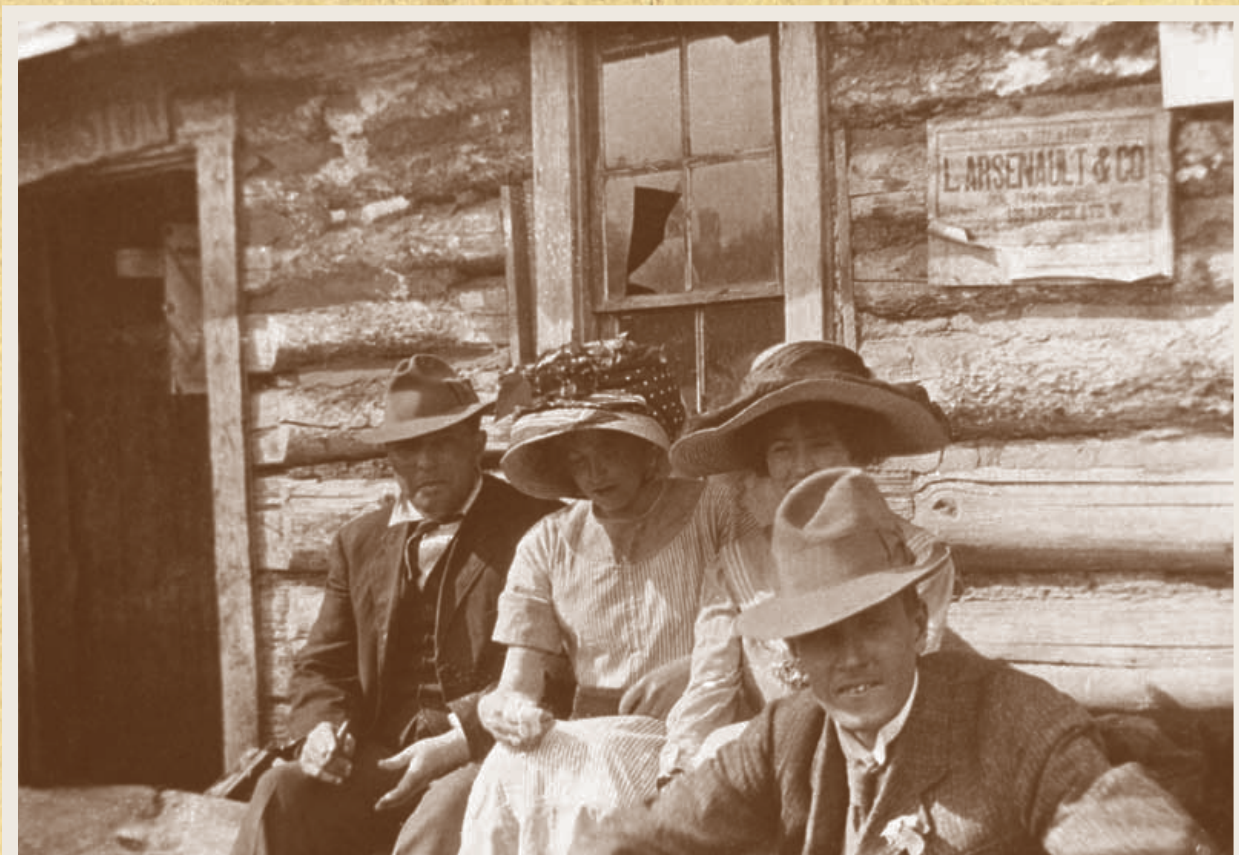

Historic Athabasca Landing Trail

AN OVERVIEW



Group at Stopping House enroute from Edmonton to Athabasca Landing
courtesy of the Glenbow Archives NA2788-2





