

## Early Settlement (Devon to Sturgeon River)

### Introduction

The North Saskatchewan River has played a valuable role in the development of human history. From its origin after the last ice age to the middle of the 20th Century, the North Saskatchewan River has played a diverse and continual role as a major transportation and resource corridor. From about 11500 BP to present, evidence can be found of human activity along the river.

The North Saskatchewan River has played an important role in Aboriginal migration westward, the western expansion of the fur trade, early missionary travel, major survey and exploration expeditions, as well as in early European settlement of the West.

Settlements along the river began with trading posts and missions that were usually situated on sites favoured by Aboriginal groups as seasonal encampments. These sites were most beneficial for shelter, protection, and resource harvesting. Guided by Aboriginal people, the earliest Europeans along the river soon adopted these advantageous sites. Early European communities along the river were constructed inside forts.

Edmontonians were nearly 2000 kilometers from the nearest post office, and 2640 kilometers from the nearest railway station in 1873. The journey overland from Winnipeg to Edmonton took 73 days. Ferries and fords along the river are a significant component of river heritage. A river crossing-based settlement emerged at the site of nearly every ferry. A post-office and general store were located at most North Saskatchewan River ferry crossings. These became the centre of local communication and trade. Bridges were not common on the river until after WWII (except in urban areas such as Edmonton). Bridges were usually built in the vicinity of ferry crossings, thus continuing the historical river-crossing routes.

Eventually the river determined how agricultural land was divided through land surveys; the river lot system similar to that used in Eastern Canada was used for early communities (except Devon). Most of these early landholders held river-related occupations as their primary employment, and many were direct descendents of fur traders, retired fur traders, or former labourers of the fur trade.

### Points of Interest Along the Journey

After the discovery of oil at Leduc #1, rapid urban expansion occurred along the river. Devon was built in response to this development; Canada's first model community, planned by a regional planning commission. The town owes its name (and its very existence) to the



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Devonian limestone which lies a mile beneath it. Prior to 1948, the river could be crossed (at the site of what would become Devon) by a passenger in a bucket or cage, pulled across on a system of cables and pulleys. In October 1948, a government operated ferry was established, which until the spring of 1951 provided a link to the north side when the river was not frozen over. In June of 1950, construction began on Devon's first bridge. The new Devon Bridge was built in 1987.

The Devon Golf Club was established in 1956, when two new fairways were cleared and seeded on the river flats. On the river flat where the No. 2 green is presently located, the Stepanko Sawmill was in operation circa 1935.

In 1949, a ski hill was cleared along the power line right-of-way on River Drive. An old Edmonton Transit street car was renovated and placed at the bottom of the ski hill to serve as a building. In 1958, two ski jumps and a cross-country ski trail were developed. By 1963, skiers realized the potential of the slopes, and soon a new rope tow and chalet were built on the Lions Park hill (some of the old machinery is still visible on the hillside above the Lion's Campground).

Rabbit Hill is one of the highest points in the Edmonton area, a knoll of sand and sediment deposited by glacial melt water at the end of the last ice age. For thousand of years from here, hunters watched bison and deer come to their drinking spots at the bend of the river below.

Big Island was the main picnic outing site from Edmonton in the 1880's and '90's. In 1907 there was a ferry two miles north of Big Island; in 1908 it was two miles south of Big Island. Fort Edmonton was built originally in the area now known as the Rossdale flats (1812–13), an area used for thousands of years by aboriginal people as a North Saskatchewan riverside seasonal camp. After flooding in the area, the fort was then relocated in 1830 to the present site of the Legislature Buildings, where it was located until 1915. At that time, the fort was dismantled. The Edmonton Board of Trade determined that no buildings from the city's short past were worth preserving. The fort structure now located at Fort Edmonton Park on the south side of the river is a replica.

Father Lacombe arrived at Fort Edmonton in 1852 as a passenger on a York Boat. The Northcote, a 180 foot-long sternwheeler, made her maiden voyage from Lake Winnipeg to Fort Edmonton in July, 1875. At the height of her travel, she made 5 round-trips per season between Fort Edmonton and Fort Garry.

Construction began in 1910 and was completed in 1912 on the High Level Bridge, a connection built by the CPR to the north side of the river. Its location is connected with



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Aboriginal oral history. The river ford directly west of the bridge was a junction with the "Old North Trail", the ancient migratory route that ran along the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountain range.

