River. The next year, the Burwash discovery was made across Yellowknife Bay. By the end of 1935, enough gold had been discovered to prompt serious mining development. The Con Mine became the first NWT gold producer with the pouring of a brick in September 1938. The Yellowknife we know today was born!

By 1942, Yellowknife was a small village, with many services and several producing gold mines. Development was halted in 1942, when the miners moved to other mining ventures considered more important to the war effort. But a new rush started when Giant Mine struck gold in 1944. With no room for expansion in crowded Old Town, a new townsite in the present day downtown area was surveyed in 1945.

In the summer of 1953, Yellowknife became a municipality and its first mayor was elected. In 1967, Yellowknife was named capital of the Northwest Territories, and later was designated a city on January 1, 1970. The gold mines which formed the City have all closed, with the first, Con, being the last in 2004. But the mining industry remains strong with a bright future in the prosperous diamond mines to the north.



Old Town Walking Tour



The Tour

School Draw and Franklin Avenue

From downtown, walk north along Franklin Avenue and down the hill to Old Town. At the intersection with School Draw Avenue you are at Willow Flats. If you are starting at the end of the New Town tour, simply proceed north on School Draw Avenue to the intersection with Franklin Avenue

Willow Flats

This is an area where old melds with new, and pioneer tales speak to you from the walls of original buildings.



The Old Woodstove Shop was the original Sutherland's Drugs

(1) The Old Woodstove Shop

In 1948, Sutherland's Drugs built this new store on Old Town's busy Main Street on The Rock overlooking Back Bay. In 1956, the building was damaged by fire, but was moved to Latham Island and renovated as Louis Lessard's Rex Café. It was moved again in 1973 to its present site, and was home for a time to the Yellowknifer newspaper and the Woodstove Shop.

Head north on Franklin Avenue toward the Gallery of the Midnight Sun. The large mural on the wooden fence was completed by a trio of Yellowknife artists to commemorate the role of water transportation in Yellowknife's early years.

Old Town Walking Tour

(2) Gallery of the Midnight Sun ■

A small display of mining equipment in front of the Gallery is a reminder of Yellowknife's hard rock mining past. There's an ore cart and a plugger drill. The wheeled tanker is a piece of equipment once used by Giant Mine's fire fighting department. A plaque on the Gallery's wall introduces Willow Flats.



Ore cart and drill display

(3) Cultural Crossroads Exhibit

Across the road, the sculpture and colourful art on the rock is a collaborative work of Metis, Dene, Inuvialuit, English and French participants in a project dedicated to all peoples of the north.

(4) News of the North

The former News of the North newspaper office was built in 1945 and was home to the paper until 1958. Founder Duke DeCoursey had his first office in a nearby tent. A wood heated building proved much better in winter for keeping the printer's ink flowing smoothly! The original printing press is now at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre. This building is used as a lumber warehouse by Johnson's Building Supplies, a hardware and lumber outfit started by Ivor Johnson in 1946. Johnson's lumber yard, stretching along the waterfront, is a reminder of the days before the highway when all supplies arrived by water.



The former News of the North newspaper office

South on Bretzlaff Drive

(5) Log Cabin on “Glamour Alley”

While the miners came to Yellowknife to mine the gold in the early days, prostitutes and gamblers came to mine the miners. Bretzlaff Drive is part of the area where they plied their trades. This log cabin is reputed to share a part in “Glamour Alley” history.



“Glamour Alley” cabin – oh, what stories!

(6) The Old Laundry

The occupants of this building provided a valuable service to the residents of Yellowknife. Norm Lund and his family ran a laundry business here during the post-war years. The attractive old log building to the rear was a storage shed. This is one of the last examples of this type of construction, once very common in Yellowknife.

Old Town Walking Tour



The Old Laundry

(7) Slant 6

In the early days, many residences were known by family names or descriptions, rather than street addresses. This for many years was the home of one of Yellowknife's early families, the Loutitts. Now it is called "Slant 6", which refers to a type of car engine, and suits this rugged old building with its obvious tilt. The style recalls construction by the Hudson's Bay Company in communities throughout the North.



