

Old Town

WALKING TOUR

YELLOWKNIFE, NORTHWEST TERRITORIES



Yellowknife
Historical
Society

FREE

An Introduction to This Walking Tour

This tour guide is for the Old Town area of Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. Old Town is the original settlement where the city got its start in the 1930s, and is located on the waterfront of Yellowknife Bay. It encompasses two low lying flats, a rocky mainland peninsula, two islands - Jolliffe and Latham Island - and the waterway surrounding it all.

On the centre page of this guide is a map of Old Town. 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 walking tour route.

The guide follows a prescribed path, but that the route can also be taken in pieces or linked together to cover any amount of time one might wish to spend strolling through the heritage of the Old Town.

Visitors to Old Town are encouraged to walk the tour. There is vehicle parking available at the intersection of Franklin Avenue and School Draw Avenue, at the Government Dock, and below Pilots Monument. Be aware that the streets are narrow and small children and pet dogs abound. Remember that although residents love to show off their neighborhood, private property should be respected.

A Brief History of Yellowknife

Welcome to Yellowknife, capital city of the Northwest Territories! Here, in the northern parts of Canada, a special community has been built on a very ancient land. It is a friendly place, remaining faithful to small-town charm despite the hustle and bustle of activity that has defined the Yellowknife spirit since its founding in the 1930s.

What is the origin of our inspired name? European explorers and cartographers over 200 years ago gave the name “Yellowknife” to the nearby river, named in honor of the Indigenous Dene that the outsiders met in the 1700s. The Europeans coined the term ‘Yellowknife’ for the copper tools the Dene carried.

We now call them the Wìlìideh Yellowknives Dene. Before there was a city here, the nomadic Dene subsisted in harmony with the land, as hunters, trappers, fishers, and gatherers of berries and wood. The long Dene history on the land and waters of Yellowknife Bay is preserved in traditional place names, like Wìlìideh - the Dene name for Yellowknife River - which means “toothless fish river”.

Fur traders were the first settlers of this area. An outpost called Old Fort Providence was established near Wool Bay, 20 kilometers to the south, around 1789. It was a regional center of trade between the European traders and the Dene. The post was abandoned in 1823 but for the next 100 years, traders, Dene, and the Metis of mixed ancestry, continued to forge relationships around Great Slave Lake.



Old Town in the 1940s.

The City of Yellowknife we know today was started following the discovery of gold in the 1930s. Though the precious metal was first noted on Yellowknife Bay by men on their way to the Klondike in 1898, the area was remote and the gold ores unproven. The development of the airplane in the 1920s brought more prospectors north. Johnny Baker staked the first gold claims on the Bay in 1934, and within two years a gold rush was on.

By 1938, Yellowknife was a boom town with hundreds of settlers arriving and three gold mines under construction. Commercial gold production began in September 1938 at the Con Mine, followed by the Negus, Thompson-Lundmark, and Ptarmigan Mines. Yellowknife became an administrative district in 1939 and its first proto-town government elected.

Development of the area was halted during World War Two, but a new rush started when massive gold deposits were discovered at Giant Mine in 1944. Yellowknife, originally built around the Old Town peninsula “The Rock”, became overcrowded, resulting in the establishment of a New Town (downtown) site which soon became the commercial and residential centre.

In 1953, Yellowknife was elevated to a municipality with a fully-elected town council. In 1967, Yellowknife was named capital of the Northwest Territories, and in 1970 it attained the status of a “city”. The gold mine era ended in 2004 with the closure of the Con and Giant Mines, but by then the diamond mine era had begun. The Ekati Diamond Mine 300 kilometers to the north began production in 1998 followed by the Diavik Diamond Mine in 2002.

With a population of over 20,000 in 2023, Yellowknife still has a boom town character 90 years after its founding.

Starting the Tour

This tour begins near Pilot’s Monument at the centre of Old Town. Between Ingraham Drive and Racine Road just below the Monument is a public parking lot. This is a great historical spot and scenic viewing area to begin the tour. There is a walking trail through the willows next to the parking lot with interpretive plaques covering some of the local history.



The Rock was the business district of Yellowknife in the 1940s.

The Rock

This area was bustling with activity during the boom years of the 1930s-1940s. Oldtimers called this peninsula “The Rock” due to its prominent hill. It was literally the foundation of Yellowknife - a solid mass of Precambrian rock known

as basalt and gabbro. Here was the commercial strip of Yellowknife with a variety of restaurants, hotels, a theatre, billiard hall, barber shops, bakery, dance hall, taxi stands, banks, and trading posts. Precariously balanced tents and shacks covered the area. Transportation was the reason why Old Town was so important. The first settlers of the 1930s were water farers - arriving on these shores by boat, barge, canoe, and float plane.

Today, The Rock features many beautiful homes and paved streets. There is no water and sewer grid, however. Pumper trucks deliver water and take away the sewage with almost all homes having modern holding tanks as part of their design.

FUN FACT!

The rocks around Yellowknife are remnants of 2.7 billion year old volcanoes that erupted beneath an ancient ocean floor.

1. Pilots Monument

Climb the staircase to the top of Pilot's Monument, a 1967 dedication to the bush pilots that helped open the north to exploration.

Aviation still plays a vital role across the north. Twin Otters and Cessnas on floats and

skis remain part of the Old Town

soundscape in both summer and winter. You'll probably see airplanes taking off or landing as you stand here. Flights are heading to mineral camps, fishing lodges, cabins, or nearby communities.