Introduction

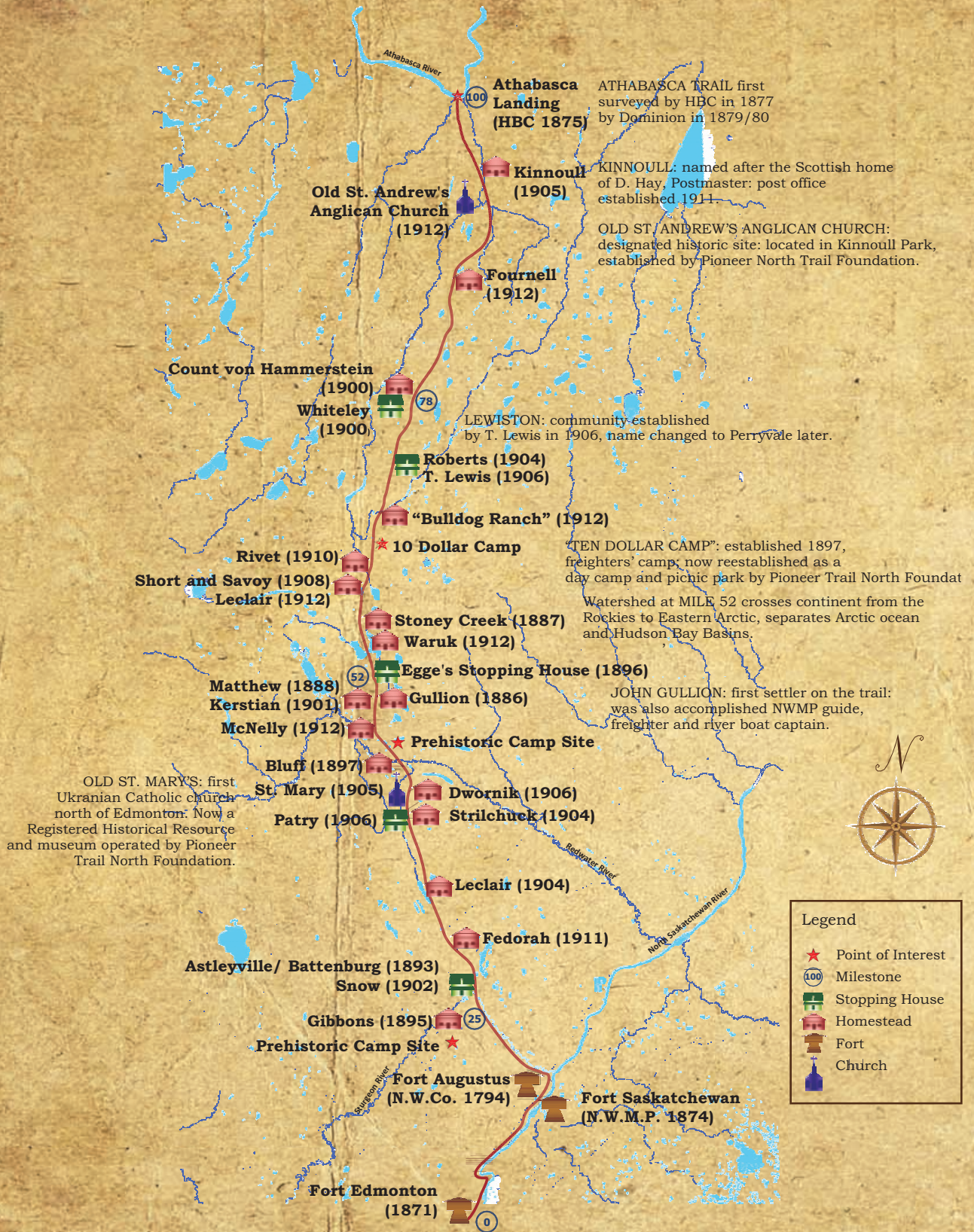
The historic Athabasca Landing Trail (ALT) was the first overland route between Fort Edmonton and the southern loop of the Athabasca River known as Athabasca Landing. The trail played a major role in the transportation of goods and services between Edmonton and Athabasca Landing in the late 1800s and early 1900s and was an important corridor for the settlement of the region. Many portions of the historic route are still in use as rural roads, and some portions are being used as recreation trails. Other portions have been abandoned. The ALT is recognized as a significant recreation, tourism, and heritage amenity and is registered as part of the Trans Canada Trail (TCT). The TCT route follows the historic route where possible and utilizes other county roads and undeveloped road allowances where use of the historic route is not feasible. The ALT is a key component of the TCT, linking the east-west land route with the northern land and water routes, as shown by the yellow circle in the figure below.