Slant 6

(8) Einer Broten's Woodyard

This area was first settled in 1937. It has been associated with commercial wood cutting and fishing since the early 1940s. Tom Reed, who came to Yellowknife in 1939, hauled firewood using a pair of horses in 1941-42. In 1946, Einer Broten and Hans Hansen became the new firewood merchants and occupied

much of this area. Like Broten, many of the early residents were of Scandinavian origin. Today, the Woodyard is a residential area, and the small shacks are homes for those who prefer a simple lifestyle.



Einer Broten's Woodyard

South on Ragged Ass Road

This section of Yellowknife befuddled town planners since the first municipal surveys in 1939. Shacks, cabins and outhouses were dotted among the bushes and rock outcrops, and a narrow road curved through the block, ignoring the surveyed route. More than 60 years later, the problem was corrected by revising the lot alignments. The name Ragged Ass Road has stuck for many years. It's a favorite of Yellowknifers and visitors, and the title of an album by singer Tom Cochrane. Authentic Ragged Ass Road signs are available for sale at city gift shops.



Quaint and Comfy

Old Town Walking Tour

(9) Quaint and Comfy

Now a quaint, small, wood frame house from the 1940s, this building is typical of a time when housing was becoming more spacious than the log cabins and tents of the 1930s. Firewood has been chopped in this yard for over 50 years.

North on Bryson Drive.

(10) Warehouse Then and Now

This small shiplap-sided shack was apparently built at the Negus Mine, one of Yellowknife's original gold mines, south of the Con Mine. It was used for storage there and has been used for the same purpose here.



Old Negus Warehouse

(11) The Old and the New

Dating from the 1940s, this log building was once located in New Town. To make room for a new residence, it was moved to this Old Town neighborhood where it fits in well.



The Old and the New

*West on Hamilton Drive and across
Franklin Avenue*

Peace River Flats ■

This area is named for settlers from the Peace River region of Alberta. Traveling down the Peace and the Slave Rivers and then across Great Slave Lake, settlers and their families arrived by boat and barge in the late 1930s. This flat expanse of land gave easy access to the lake for water and transportation. Recent construction has updated the look of the area, but the friendly Old Town atmosphere remains. A plaque at the entrance to Peace River Flats shows a picture of this area in the 1940s.

Knutsen Lane

(12) From Refinery to Residence

This attractive looking house has undergone transformations that typify the honourable Yellowknife tradition of recycling buildings. It was constructed in 1947 at the Negus Mine site as the refining plant where gold was poured. It was moved here in 1960 and used as a blacksmith shop, and has been extensively renovated over many years as a residence.

Old Town Walking Tour



Former Gold Refinery

North on Stout Road, East on Primrose Lane

(13) Chippy's Cabin

This eccentric little log cabin is hard to miss! A plaque put together by local residents tells the story. Built in the 1930s by woodcutter “Chippy” Loutitt, the logs came from the Yellowknife River area where many good stands of timber were harvested in the early years.



Chippy's Cabin

North on Lois Lane

Local residents named this street many years ago. It was known as Penny Lane at one end and Lois Lane at the other, after two local residents. Lois won out when the City picked the name of Superman's girlfriend, played on film by the actress Margot Kidder, who was born in Yellowknife.

(14) Davey Jones' Shack

Behind the asphalt siding of this house is a log cabin built in 1937 and a small addition built in 1958. This is one of the few original Peace River Flats houses. The name refers to its present owner.



Davey Jones' Shack

North on McAvoy Road

Proceed northeast along McAvoy Road, named for a family of bush pilots and diamond drillers. Chuck McAvoy was a famous pilot who disappeared on a flight to a mining camp in 1964. Despite much searching over the years, the wreckage of his plane was only located in the summer of 2003. Looking across Back Bay, you see a rocky escarpment. This is evidence of the West Bay Geological fault. At the base of the escarpment lies the pioneer graveyard, Back Bay Cemetery, a designated heritage site. It is accessible by a trail that starts on Highway 3.

Old Town Walking Tour

(15) John Anderson-Thomson House

This beautiful house was built by Bear Exploration and Radium Limited in the late 1940s to house their field engineers and geologists. Bill Hacker was in charge of their extensive geologic investigations around the region. The house was bought in 1948 by John Anderson-Thomson. A geologist and surveyor, he was one of the men who surveyed the Mackenzie Highway route, and was a Justice of the Peace for 22 years.