The view from the top of the hill is one of the best in Yellowknife. From here, you can get a good look at Yellowknife Bay and, to the south, Great Slave Lake. One can also see downtown and all the different neighborhoods of Old Town. You may notice a great number of floating homes, or houseboats, around Jolliffe Island - more on these later in the tour. At one time, the gold mines of Yellowknife were visible from here, but the shaft headframes that marked their locations have all been taken down.

FUN FACT!

Great Slave Lake is the 10th largest lake in the world. The Dene name for the lake is Tinde'e.



Jolliffe Island in the 1940s.



Dettah village in the 1940s.

2. Jolliffe Island

The large island to the south is Jolliffe Island, named after a government geologist - Alfred Jolliffe - who mapped the rocks of this area in 1935. A bronze plaque near Pilot's Monument tells the story of Jolliffe Island. In the early years, it was home to oil storage tanks, lumber yards, and a dozens of small residences. Only a handful of small cabins remain today. The island is important to the Wìlìideh Yellowknives Dene who call it Dii Tso Do, meaning "Big Spruce Island".

3. Dettah

On the very south horizon you may see the town of Dettah, at the head of Yellowknife Bay on its eastern shore. Dettah - meaning "Burnt Point" - is a Wìlìideh Yellowknives Dene community which predates the settling of Yellowknife itself. It has been around since the 1800s and was once an outpost for traders operating between Fort Resolution and Behchoko on Great Slave Lake. Today, there is a population of about 200 and it can be visited by boat or highway in the summer, and ice road in the winter.

From Pilots Monument, climb back down the staircase to Ingraham Drive and follow the road north towards Latham Island and the Causeway - more on this later. Turn left onto Wiley Road.



Hudson's Bay Company.

4. Hudson's Bay Company

The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) was Canada's dominant fur trading organization and entered the Northwest Territories in the early 1800s to compete with the French traders. Yellowknife's HBC was established in 1938 and this post replaced the original destroyed by fire in 1945. A new HBC store opened at New Town in 1947 but the Old Town post continued to operate until 1960. After that - and still to this day - it served as a warehouse.

5. CPA Floatbase

Across the street from the HBC is an old float base building. Yellowknife experienced a very busy summer in 1946 when the post-war gold rush was on. Prospectors and syndicates needed airplanes to fly them and their supplies into the bush. Canadian Pacific Airlines (CPA) was the biggest charter and scheduled aviation company in the NWT at that time. This was CPA's Old Town floatbase, built in 1946. It had an office, dispatcher, waiting room, and staff quarters upstairs. Subsequent aviation companies that operated from this base included Yellowknife Airways, Pacific Western Airlines, Northward Aviation, and Air Dogrib. In the 1990s, a micro-brewery and pub operated from the renovated premise.



Wildcat Café.

6. Wildcat Café

The Wildcat Café sits at the corner of Wiley Road and Doornbos Lane. It was opened in 1937 by Willy Wylie and Smokey Stout. In 1939, when owned by Carl and Dorothy Jensen, an ice cream parlour operated out of the front addition, serving cones, banana

splits and sodas. Mah Gow (of Chinese origins) ran the Wildcat Café from 1942 until he left town in 1951. By this time, Old Town was no longer the commercial centre of Yellowknife, and the derelict log structure was due for demolition. A group of concerned citizens stepped in to save the old café, and after several years of restoration, it was reopened in 1979.

The cafe is only open during the summer months, so be sure to drop in for a meal during your walk. The longevity of the Wildcat symbolizes the resilience of northerners and their warm hospitality!

FUN FACT!

In 1944, the breakfast menu at the Wildcat Café offered a bacon and eggs meal at a cost of 85 cents.



Tom Doornbos carrying water with a shoulder yoke.



Pentecostal Mission log cabin.

7. Doornbos Lane

Doornbos Lane is named for Tom Doornbos, an odd yet colourful character. Holland-born Doornbos came to Yellowknife in 1941, and soon, everyone in town knew him as the man who sold buckets of water. He carried two buckets at a time, suspended across his shoulders with a wood yoke. At 25 cents a pail, he earned a good living, and offered an essential service. Tom Doornbos slowly invested his earnings into real estate and made a fortune in the 1960s-1970s when Yellowknife became capital. He died in 1981 a very rich man.

8. Pentecostal Mission

Behind the Wildcat Café is a cabin once owned by Tom Doornbos. This log cabin was built in 1937 on Latham Island by Art Arbour, a prospector. While owned by Doornbos in the 1960s-1970s, Gordon and Ruth Bailey ran the Pentecostal Mission in the cabin, opening their door to those in need. The cabin was moved from the island to this location in 1987 so that it could be preserved as a memory to both the charitable Baileys, and the legendary Doornbos.

Continue south on Wiley Road along the shore of Back Bay.



Wardair floatbase in the 1950s.

Before there was a road, a wood-plank boardwalk hugged the steep rock cliff, connecting businesses on both sides. The boardwalk was built in 1938 from the Wildcat Café to Weaver & Devore's store. Soon, the boardwalk was replaced with rock fill and a road encircled The Rock. There were not many cars in Yellowknife back then, but sure enough, the only two vehicles crashed head-on driving in opposite directions!