Local trail groups have been working for years on revitalizing sections of the trail and recreating a continuous corridor for the ALT. The ALT steering committee was formed in 2008 to guide preparation of a conceptual master plan for the ALT corridor. Its mission statement is:

“ . . . to promote and support the development of the Athabasca Landing Trail, a continuous, non-motorized recreational trail that follows the historic route from Fort Saskatchewan north to Athabasca, and links to other trail systems in Alberta and Canada.”

Athabasca Landing Trail 1876-1912



Preserving the Heritage

THE ATHABASCA LANDING TRAIL

The ALT was constructed by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1876, generally following a traditional First Nations route. It was the first overland road from Fort Edmonton to the southernmost point of the Athabasca River. Athabasca Landing, as the site became known, soon became the central distribution point of transfer for furs being moved along the Athabasca and Mackenzie river systems and for goods being shipped to the north. Missionaries, the North-West Mounted Police, and settlers soon followed the fur traders along the ALT. In 1898, some 600 gold rush prospectors started out along the trail, intent on reaching the Klondike. That same year, the Kennedy stagecoach was established to deliver passengers and mail, stopping at several locations along the way. The ALT was dubbed the "100 Mile Portage" since it linked two major waterways—the North Saskatchewan River and the Athabasca River.

Between Fort Edmonton and Lamoureux, the ALT and the Victoria Trail were one and the same, with the Victoria Trail continuing eastward to Fort Victoria (the fort is now gone, but the location is recognized as a provincial historic site called Victoria Settlement) and on to Fort Garry (now Winnipeg) via the Carlton Trail. The ALT continued northward to Athabasca Landing. For the first 26 years, the trail was the only connection between Fort Edmonton and Athabasca Landing. After the railway was completed in 1912, the ALT lost its importance as a freight route but was still the primary route for regular traffic.

The ALT was constructed through trees, creeks, and boggy territory and became known for bugs, mud, and moonshine. It was constructed at a total cost of \$4,059 and was Alberta's first Dominion Highway and Canada's first toll road. Mile 0 of the trail was at Fort Edmonton, mile 100 at Athabasca Landing. The portion of the trail between the Sturgeon River and Athabasca was surveyed in the summer of 1897, and the road plan created through this survey is still in effect today, although it has been modified many times.

IMPORTANT SITES ALONG THE ROUTE

Early Homesteads, Stopping Houses, and Campsites

There were few signs of civilization along the route when the trail was first constructed. James McLean surveyed the ALT in 1897, and recorded only five houses between the Sturgeon River and Athabasca Landing. Even at Athabasca Landing, buildings were few and far between with only the Hudson's Bay agent's house, the "English" church, the parson's house, a warehouse, and a toolshed at the river's edge. However, within a few years of the trail being declared a public right-of-way by the federal government, many homesteaders claimed land along the route.

Many of these early settlers provided food, shelter, and a variety of other services to travellers on the trail, and their homes were known as stopping houses. Some became well known in the region for the quality of the fare and for the pleasant experience of overnighting (see inset on page 4 for a description of an evening at Eggie's Stopping House, written by Edna Shore in 1910). Freighters often camped along the way and sites such as Ten Dollar Camp became well known (named after the rumour that someone lost a ten-dollar gold coin at the site). The plan on page 2 shows the ALT as it existed in the early 1900s.



Egge's Stopping House - photo courtesy of the Athabasca Archives

When I went inside, the kitchen with its long table of goods had a delicious smoky smell and the cakes and pies seemed as big as cartwheels. . . . In a little while the air became warmer and, with the sounds of laughter, more cheerful. . . . The piano opened its mouth to show its teeth in a pleasant smile and to join in the singing of Little Red Wing. . . ."