The Anderson-Thomson House

Northeast on Pilot's Lane

(16) Rayrock House

The Rayrock uranium mine northwest of Yellowknife was the talk of the town in the mid 1950s, but it closed abruptly in 1959. This house hails from the minesite. Moved here in 1962 on a winter road, it is home to members of the Weaver family.



Rayrock House



Pilots' Monument atop of The Rock

The Rock

The prominent outcrop known as The Rock dominates this part of town. Perched atop, overlooking Great Slave Lake, is Bush Pilot's Monument. This next part of the tour takes you along the west side of The Rock and makes it's way to the stairway leading to the top and the Bush Pilot's Monument. The Rock was the hub of commercial Yellowknife before 1945. Now it is a picturesque residential area with several interesting businesses to visit.

North along Weaver Drive and Wiley Road

Before the road, there was a plank boardwalk hugging the rock, connecting the businesses on the south and north sides. The boardwalk was built in 1939, but was soon replaced with rock fill for the encircling road. A story is told that in the mid 1940s that the only two trucks in town hit head on driving in opposite directions around The Rock.

Back Bay





Old Town Walking Tour



The first Weaver and Devore Store is now a restaurant

(17) Original Weaver and Devore Store 🏠 ★

The restored original log cabin store is now home to a fish restaurant. A designated heritage site, it was built in 1937 by Harry Weaver and Bud Devore and is the longest surviving business in Yellowknife. The “new” store is in the large quonset hut across the street. The new store still thrives today supplying residents and bush camps with food and gear. The green-sided warehouse section was built in 1937 for the Mining Corporation of Canada, which was developing a gold mine on Gordon Lake. The Weavers bought the building in 1960 and attached the new store in 1967.



Old Negus Townhouse

(18) Log Shed

This tiny log shed is one of the oldest buildings in Yellowknife. Built in 1937, it was a shed and office for the Mining Corporation of Canada before the larger warehouse (noted above) was erected.

(19) Old Wardair Base

Max Ward arrived in Yellowknife to help start a charter business in 1946. He flew a de Havilland Fox Moth, and in 1951 brought the first Single Otter aircraft to the NWT. The fabric-covered Fox Moth is celebrated in the Aviation Gallery at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, and several Single Otters are still flying out of Yellowknife. Ward also introduced the Bristol freighter (the big blue aircraft near the Airport). Wardair became a national airline, and was purchased by a competitor, Canadian Airlines. Although Max Ward is retired, he still visits in the summer flying an aircraft painted the original Wardair colours.



Old Wardair Base

(20) The Shed Museum

Behind the restaurant 'On the Waterfront' is an old shed with interesting artifacts collected from camps and abandoned minesites around the NWT. This wharf is where another airline got its start – Bob Engle's NWT Air eventually grew to fly 737 jet service across the NWT and was purchased by the national carrier Air Canada.



The Shed Museum

Old Town Walking Tour

(21) The Wildcat Café 🏠 ★

The Wildcat is the most famous restaurant in town and a favourite for visitors during the summer. It was opened in 1937 by Willy Wiley and Smoky Stout. The small addition by the front door was built in 1939 and became an ice cream parlor. The cafe closed in 1951 and was due for demolition until a group of local residents formed a society to preserve the building. In 1979, after several years of hard work, the Old Stope Association reopened the Wildcat Cafe as a summer restaurant. The building is a designated a heritage site and celebrated in Canada's Museum of Civilization in the National Capital Region.



The Wildcat Café is the centerpiece of City heritage

(22) Pentecostal Mission

This charming cabin also dates from 1937. It was built as a residence by Art Arbour on Latham Island. In the 1940s and 1950s it was the Anglican Church rectory and residence. Many weddings and parties were celebrated here. It earned its name from a more recent owner, the Pentecostal Mission, and it served for many years in its original location as a shelter for the homeless. It was moved to this site and restored by the Old Stope Association.



The Pentecostal Mission

(23) Canadian Pacific Air Building 🇨🇦 ★

Built in the summer of 1946, this building has been used by many northern aviation companies – Canadian Pacific Air, Associated Airways and Pacific Western Airlines in the past, and more recently Northward Aviation and Air Dogrib. In the early days, it was also used for banquets and other events. It was designated a heritage site in 1992 and later renovated.