9. Wardair Floatbase

Max Ward arrived in Yellowknife in 1946 with a single-engine Fox Moth bi-plane. In 1951, he brought to the north the first single-engine Otter plane and two years later, in 1952, started Wardair Limited. The first office was a repurposed bunkhouse building from the Negus gold mine that still stands at the old base. Wardair grew into a major Canadian airline, known for good service at lower-than-average prices. By the 1970s, Wardair was flying Boeing 747s to Hawaii out of Edmonton. Floatplane operations in Yellowknife ended in 1979 but Wardair continued to maintain and lease out its float base. Max Ward died in 2020, age 98 years. Ahmic Air now runs its charter operations from the float base.

Continue south on Wiley Road along the shore of Back Bay to the "Hank Koenen" park, named after an early Yellowknife bush pilot whose float base was nearby.

10. Back Bay

As you have seen, this area of Old Town has many floatplane bases - past and present. Back Bay is classified as an aerodrome due to its importance in aviation. Back Bay is sheltered from the wicked south winds coming up Yellowknife Bay from Great Slave Lake, and has always been a natural, protected harbour for both airplanes and boats.

The first airplane to land in the Yellowknife area was in the spring of 1929 when a Fokker Super Universal plane piloted by Punch Dickins landed on skis on the ice of Walsh Lake with a group of prospectors. That same summer, the first float plane landed on Yellowknife Bay with more prospectors. The Bay was an ideal place to cache fuel drums to support exploration further north. In 1929, the mineral they were looking for was copper, not gold. They didn't find much, and so left the north. A few years later, gold prospectors returned by canoe, found rich gold veins, and the rest is history!

Continue heading south on Wiley Road towards the Weaver & Devore store.

SIDE TOUR



From this park node, launch a canoe or kayak and paddle across Back Bay to visit Yellowknife's pioneer cemetery, used from 1938 to 1946. In the winter season, one can hike to the "Ice Caves" behind the cemetery.



Weaver & Devore trading post.

11. Weaver & Devore

Traders were the first settlers to early Yellowknife with commerce on their mind. Although the Hudson's Bay Company was a dominant, monopolistic presence in the NWT, free traders beat them during the gold rush to Yellowknife. Harry Weaver and Bud Devore were boat-builder/traders from Peace River, Alberta, who first journeyed down river along the Peace-Slave Rivers, across Great Slave Lake, and finally to Yellowknife in the summer of 1936. There wasn't much of a town then, with only a few permanent structures and settlers willing to stay the winter, but there was plenty of gold prospecting activity and opportunities for Weaver & Devore to sell trade goods off their barge.

SHOPPING



Weaver & Devore Trading carries an excellent variety of northern parkas, boots, and mittens for all your seasonal needs.

They returned in 1937 to build a permanent trading post. Weaver & Devore's store is now operated by the third generation of the Weaver family and is in a larger premise across the road from its original 1937 log cabin post - which is now a fish restaurant called "Bullock's Bistro". Drop in for a meal or leave a business card or memento on its famous wall.



Anderson-Thomson's House.

Continue along Wiley Road. Take time to pose for a selfie in front of the #ILoveYK mural on the side of the Weaver & Devore store. Turn right onto Pilots Lane.

12. John Anderson-Thomson's House

This beautiful house was owned by John Anderson-Thomson, who bought it from Bear Exploration and Radium Limited in 1948. He was a mining engineer and Dominion Lands Surveyor and worked across the NWT at many mines, town planning projects, DEW Line stations, and infrastructure projects like roads and railways. He was known as a tenacious bushman and together with his wife Janet were among the social elite of Yellowknife.

John was often accompanied by Janet, who contributed to his voyages by sketch mapping and cooking as they travelled. Janet was also the original designer of the Northwest Territories' tartan, whose colours were inspired by the northern landscape she so admired. The Anderson-Thomson's lived in this house until John's death in 1985. It is still privately owned and kept in good repair by its new owners.

Turn right on Boffa Drive and continue along the shore of Back Bay on McAvoy Road towards Anderson-Thomson Boulevard. You are now in the Old Town neighborhood of Peace River Flats.



Peace River Flats neighborhood in the 1940s.

Peace River Flats

Peace River Flats is named for the number of settlers who came to Yellowknife from the Peace River, Alberta region. In those days, everybody travelled the major waterways which flowed north from Alberta, like the Peace, Slave, and Athabasca Rivers. Farmers from Peace River who had suffered hardship and financial loss during the Great Depression of the 1930s came to Yellowknife to start a new life, settling on this flat expanse of land. Few of the original cabins remain, but the neighborhood retains a relaxed atmosphere typical of Old Town.

A large outcrop - known locally as McAvoy Rock after a bush pilot family - defines the edge of this neighborhood. A climb to the top gives another great view of Back Bay, an important wetland for migrating birds in the spring. Residents take advantage of the shore front and keep their boats and floatplanes moored at various private docks.

FUN FACT!

Yellowknife has always been a multicultural place! First settlers were from all over the world, including New Zealand, England, Norway, Sweden, China, Lebanon, and Syria.



Carl Jensen's House.



Old boat in the willows.

13. Jensen's House

At the corner of McAvoy Road and Anderson-Thomson Boulevard is an old house from the 1940s that has had many owners, including Robert Earl Robertson, Jack Demore, Carl Jensen, Hank Lupien, Joe Major, Robert Fitzgerald, and Dave Jones. Carl Jensen once owned the Wildcat Café but was also known as a taxi car and bus owner in the 1940s. The house is a classic example of early Yellowknife housing with its shingle siding.