Edna Shore, The Alberta Historical Review

Schools, Churches, and Communities

As traffic increased on the trail, schools, and churches were built. Additional homesteads were developed near these facilities, and when the railway came through in 1912, they became thriving communities. Many of the original public buildings stand today, and some are still used for community functions. Other important historic sites have no structures remaining.

INTERPRETATION FRAMEWORK

There is an abundant and rich history associated with the ALT and the land it travelled through. One of the primary goals of this project is to celebrate and share this history by raising awareness of existing features and sites and protecting them through a strong interpretation program that brings the full story of the trail to life for today's visitors.

There are many local families that have lived on or near the ALT for generations. For them, there will be motivation to document and share the story of their ancestors. For new travelers to the ALT, there will be opportunities to learn about the history of this area and to gain an understanding of the early development of the province of Alberta. A trip along the ALT will indeed be a journey through the past.

It is recommended that the primary interpretation theme relate to the story of the trail itself—why the road was built, who used it, what stories are associated with travel along the early trail. Secondary themes could explore community life in the first settlements on the ALT and the rich natural history of the region, including the flora, fauna, and geology of the area..

Planning the Trail

Development of the ALT will require an ongoing commitment from a broad range of stakeholders. Direct involvement by both urban and rural municipalities along the trail route, land owners, trail operators, land managers, and provincial agencies with a mandate for sustainable recreational trail development, tourism, and community development are all critical to the success of the ALT.

ALT STEERING COMMITTEE

Commitment for the ALT is strong and is evident through the formation of the steering committee in 2008. The steering committee's mandate was to guide completion of this master plan and it met regularly in 2008 and 2009 with active involvement in all aspects of the plan.

The ALT steering committee includes representation from the following:

- Three counties: County of Athabasca, Westlock County, and Sturgeon County
- Three municipalities: Town of Athabasca, City of Fort Saskatchewan, and the Town of Gibbons
- Two trail operator groups: Athabasca Recreational Trails Association and Rainbow Equitation Society
- Two provincial government departments: Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation and Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
- The Alberta TrailNet Society



Historic ALT Crossing the Redwater River

Although the original mandate of the steering committee was to guide completion of the master plan, it is recommended that the committee remain active to support and guide progress and to ensure the completion and success of the ALT.

THE VISION

Besides offering recreational opportunities for Albertans and their visitors, the ALT is expected to bring economic opportunities to the area, and preserve and promote the natural and human history of the region. The steering committee's vision is described below.

The Athabasca Landing Trail is a heritage trail that showcases the human and natural history of the original trail, while providing non-motorized recreation opportunities for Albertans and their visitors. It will become a continuous link from Fort Saskatchewan to Athabasca and will offer many benefits to individuals and communities. Development of the ALT will help to:

- Preserve the sense of community associated with the unique history, culture and heritage achieved by participation in trail activities
- Promote enhanced health, wellness, and enjoyment for residents and visitors through responsible use and management of a safe trail network
- Facilitate environmental education and an appreciation for the value of natural systems
- Contribute to sustainable tourism and provide opportunities for innovative, trail based economic activities
- Highlight the trail's importance as an historical transportation route to northern Alberta
- Support multiple use, non-motorized, family recreation in a wide variety of ecosystems
- Maintain a cooperative effort that involves volunteers and promotes a sense of public ownership

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Long distance trails such as the ALT are not likely to succeed unless the people who live near them, and those who have a strong interest in using them, feel a sense of ownership. The ALT already has many ardent champions who have been very involved in the development of this plan, and this sphere of influence was expanded during the public consultation process through four open houses, held to share information and gather input from people in the community. Local residents have been supportive of the project, and it is very important to continue this dialogue and maintain the current level of interest and enthusiasm throughout all phases of trail development and operation.