Canadian Pacific Air Building

Old Town Walking Tour



Hudson's Bay Warehouse



Hudson's Bay Staffhouse

(24+25) Hudson's Bay Warehouse and Old Staffhouse



The huge warehouse is the last remaining evidence of the Hudson's Bay Company in Yellowknife, once a strong and proud presence in the NWT and across Canada. This building replaced a smaller store that burned down in 1945. The Bay moved up to New Town in 1960, and this massive wood structure has been used as warehouse ever since. It was designated a Heritage Site in 1994. The residence on the corner of Ingraham Drive and Doornbos Lane is part of the old Bay staffhouse, now much renovated.

South on Ingraham Drive

This road was once known as King Street and, along with Queen Street (now Raccine Road), this was the main commercial strip of Old Town Yellowknife. In the 1940s, walking south on Raccine Road toward New Town, on the left was Yellowknife Rooms, the Busy Bee Cafe, Jim McDonald's Pool Room, Yate's Drugs, the Bank of Toronto (see #36), and the Legion Hall. To the right was the Bank of Commerce, the Wildcat Cafe, (see #21) The Roving Hornet Cafe, two barber shops, Sutherland's Drugs (see #1), a taxi stand and the Pioneer Theatre. One of the most remembered buildings was the Old Stope Hotel. It burned in a spectacular New Year's day fire in 1949, was reconstructed, and burned again in 1969. The hotel's old boiler sits on display next to the Wildcat Cafe.

(26) Log Cabin Incognito

Behind the wood siding of this house is Willy Wiley's original 1937 log cabin, later occupied by Curly McDonald. It surely must have had the best view in town when built!



Log Cabin Incognito

Climbing to Pilot's Monument

Climb the steps to the top of The Rock and visit the Bush Pilot's Monument and plaque. The arrow points north as though to beckon the bush pilot farther into unknown territory. The light atop the steel mast blinks whenever a pilot is about to take off or land on the water. Two other plaques introduce Jolliffe Island and The Rock. Jolliffe Island is named for Alfred Jolliffe, a geologist with the Geological Survey of Canada mapping the region in

Old Town Walking Tour

1935 when gold was inadvertently discovered on the west shore of Yellowknife Bay. In the early days, Joliffe Island was a residential area and the site of Imperial Oil fuel storage.

(27) House of Horrors

Built in 1938 by Alphonse Cyr as a rooming house, the building earned its name for the wild parties and card games it hosted in the 1940s. It has also been a barber shop and a private residence, but it has not been used in many decades.



House of Horrors

(28) Old Raccine House

Pete Raccine built his house in the early 1940s and lived here for years. Raccine built the first hotel and restaurant establishment in Yellowknife with the help of Gordon Latham and Ted Hickmont. The house has remained a residence.



Old Raccine House

Intersection of Weaver Drive, McDonald Drive and Franklin Avenue

If you traveled back in time to 1936 when the community was first being settled, you'd be up to your shoulders in Yellowknife Bay. Most of this land now occupied by buildings has been filled in with rock and gravel over the years. It is interesting to compare old photos to see just how much the settlement around The Rock has physically expanded.

(29) Boyles Brothers Shop

Several diamond-drilling outfits have operated in the Yellowknife region during the various mining eras, none more popular than the Boyles Brothers Drilling Company who used this building. In the very early years, it had served as a temporary schoolhouse and recreation facility. Mildred Hall, Yellowknife's first teacher, once lived in part of the building.



Boyles Brothers Shop

Old Town Walking Tour

(30) Ptarmigan Warehouse

Built at the Ptarmigan gold mine on the Ingraham Trail in 1941, and used as a warehouse, the building was moved here when the old minesite was demolished in 1970. It has been extensively renovated and now serves as an office and residential space.



Ptarmigan Warehouse

North on McDonald Drive

(31) Yellowknife Hardware

This 1941 building was the recreation hall at the Outpost Island gold and tungsten mine, 88 kilometers southeast of the city. The mine closed down the following year when the company could not pay to keep it running. Walter England moved it here across Great Slave Lake to house his business – Yellowknife Hardware, one of Yellowknife's best known and longest lived businesses.