Continue down Anderson-Thomson Boulevard and walk out onto the pier into Back Bay.

14. Old Boat

Depending on the season, you may see evidence of an old wood boat in the willows along the shore of Back Bay. The history of this boat is not very well known, but an early pioneer - Jock McMeekan - wrote about a beached boat on Peace River Flats that was once used by the RCMP at Fort Rae (Behchoko) in the 1940s. Wooden-hull boats of this size, fitted with gas or diesel engines, were used by government patrollers, commercial fishers, and freighters. The people who worked and lived on the waters of Great Slave Lake were incredibly brave.

Head south down Lois Lane and right onto Primrose Lane.



Chippy Loutitt's Cabin.

The name of Lois Lane is an inside joke, with double meanings. On one hand, it pays homage to Yellowknife-born Margot Kidder who played the character Lois Lane in the 1970s Superman movies. On the other hand, it represents neighborhood resident Lois Little who has lived on this street for many years.

15. Chippy's Cabin

Chippy Loutitt's eccentric little log cabin is hard to miss! A plaque on the cabin written by local residents tells the story. Built in 1936 or 1937 by woodcutter Colin "Chippy" Loutitt, the logs were cut from the Yellowknife River where many good stands of timber were harvested in the early years of Yellowknife.

Turn south down Stout Road. A large baseball field occupies land that used to be a large pond. In the 1960s-1970s, it was filled in with garbage and was a temporary trailer park. The ground under Peace River Flats is unstable silt which can be a challenge for home owners. Turn left onto Knutsen Lane.



Negus Mine refinery.

16. Negus Mine Refinery

This unassuming house was once a gold refinery at a Yellowknife mine. Built in 1947 at the Negus Mine south of the city, the final stages of gold recovery happened in this building as molten metals were poured into bullion bricks using an oil-fired furnace. Years after the mine closed, Andy Knutsen acquired it for use as a blacksmith and sheet metal shop and moved it to Peace River Flats in 1960. At that time, the Flats was mostly light-industrial. In 1992, as the area became more residential, the old shop was heavily renovated into a house. From an industrial refinery, to a quaint little residence - if these walls don't tell stories, maybe they will reveal hidden gold bricks!

Continue to Franklin Avenue. This area is the entrance to Old Town. Turning southward, Franklin Avenue will take you up the hill to the downtown commercial core of Yellowknife. Turning northward, Franklin Avenue goes to the heart of Old Town. Cross Franklin Avenue and onto School Draw Avenue.

FUN FACT!

Yellowknife area mines produced about 15 million ounces of gold between 1938-2004, or approximately 25,000 gold bricks - a volume that equals two houses the size of the old Negus refinery.

School Draw Avenue

School Draw Avenue is also an early settlement area of Yellowknife although it did not become a surveyed subdivision of the city until the 1960s. It is named for a public school that ran from 1940 to 1947 on the shore of Yellowknife Bay. The school was built there because it was halfway between Old Town and the Con and Negus gold mines. Yellowknife's very first school was a log cabin used in 1938-1939, now located downtown near the Mildred Hall elementary school.

The original road to Con Mine started at School Draw Avenue and went over Tin Can Hill to the mine. Today, Tin Can Hill is a popular greenspace with many trails and scenic views of Yellowknife Bay.

The waterfront area of School Draw was once teeming with cabins and tents. Many of its residents were Indigenous Dene or Metis who liked to live near the water. After Yellowknife was named capital of the Northwest Territories in 1967, the city decided to redevelop the School Draw Avenue area to provide a hundred houses for the influx of new government workers. Today, it is on the margin of both Old Town and downtown and is a very nice residential subdivision of the city.

SIDE TOUR



Continue along School Draw Avenue to the intersection of Lundquist Road to see a heritage plaque that describes the school that was located further down the avenue. Continue further down the avenue to Rotary Park for a boardwalk that leads to a pleasant view of Yellowknife Bay. An excellent area for viewing the Northern Lights - Aurora Borealis!



Willow Flats neighborhood in the 1940s.

Willow Flats

Willow Flats has been a residential neighborhood since the 1930s. It was named for the abundance of willow tree shrubs that grow along the shore of Yellowknife Bay. Like Peace River Flats, Willow Flats was a relatively flat area of land suitable for building houses.

In recent years, the Flats has become a popular neighborhood with many high-end houses. However, residents will remember a period in the 1960s-1970s when old shacks were deemed derelict by City Hall. Some of the shacks have survived, and Willow Flats is now noted for a rather unusual mix of old and new types of housing together with light industrial uses like shops and warehouses.

SHOPPING



On Franklin Avenue are a number of businesses worthy of a visit. Two gift stores, The Gallery of the Midnight Sun, and Down to Earth Gallery, offer a variety of northern arts and crafts.

For a meal and a drink, visit the NWT Brewing Company on Franklin Avenue. The brewery has been making beer since 2015 and is named in honour of 'The Woodyard' neighborhood.



A game of street hockey outside the Rex Café.

At Franklin Avenue and School Draw Avenue.