Public acceptance is particularly critical in some key locations. Portions of the preferred ALT route travel through privately owned land, and rights-of-access will be required to provide a continuous off-road trail linkage. One-on-one dialogue with these land owners will assist in identifying issues and determining ways to address them and facilitating access across private lands. To protect and ensure the longevity of the trail, it is recommended that a right-of-way be registered on the land title where possible.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT

The ALT travels through six separate jurisdictions, including the following:

- Three counties (Sturgeon County, Westlock County, and Athabasca County)
- One city (Fort Saskatchewan)

- Two towns (Athabasca and Gibbons)

There are also five villages or hamlets on the route that are administered by the counties, including Colinton, Meanook, Perryvale, Rochester, Tawatinaw, and Lamoureux.

It is critical that these local governments be supportive of the ALT. In the planning stage, they have an important role to play in

- Maintaining a representative on the ALT steering committee
- Providing council and staff assistance to the ALT steering committee
- Acting as grantee for rights-of-way across private land
- Protecting the trail route through adoption of the master plan

TRAIL USERS

In keeping with the historic use of the ALT, and in response to community feedback, only non-motorized use will be allowed on the proposed trail. This respects agreements that specify non-motorized use only where the current TCT route crosses private land.

In locations where the historic ALT is still in use as public roadway, it will remain as a public road and the new recreation trail will be constructed as a narrow separate trail beside the road.

Anticipated summer users on the trail include horse and wagon teams, equestrians, cyclists, and pedestrians. Winter users will likely include dog sledders, cross-country skiers, and snowshoers.

Horse and wagon teams will need the widest trail width. In locations where the historic road is still in use, these teams will continue to use the roadway and other users will travel along the narrow trail. In locations where the historic route is not available, the new trail will be developed to a standard to accommodate all users.



ALT Wagon Train Ride 2009

Managing the Trail

GOVERNANCE

The ALT is a regional trail travelling through several different jurisdictions. The ownership and governance of trails of this nature are more complex than for trails in a single jurisdiction. The actions of one municipality can have a significant impact on the whole trail, so it is important that all players be involved in all aspects of the trail planning, development, and management and that all be equally committed to the success of the trail. The current ALT steering committee should remain in place to “carry the torch” through to formation of a new entity that ultimately manages the entire trail. One governance model that might work well for the ALT is the formation of a part nine company. A very good local example is Alberta's Iron Horse Trail, which has been successfully managed by a single part nine company with equal representation from the 10 municipalities through which the trail crosses.

MANAGEMENT PLAN

Before construction of any trail segments, there should be a very clear plan that outlines, in detail, how the trail will be managed. This management plan should be jointly developed by trail users, trail operators, governing municipalities, and local enforcement agencies. It needs to provide a clear strategy for dealing with trail monitoring, maintenance and repairs, and trail-user education. It should list the responsible body for each item and have an identified and secure budget.

This management plan would be a working tool that is reviewed and updated annually to reflect actual trail activity and made available to the public. A trail steward program could be developed in association with the management plan to encourage participation in the protection of the trail by the public.

COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING

For a trail to provide economic spin-offs to local communities and businesses, it must become well known. Firstly, it must be embraced by the local communities along the route, and secondly, it should be known to people from farther away. The ALT is located on the doorstep of the Alberta Capital region with its one million plus population and, thus, is well positioned to become a tourism destination. Information about the trail should be available through many outlets, including a good web site. Clear maps that are easily available from the web site, or as printed copies from suitable outlets, are also very important. Events held on the trail should be well advertised; if there is intent to host annual events, it is critical that the first event be a success. Word of mouth is the best promotion possible, so it is important to consider the experience of the first users of the new trail.

The Athabasca Landing Trail can become an attractive tourism destination for Albertans and a source of pride to the communities along the route. Development of the vision will require a strong commitment from many people over many years. The master plan study is intended to set the stage and help generate the level of interest and excitement that will be required to see this project through to completion.



Hauling a Boiler from Edmonton to Athabasca - photo courtesy of the Athabasca Archives



March 2010