In 1875, John Walter quit the fur trade in order to establish a ferry as well as a boat-building business on the south bank of the river. He built his first house on the south side of the river in 1876 where it is still located just west of the 105 Street Bridge. He built a sawmill to make use of logs floated down from upstream. This business venture expanded as the cities of Edmonton and Strathcona grew. Eighteen houses stood along the south bank of the river by the end of 1882, 17 of which were within the boundaries of twelve river lots that were to become the edge of the City of Strathcona. Important property on the river flats, John Walter's ferry was then the only reliable transportation across the river to Fort Edmonton. "The Belle of Edmonton" ferry ran for the next 20 years. In 1882 John Walter also installed a ferry where the present Clover Bar Bridge crosses the river in Edmonton. In 1900, the only ferry left operating when the Low Level Bridge opened was John Walter's ferry, which ran until the High Level bridge opened in 1913.

Logs were floated downstream to sawmills in Edmonton; lumber rafts could be as long as 260 feet. The last log drive came downstream to Edmonton in 1925.

In 1902, the Edmonton Electrical Lighting and Power Company (now EPCOR) built a power plant on the Rosedale Flats, previously the site of the forts. This site is still in use today. A burial ground was established outside the walls of the forts by the fur traders. It is estimated that between 1800 and 1871, as many as two hundred Indian, Métis and European people were buried there.

In 1895 Father Lacombe accompanied the mayor of Edmonton to Ottawa to lobby the federal government for a bridge. The Low Level Bridge was completed on April 4, 1900.

In 1903, Edmonton's first water treatment plant was built. It distributed water directly in homes on the north and south side of the river, replacing horse drawn wagons.

As early as 5000 years ago, early aboriginal toolmakers camped regularly in the area of Rundle Park, making stone tools from locally available quartzite. This river rock is excellent for tool-making, as it is harder than steel.

(From the early 1800's to the turn of the 20th Century) At the Horse Hills Depot, the horse guards kept 500 to 1000 horses for the business of the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Edmonton. In 1872, the Sandford Fleming expedition journals having stopped near "Horse Hill". In 1848, Paul Kane also mentions in his journal 700 or 800 horses of Fort Edmonton, cared for at Horse Hills. Every post of the Hudson's Bay Company had a location, well supplied with water, wood, shelter and good pasture, where the horses were kept.



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Near present-day Fort Saskatchewan, the old supports from the Canadian National Railway's trestle bridge built in 1905 are still visible on the south side of the river. In 1988 the railway was rerouted, and the bridge was demolished.

The North West Mounted Police built a fort on the south side of the river in 1875. In 1876, Colonel MacLeod asked the NWMP for \$1000 to complete the Fort. At first the fort was called Sturgeon Creek Fort, but it soon came to be known as Fort Saskatchewan. By 1885, Fort Saskatchewan became the "G" Division headquarters of the NWMP. The original fort's four corner posts are now marked with poles.

Brothers Francois and Joseph Lamoureux came from Montreal and settled, building a farm on the north side of the river in 1872. They eventually operated a ferry service between Lamoureux and the NWMP barracks in Fort Saskatchewan, a lumber operation, and the "Saskatchewan Hotel".

Father Lacombe organized the first non-fur cart team in 1862 because he could no longer afford the cost of using the Hudson's Bay cart system. In order to secure supplies for his mission, he led 30 Red River Carts along North Saskatchewan River trails from St. Albert to Fort Garry and back. This then became a common river trail path for the Catholic missionaries and other non-fur traders on the river. In 1867, Father Lacombe traveled from Fort Edmonton to Fort Victoria by dogsled. In 1876, the Victoria Trail was the official route for the "Royal Mail" to Edmonton.

The Northwest Company built Fort Augustus across from the site of present-day Fort Saskatchewan in 1795. The Hudson's Bay Company built its original Edmonton House just east of that location later that same year. Both were built in order for the companies to profit from the fur trade. By 1802 both forts were relocated; the companies amalgamated and the last Edmonton House was built south of today's Legislative Buildings. A stone cairn overlooking the river flats where the original forts once stood was erected in 1926. In 1872 the Sanford Flemming expedition noted that 25 pound fish were often caught at "Sturgeon Creek".

The Birch Hills, at the mouth of the Sturgeon River, was throughout history a widely-used seasonal canoe building encampment. It was used by aboriginals long before Anthony Henday stopped there in 1755, to harvest birch to build canoes to carry him and his furs downstream to the Hudson's Bay. In 1760, Henday took 61 canoes from this area to York Factory; the canoes were laden with fur. In some years, hundreds of birch bark canoes traveled from this area to the Hudson's Bay.



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