17. Rex Café

This bright red building at the entrance of School Draw Avenue has been moved around many times. It started its life in 1947 on The Rock overlooking Back Bay, as a new store for Sutherland's Drugs in the Old Town. In 1956, it was gutted by a fire and moved to Latham Island where it became the Rex Café, owned by French-Canadian-Metis settlers Louis and Agatha Lessard. In 1971-1972, Brian Laramée ran a gambling den in the Rex Café that was raided by the RCMP several times and again gutted by a suspicious fire. Then the building was put on skids and moved yet again to its current home in Willow Flats. From 1974 to 1978 it was the office and printing plant for *The Yellowknifer* newspaper. It has also been a woodstove shop, art gallery, lodge office, tattoo parlour, and private apartments.

Turn left on Brock Drive to Ragged Ass Road.

- | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Pilot's Monument | 18. Ragged Ass Road |
| 2. Joliffe Island | 19. The Woodyard |
| 3. Dettah | 20. Glamour Alley |
| 4. Hudson's Bay Company | 21. Cultural Crossroad Project |
| 5. CPA Floatbase | 22. News of the North |
| 6. Wildcat Café | 23. Johnsons Building Supplies |
| 7. Doornbos Lane | 24. Boyles Brothers Drilling |
| 8. Pentecostal Mission | 25. Capitol Theatre Lobby |
| 9. Wardair Floatbase | 26. Old Town Dock and Beer Barge |
| 10. Back Bay | 27. House Boats |
| 11. Weaver & Devore | 28. Old Town Glassworks |
| 12. John Anderson-Thompson's House | 29. McMeekan Causeway |
| 13. Jensen's House | 30. Gino Pin's House |
| 14. Old Boat | 31. Liske House |
| 15. Chippy's Cabin | 32. Bank of Toronto |
| 16. Negus Mine Refinery | 33. Harriet's Lane |
| 17. Rex Café | 34. N'Dilo |
| | 35. Cat Train Caboose |







Outhouse on Ragged Ass Road 1946.

18. Ragged Ass Road

The name 'Ragged Ass Road' evokes images of dirty, downtrodden people without luck on their side. And back in the 1960s, perhaps this is what Lou Rocher and his friends were feeling after a season of gold prospecting with not much to show for it. While sitting at the table drinking, somebody declared in self-mockery: "We should call this Ragged Ass Road... everyone who lives on it is dirt poor!" The name stuck and later became officially recognized by the city.

Yellowknife's love for the road has since grown. The musician Tom Cochrane even used the name for the title of one of his albums. It is a popular street name among residents and visitors alike. In fact, the actual street signs had a habit of being stolen for many years. Please don't steal them...souvenir Ragged Ass Road street signs are available at local gift shops!



Dog team hauling wood.

19. The Woodyard

Wood cutting was once a big industry in Yellowknife. The early settlers all had wood stoves in their cabins and tents and the mine boilers consumed thousands of cords. From the earliest days, hardy bushmen used the shoreline flats for cutting logs into firewood and milling rough timbers into lumber. Tom Reed was one of the first woodmen in this area, using horse-drawn sleighs to transport cordwood to customers. Horses wore rubber shoes to avoid slipping on wet rocks.

Norwegian woodcutter Einer Broten set up business here in 1946. Broten was a generous and hospitable man who helped others in their time of need. To lodge the men under his employ, Broten turned huts and cabooses into houses. These tiny houses are built on the overgrown sawdust and woodchips that accumulated from decades of milling. Today, the Woodyard keeps its historic character and is home to hardy and independent citizens of Yellowknife.

Travel down Bretzlaff Drive to Franklin Avenue.

20. Glamour Alley

Bretzlaff Road was once known as “Glamour Alley”. Here, laundries, bootleggers and bawdy houses were open for business in the 1930s. The Glamour Alley girls entertained in their tents and cabins until 1939 when the RCMP, under official government order, broke up the parties for good. There was some local support for legalized prostitution because of the huge disparity between male and female settlers and a shallow dating pool. Liquor, gambling, and prostitution were popular vices in the early years since there were few other social and recreational opportunities.

“A professional lady of the night flew in and found the area in need of more adequate services. She immediately made arrangements for a cabin and sent out for a couple of helpers. The Black Diamond and the Core Barrel had moved during the winter and had set up shack tents on the shoreline midway between the Con and Negus Mines. They, like their ancestor, of the old Nor’West Company, knew where the best trapping and richest pelts could be found.”

– Fred Peet, “Miners and Moonshiners”

“Gambling, liquor and ladies is a trinity always to be found in a mining camp. The people involved in such activities supply services that men demand. There existed a demand for this trinity in Yellowknife. The miners came to mine the gold. These others came to mine the miners.”

– Ray Price, “Yellowknife”



Cultural Crossroad Project.

Franklin Avenue

You are now back on the main street that connects Old Town with the rest of Yellowknife. When Yellowknife boomed again after World War Two, Old Town was too crowded with no room to expand the community. The downtown, or “New Town” project, was surveyed in 1945 and Franklin Avenue became a major traffic corridor up the hill, as it remains today.

21. Cultural Crossroad Project

Across Franklin Avenue is a sculpture and colourful art on the rock face, a collaborative work of Metis, Dene, Inuvialuit, English, and French participants in dedication to all the people of the North. The bronze sculpture is of a Dene drum surrounded by three animals important to the Indigenous people: the fish, the bear, and the eagle. On the rock face are carved hundreds of hand prints and other signs and symbols, adorned with the phrase “The Power of Working Together” in all 11 official languages of the NWT: Cree, Tlicho, Chipewyan, Gwich’in, Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, Inuvialuit, North Slavey, South Slavey, English, and French.