The first Yellowknife Hardware

(32) The Original Capital Theater

This was the front part of the original Capital Theater built in the New Town site after the war by Bill Cole. It was located one block east of where the current theater sits in New Town. The building was moved here one summer evening in 1978 to make way for a new high rise tower.



The Original Capital Theater



Government Dock

(33) Government Dock

In the 1940s the government built a wharf of crushed rock to service barges and boats unloading freight. Float planes, boat taxis and fishing vessels were common sights during the short summer. The Government Dock is still active, playing a role in local access to Great Slave Lake. The arrival of the “beer boat” after the spring break-up was always a big event in the early years before the Mackenzie Highway was completed in 1960.

Old Town Walking Tour



McMeekean Causeway

(34) McMeekean Causeway

The causeway and road to Latham Island was built in 1948, thanks largely to the lobbying efforts of Jock McMeekean, the outspoken journalist of the *Yellowknife Blade* newspaper. McMeekean perhaps wanted it more than most people - after all, he lived on the island! The causeway was replaced by a bridge in 1996.

Latham Island

When the first businessmen arrived in the fall of 1936, they sought the perfect place to build a hotel for what they envisioned as a future gold mining region. Pete Raccine, Ted Hickmont and Gordon Latham eventually selected the northwest side of Latham Island, opening the Corona Inn in a small log cabin. The Federal Government also chose to erect their offices and the liquor store on the Island, which was across the narrows, as there was no causeway then. Watt's Water Taxi service made a good profit by ferrying thirsty miners back and forth between the mainland and the liquor store at 5 cents a trip. The Island has had its ups and downs through time. It was never the preferred area for commercial settlement, instead becoming a quiet refuge for residents. The Yellowknives Dene First Nation have developed a settlement at its north end called N'Dilo. (see #37)

North on Hearne Hill Road

(35) Old Liske House

Latham Island became a popular residential hide-a-away for Yellowknife residents in the 1940s, before the causeway was built across the narrows. Now masked under new siding, this is one of the older log houses. It underwent major repairs recently and now sits on a new foundation – a total renovation effort.



Old Liske House

East on Otto Drive

(36) Bank of Toronto ■ ★

This was Yellowknife's first bank. It was built in 1939 on The Rock and was a residence until 1946, when it was moved. This cabin was probably the busiest in town - especially on payday. Allan Lambert, who eventually became president of the TD Bank, was manager of the Yellowknife branch for a time, proof that even corporate executives have humble beginnings! The building was moved here in 1964 by Sam Otto, a Yellowknife prospector, and is used as a residence. It was designated a heritage site in 1998.

Old Town Walking Tour



Bank of Toronto

North on Otto Drive up the hill into N'Dilo

(37) N'Dilo

Started as a group of small homes, N'Dilo is now a tranquil and interesting mix of old and new as the community expands and modernizes. As you round the west side and walk toward Morrison Drive, to the left is the original area of settlement. Once full of small brightly painted houses, which are now steadily disappearing, it gave a name to the area - Rainbow Valley - that is sometimes still used today.



N'Dilo

South on Morrison Drive

(38) Old Herriman House

Joe Herriman, a prospector who at one point owned the Ragged Ass Mine at Hidden Lake, lived here many years ago. It has been kept in good repair by its owners over the years, with a recent red paint job.



Red House



A Caboose stilled

(39) Cat-Skinner's Caboose

What was once living quarters for “cat-skinners” is now a homeowner’s storage shed/artifact exhibit! A cat train, consisting of a tractor (or “Cat”) towing a number of sleds, was the principal form of transportation from the 1930s to the 1960s. This tiny caboose served as bunkhouse and dining hall for the crew of cat-skinners. Today, ice roads constructed over lakes and portages allow modern transport trucks to carry goods to remote regions.

If you would like to know more...

Several books about Yellowknife are available at the Yellowknife Public Library, The Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Center, or the bookstores and shops around town.

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The Heritage Committee would like to recognize and thank the many people who have assisted in the creation of this guide over the years and all people who share an interest in our City's history.

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Photographs by Bruce Stebbing, Carmen Jones and Ryan A. Silke, and courtesy of the NWT Archives.

Designed by Outcrop Communications Ltd.

Printed by Canarctic Printing Ltd.

