

Yellowknife's Rich Community History

Yellowknife sits atop the Canadian Shield, a large expanse of ancient bedrock where many innocuous stones are a fascinating history of our planet going back billions of years. The community owes its name to Dene who traveled between Great Slave Lake and the Arctic Ocean. Explorer Samuel Hearne called them the 'Copper Indians' in 1771 because of the implements made from native copper. Later explorers and traders, observing their crude blades, coined the term Redknife, and later, Yellowknife, to describe the tribe. The Yellowknife River, a major corridor of travel for these Dene, was put on the maps in the 19th century.

Many aboriginal people are descendants of the Yellowknives and Tlicho Dene and continue to practice traditional lifestyles from the communities of Detah and N'Dilo. The fur trade in northern Canada saw the first European settlement near here in 1789, when Alexander Mackenzie canoed into Great Slave Lake and instructed his voyageurs to trade with the Dene. This activity was centered at the little outpost Old Fort Providence, 20 kilometers southeast of Yellowknife Bay.

The modern city we know today got its start after the discovery of rich minerals. Gold-hungry Klondikers were the first to stake a claim in 1898. Later, using the incredibly versatile bush plane, prospectors returned with gusto, and it was the 1934 discovery of visible gold by Johnny Baker on the east side of Yellowknife Bay that gave rise to a commercial settlement. More gold was staked and by 1938 the bay was the site of a boom town. Con Mine poured its first gold brick on September 5, 1938.

Early Yellowknife was a haphazard collection of tents, log shacks, and businesses scattered around the protective harbour of the Bay, what we now call "Old Town". The Corona Inn, Vicky Lepine's laundry, Wildcat Café, Weaver & Devore Trading, Sutherland's Drugs, and Vic Ingraham's hotel were among the first. Yellowknife thrived with prospecting and mining and it was also a hub for trapping, commerce, transportation, and government activity.

The end of the boom was precipitated by the prolonged war in Europe when all the men left to fight. A new rush started when Giant Mine struck gold in 1944 leading to the start of production there in 1948. With no room for expansion on crowded Yellowknife Bay, a new townsite was started up the hill in 1945. Governance grew from an Ottawa-controlled administrative district in 1939 to a fully-elected municipality in 1953.

For many years Yellowknife was accessible primarily by water. Most of the bulk freight was brought up via barge traffic from Alberta through the Slave River system. In the winter, freight was consigned north by tractor train and ice road trucks. Year-round passenger and mail service was through scheduled airlines from Edmonton.

In 1960, isolation ended when a highway connected to the outside world. Yellowknife came of age when declared capital of the Northwest Territories in 1967. The city continued as a regional center for mining activity and grew with the discovery of diamonds in 1991 and still prospers even with the end of gold mining in 2004. Over eighty years after the discovery of gold, Yellowknife's future still shines bright thanks to

the treasures beneath our feet.

Preserving and celebrating the community's story is the goal of our membership. The Society is currently renovating the old Giant Mine recreation hall, once the social hub of town, as a main exhibit hall to showcase the story of Yellowknife and its diverse people. To achieve our goals, we need your support! Donations, in kind services, stories, photographs, artifacts, ideas, volunteers, and new members! Let's honour our Yellowknife community elders and past generations by building a museum and heritage centre the entire city can be proud of!

A Yellowknife Chronology

1771 – Samuel Hearne of the Hudson's Bay Company is the first recorded European to travel through the Yellowknife area on his way back from the Arctic Ocean

1789 – French fur traders establish 'Old' Fort Providence 20 km southeast of Yellowknife Bay on the recommendation of Alexander Mackenzie.

1821 – John Franklin ascends the Yellowknife River under the guidance of Yellowknife Indian chief Akaitcho, on a mission of exploration towards the Arctic Ocean. Many of his men would perish on this journey.

1898 - E. A. Blakeney, on his way to the Klondike, picks up rock samples at Yellowknife Bay and stakes claims. The samples are assayed in Ottawa and found to contain gold.

1929 – More prospectors are searching for gold around Great Slave and Great Bear Lakes thanks to the use of the versatile airplane in mineral exploration.

1933 - Johnny Baker and Herb Dixon paddle down the Yellowknife River and make a gold discovery at Quyta Lake.

1934 - Johnny Baker returns and stakes the Rich claim on the east side of Yellowknife Bay. This date is generally viewed as the birth of the gold camp. The Burwash Mine operates from 1935-1936 before the small gold vein 'pinches out'.

1935 - Members of the Geological Survey of Canada find gold near Jackfish Lake, on the west side of Yellowknife Bay. This prompts a 'blind' staking rush as winter snow sets in. Claims are staked that will lead to the discovery and development of the Con, Negus, and Giant Mines.

1936 - Commerce arrives with the setting up of the Corona Inn restaurant and hotel, and Weaver & Devore traders, in modern day Old Town Yellowknife.

1938 - Yellowknife is a boomtown with gold discoveries all over the region! The first gold is poured at the Con Mine in September.

1939 - The first community government meets with the creation of an Administrative District of Yellowknife. The first school board is organized.

1944 - World War II has forced the closure of the gold mines. Geological investigation of the Giant Mine property reveals and confirms a massive gold bearing deposit beneath Baker Creek.

1945 - Surveying and development begins on a 'new town' for Yellowknife up from the waterfront.

1948 - Giant Mine starts gold production.

1953 – The first fully-elected town council is organized for the Yellowknife municipality.

1967 - Yellowknife is named Capital of the Northwest Territories.

1991 - A staking rush ensues after the announcement that economic diamonds have been discovered 300 kilometers north of Yellowknife.

1998 - Canada's first diamond mine, Ekati, begins production north of Yellowknife.

2003/2004 - Gold production ceases at the Con and Giant mines, ending a long era of gold pouring in the community.