News of the North.

22. News of the North

Newsmen and professional photographers were ardent documenters of Yellowknife's rapid growth in the 1940s, and this building stands as a testament to them. Built in 1945 it was printing plant for "The News of the North". The newspaper was started by W.H. "Duke" Decoursey inside of a small canvas tent. This insulated, heated building proved much better at keeping the ink flowing smoothly! Several printing presses and a linotype machine provided Yellowknife's first commercial printing plant.

Photographer Henry Busse also shared space in the building. He ran Yellowknife Photo Studios, a professional portraiture business, until his death in a 1962 plane crash. Over 10,000 photographs from Busse's business are now part of the NWT Archives heritage collections.



Johnson's Building Supplies.

23. Johnson's Building Supplies

An Old Town institution for over 50 years was O.I. Johnson's Building Supplies. Oscar Ivar Johnson was a Swedish carpenter who came to Yellowknife in 1938 with his wife Alice. They started a family and Oscar worked as a general contractor on many projects including the old Yellowknife arena and fire hall. His lumber yard in the Old Town was a huge waterfront property and is still intact today with several original buildings. The largest is this 1968 quonset hut that served as a hardware retail store and shop. Johnson's Building Supplies continued to operate until 2009 and today the property serves as storage for Quality Furniture and is wonderfully decorated by Yellowknife artists.

EVENTS!



Visiting Yellowknife during the month of August? Look for notices about Old Town's "Ramble and Ride" festival held along Franklin Avenue usually on the August long weekend.



Boyles Brothers diamond drilling shop.

24. Boyles Brothers Drilling

This prefabricated wood building dates to the World War Two period and was assembled here by Boyles Brothers Diamond Drilling Company as an office and machine shop. In 1944, with the gold boom in full swing, Boyles had dozens of drilling rigs around Yellowknife probing the rock for gold ores. The drills pulled up a cylinder of rock called “core” using diamond-studded drill bits - hence, diamond drilling. The core was then analyzed for its mineral content.

By 1972, the Boyles Company had drilled over three million feet of core from the Giant Mine alone. The shop was still being used by diamond drillers in the 1980s. In 2012, the old building was renovated and now is the “Mother Earth Rocks” store.

SHOPPING



Mother Earth Rocks is an arts and crafts gallery and also the location of an Old Town automatic bank machine if you need to pull out some cash for your Old Town experience.

The Gut

At the intersection of Franklin Avenue and Weaver Drive, Franklin Avenue becomes McDonald Drive and wraps around the south-east side of “The Rock” or Pilots Monument. This side of Old Town faces Jolliffe Island, between which is a channel of water that locals call “The Gut”. This channel is an important waterway for the Old Town community, past, present, and future. Boats and floatplanes taxi through The Gut in the summer, and in the winter a series of ice roads lead to private houseboats on the bay.

Many early residences and businesses lined this shoreline in the 1930s-1940s including the Catholic Church and rectory, Lakeview Café, RCMP detachment, doctor Oliver Stanton’s office, and Anne Bauer’s café. There were more aviation bases along this road too, such as Ptarmigan Airways and Gateway Aviation.

Continue north along McDonald Drive. William McDonald was a geologist and naturalist who lived on Jolliffe Island. He was a collector of bird eggs and all-around lover of wildlife.

EVENTS!



The Snowking Winter Festival is held on the ice of Yellowknife Bay every March. Be sure to check out the many events held at the Snow Castle!



Capitol Theatre.

25. Capitol Theatre Lobby

In the early years of Yellowknife, lumber and fixtures that made up a building were so valuable that abandoned buildings were either taken apart and repurposed, or entire structures were dragged to a new location. Hidden behind the siding of many buildings are the skeletal remains of very old pieces of history.

One of the largest buildings ever moved was the old Capitol Theatre lobby, now a beautiful waterfront home in Old Town. Built downtown in 1947, Bill Cole's entertainment house was a 400-seat movie theatre. This is the front lobby portion only. The Cole family lived in the apartment above, and there was a small retail space that held various businesses, including a dentist office.

In 1977, the last movie was shown at the original Capitol Theatre when a new theatre complex opened. The old theatre hall was torn down, but the front lobby was saved and moved slowly down Franklin Avenue to its new Old Town home. It was a huge job. Crews had to close the road and took down power lines, street lights, and traffic lights to make way for the massive building. Recycling is an age-old northern tradition!

Continue north along McDonald Drive towards the Old Town Dock, where an interpretive kiosk explains the importance of water transportation to Yellowknife and a story about the Beer Barge.



Boats with barge arriving at Yellowknife.

26. Old Town Dock and the Beer Barge

In the 1930s, gold prospectors and traders docked their watercraft on the rocky peninsula of Old Town. A trip across Great Slave Lake by boat was the cheapest way to the boom town, and the majority of supplies and equipment came up on a network of barges and river boats from the south. The Old Town Dock was constructed in 1946 to support an incredible surge in water traffic to Yellowknife during the post-war gold boom. The wharf was capable of mooring large barges of the Northern Transportation Company and Yellowknife Transportation Company who erected warehouses nearby. One of the warehouses is now an apartment building.

FUN FACT!

Yellowknifers once celebrated the summer barges with a lottery contest to guess the correct day and time the first boat would arrive at the dock.

The arrival of the first boats in June signaled the official arrival of summer. It was an exciting place to congregate especially when the first boat and barges in tow arrived with valuable supplies and cargo. The first barge of the season often carried a fresh load of beer! Fun parties ensued as tug boats and their barges began to off-load supplies. The local newspaper reported in June 1941: *"M.S. Prospector and barge had on board 1,875 cases of beer and a large consignment of that delightful beverage known as 'goof', because it has the property of really driving away all inhibitions and feelings of inferiority... and other things."*

Today, barges no longer bring freight to Yellowknife, but the dock is still a hub of activity for bush planes, commercial fishers, tour companies, and residents who live on the water.

First Boat of Season Is Welcomed to Yellowknife

The much-awaited first boat of the 1945 season reached Yellowknife at 7:45 a.m. on Friday, June 22. The Radium Express, owned by Northern Transportation, carried a cargo which had been awaited for weeks.

Tommy Albers, who is employed at the Negus, held 1636, in the competition sponsored on behalf of Yellowknife Holy Trinity church, and received \$200. If the holders of tickets No. 670 and No. 2382 will present themselves to John Parker, they will receive \$120 and \$80 respectively.

More than half the total receipts went for prize money, and with the remainder needed improvements will be made at the church and manse.

*Newspaper clipping
from News of the
North, 1945.*



Houseboat bay.

27. Houseboats

From the government dock, you can see a variety of houseboats along the shore of Jolliffe Island. Water living is not for everybody, but many have embraced it as a regular lifestyle. Houseboats joined the mixture of housing options in Yellowknife in the 1980s as people searched for affordable solutions to the high cost of living in the north. Many are constructed on old barges or repurposed boats; others are built on platforms of floating plastic drums or pontoons.

Residents enjoy the rustic independence. They require self-sufficiency, with off-grid power generation like wind or solar. Heavy anchors prevent boats from being swept away in lake storms. Break-up (in the spring, when the ice is melting) and freeze-up (in the late fall, when the lake begins to freeze) pose unique challenges but residents endure and find creative solutions to commute back and forth from shore.

FUN FACT!

Some houseboats are legally registered as marine vessels with the Canadian Coastguard. Most have composting toilets or "honeybuckets."



Old Town Glassworks.

Continue north along McDonald Drive.

28. Old Town Glassworks

You are welcome to check out Old Town Glassworks, a business that recycles glass bottles and sandblasts them into art. There is a gift shop inside and they have regular workshops so you can make your own souvenir glass. It also runs a bicycle rental and repair cooperative. The business is within a very old Yellowknife home which dates to the 1940s, the last original house on this stretch of our Old Town walk.

Continue north on McDonald Drive and turn right onto the McMeekan Causeway.

SHOPPING



Overnight accommodations can be secured at the Aurora Bayside Inn with its associated restaurant Fishy People Inc.



Bertha Watt's water taxi to Latham Island 1938.

Latham Island

Latham Island was perhaps the first area of Old Town to be populated by early settlers. In 1936, Gordon Latham, Ted Hickmott, and Pete Racine opened the Corona Inn on the Island's west shore. Housed in a log cabin, it was an eclectic place, serving simultaneously as hotel, restaurant, game hall, post office, and barber shop. The Corona Inn was Yellowknife's first place of commerce. Eventually, the mainland peninsula became the focus of commercial activity. Today, Latham Island is a residential suburb and construction has given rise to some spectacular architecture tailored to the rocky landscape.

29. McMeekan Causeway

Latham Island was not always connected to the mainland by a causeway. In the 1930s-1940s, water taxi operators ferried residents back and forth across the narrow channel. Bertha Watt charged passengers five cents to row them across. On the island were the liquor store and government offices, two of Yellowknife's busiest places, where beer and prospecting licenses were acquired.



Gino Pin's house.

In 1948, the first bridge across the channel was built. It was championed by Island resident Jock McMeekan, an outspoken journalist and prospector who lobbied for a bridge in his newspaper, "The Yellowknife Blade". In 1996, the modern causeway you see here was completed, and it was fitting to name it after McMeekan, Old Town's early advocate.

Turn right down Mitchell Drive towards the Air Tindi floatbase.

30. Gino Pin's House

Early Yellowknife residents liked to build to the contours of the land. Building on rock was a real challenge, and it would have been too expensive for 1940s-era citizens to blast away rock to make flat terrain. In 1976, Yellowknife architect Gino Pin built a house rising up the side of this slope as a demonstration that building methods could still be adapted to rocky terrain. Interior rooms are small and interconnected with many flights of stairs, so living in this house would require great mobility. Locals call it the "Eraser House" because of its shape or sometimes the "Slant House".

Return to the Causeway and walk north up Hearne Hill Road.



Liske House in the 1980s.

31. Liske House

Beneath the blue siding of this unsuspecting tiny house is a log cabin of 1940s-vintage, once the home of Pierre Liske of the Yellowknives Dene. Liske was a trading chief from Trout Rock (Enodah) on the North Arm of Great Slave Lake in the 1920s-1930s. When Pierre Liske died in 1961, the house passed to his son Antoine Liske, who also became a leader in the Dene community. Antoine and his wife Elise both lived off the land hunting, trapping, and fishing.

Turn right on Otto Drive and follow it north. Otto Drive is named for Yellowknife-based prospector and trapper Sam Otto who lived on this road when not in the bush. His log cabin home, now gone, was a museum of Sam's travels across the Northwest Territories, featuring many mineral specimens and archaeological artifacts he found on the land, and taxidermy mounts he created while living alone in a dug-out cabin on the arctic tundra. Sam Otto's collections are now kept at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife.



Bank of Toronto 1944.

32. Bank of Toronto

John Stakson built this cabin in 1939 and it is a fine example of early log construction. It served as the Bank of Toronto from 1944 to 1951, Yellowknife's third bank. This cabin may have been the busiest in town, especially on pay day. Bankers had no hours back then; if a prospector knocked on the cabin door at 5 AM in need of a loan, the teller woke up and took care of business. The cabin was originally located just below The Rock in the commercial centre of early Yellowknife and was moved here in 1964 and renovated into a home.

33. Harriet's Lane

This road is named after the matriarch of the Larocque family in Yellowknife, Harriet, who lived in this area until her death in 1971. In the 1980s, her children fought the City for title along this shore so that they could legally occupy the land they grew up on. Many of the Larocque's still live on Harriet's Lane today.

Turn off Otto Drive and up Sikyea Tili towards the community of N'Dilo. The road is named for Michel Sikyea, a Williideh Yellowknives Dene elder who fought the government for his people's Treaty right to hunt migratory ducks all year round.



**WELCOME
TO
NDILO**
YELLOWKNIVES DENE
FIRST NATION TERRITORY

Welcome to N'dilo.

34. N'Dilo

The Wìlìdeh Yellowknives Dene community of N'Dilo is located on the very northern tip of Latham Island; in fact, N'Dilo in their language means “end of the island”. The first permanent homes were built here by the government in 1958 for Dene families. Yellowknifers might fondly remember it as “Rainbow Valley” because those first houses were painted many different colours. This moniker is preserved in the name of the nearby “K’alemi Dene” school, which means “Rainbow” in the Dene language. N'Dilo is a great place to experience the Dene culture of the Yellowknife area.

Sikyea Tili road is a crescent that circles around to the other side of Latham Island and connects south to Morrison Drive. Continue south on Morrison Drive.

FUN FACT!

The traditional name for Yellowknife Bay is Wìlìcheh. Wìlìi means “toothless fish”, referring to the inconnu fish that is an important source of food for the Dene, and Cheh means “Bay”.



Cat Train Caboose.

35. Cat Train Caboose

What was once living quarters for “Cat Train” operators is now a homeowner’s storage shed. The shack, or “caboose”, is a small bunkhouse and dining hall that formed a Cat Train winter road convoy. Cat Trains were the precursor to today’s winter road trucking convoys, where instead of a truck pulling a trailer, a tracked bulldozer (or Caterpillar tractor) pulled massive sleighs full of freight. Before there was a highway to Yellowknife, Cat Train convoys crossed Great Slave Lake ice. They were common from 1939 to the late 1950s. Today, well-engineered ice roads constructed over lakes and portages allow modern transport trucks to carry goods to remote regions in the NWT.

Yellowknifers have a knack for displaying antiques and mementos of its past. This caboose, and the shed nearby, are beautifully decorated to bring out the city’s historical charm.

SHOPPING



Sundog Trading Post on Lessard Drive offers light meals and scheduled tour packages: boat tours in the summer and kick-sledding dog tours in the winter.

We hope that you have enjoyed this tour of Yellowknife's Old Town. Please make your way back to "The Rock" and "Pilot's Monument" where this tour started. There are many cafes, gift shops, stores and other attractions in the Old Town area that you are welcome to visit. Now you know a little of our history and we hope you will enjoy some of the modern attractions of Yellowknife.

Old Town Attractions

Look up these Yellowknife businesses and events online for more information.

Ahmic Air

3514 Wiley Road
Aviation charters

Air Tindi

23 Mitchell Drive
Aviation charters

Aurora Bayside Inn, Fishy People Inc.

3505 Macdonald Drive
Restaurant and accommodations

Bluefish Services

8 Mitchell Drive
Touring packages and fishing

Bullocks Bistro

3534 Weaver Drive
Restaurant

Down to Earth Gallery

5007 Bryson Drive
Arts and crafts gift shop

Gallery of the Midnight Sun

5005 Bryson Drive
Arts and crafts gift shop

Mother Earth Rocks

3608 Franklin Avenue
Arts and crafts gift shop

NWT Brewing Company

3905 Franklin Avenue
Restaurant and brew pub

Ramble and Ride Festival

Throughout Old Town
Held every August long weekend

Snowking Winter Festival

Yellowknife Bay
Held every March

Sundog Trading Post

4 Lessard Drive
Restaurant and touring packages

Weaver & Devore Trading

3601 Weaver Drive
Convenience store, clothing, and expediting

Wildcat Café

3507 Wiley Road
Restaurant

Yellowknife Outdoor Adventures

3603 Franklin Avenue
Touring packages and fishing

If you would like to know more...

Several books about the history of Yellowknife are available for browsing at the Yellowknife Public Library, the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, or for purchase at the bookstores and gift shops around the city. If you would like more detailed information on the history of buildings and sites documented in this brochure, please contact the Yellowknife Historical Society.

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