



WEST DAWSON SHIPYARD WALKING TOUR




Yukon

The *Lightning* leaving for a picnic, 1914.
(Dawson City Museum, 1984.218.4)





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The Boneyard

The West Dawson Shipyard was built circa 1900 for riverboat winter storage and repair. It later became a place where boats were stored after retirement, earning the names “Sternwheeler Graveyard” and “Boneyard.” Today it holds the remains of four sternwheeler steam boats: the *Lightning*, the *Julia B*, the *Seattle No. 3*, and the *Schwatka*. Long before and long after the shipyard, this riverbank was one of many Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in fish camp locations along the river.

Although the decades have taken their toll on the boats, this site is one of the most important land-based groupings of historical sternwheelers in North America.

This is a place to appreciate the history of Yukon River travel and to learn about the relationships of Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in with the river and the sternwheelers. You are welcome to visit and learn. Please do not enter the boats or climb on them. Do not disturb or remove artifacts and leave the site and the boats as you found them. Do not venture into the wooded areas around the site. These are culturally and spiritually significant areas for Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in and we respectfully ask you to avoid further exploration.



How to get there

The West Dawson Shipyard is about 2.8 km or 1.75 miles from the Dawson Visitor Information Centre. Take the free George Black Ferry to the west side of the Yukon River and drive or walk to the end of the campground. Go through the yellow gate to the beach and walk along the river's edge for about 200 metres.

The route to the site is often waterlogged. Ask at the Visitor Information Centre about water levels before visiting. Wear appropriate footwear and be bear aware.



Historic Sites



To West Dawson
Shipyard, 200 M

TOP OF THE WORLD HIGHWAY

WEST
DAWSON

Yukon River
(Chu Kon' Dëk)

 Yukon River
Campground

To
Dawson
City

George Black
ferry landing



NORTH

0 150 300 M





Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Elder John Semple remembered his family's fish camp: "Cut fish across river and couple big racks three story high. Right down by the Steamboat on the beach there". (Parks Canada Riverboat Collection #201508)

"When school over we pack up dogs and all. We move across to Shipyard (fish camp) we had to make three or four trips. You know you have to take dogs, blankets, and food. Every year we go back same spot. Everyone has their own place."

– Doris Roberts, Yukon River Heritage Sites Projects, 1994

A good place to fish

This riverbank gets lots of sun exposure and tends to be windy. These qualities make it a good place for a fish camp. Until the late 1950s, Hän families from Moosehide (about a kilometre down river) set up seasonal fish camps here every summer. They spent the sunny months smoking and drying salmon. Today, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in gather at the First Fish Camp at Moosehide every July. They share in harvesting, processing, conservation and stewardship of Yukon River salmon.

"There was a big event around the arrival of the king salmon. Every year, June and July, there was always big celebrations when the first salmon were spotted coming up the Yukon River. The event would be celebrated by dancing, singing and feasting because it was bringing life back to the community."

– Gerald Isaac, Moosehide Oral History Project, 1994



The Baum family fish camp at Tr'ochek in 1957 or 1958. (Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Archives, Roy Johnson collection)

One of the happiest times

The whole family would help to set up the fish camp and do the work of gathering, cutting and smoking fish. Children helped by looking after each other, learning how to cut fish from their parents and Elders, and helping at the fish wheel.

In oral histories shared by Elders who spent their childhood summers at their family fish camps by the shipyard, we hear of the joy and connection shared in this work:

"It is one of the happiest times [...] we used to enjoy ourselves, all the kids that went across. The Henrys used to go, and the Josephs, us and the Semples. We used to have fun. And at nights, my brother and my sister used to play guitar. So after work, you know how kids are a hard time to be put to bed, eh? Sometimes we have to go to sleep six-thirty every night, but sometimes we get to stay up and my sister Sara, my brother Edward, and my cousin Daniel Simon, we used to sit around. While they're smoking fish, you know those little strips they cut off the belly? We used to roast that over the fire, same time as the potatoes are baking and they would sing. Sing all the time." – Martha Kates, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Life on the River Oral History Project, 1999.



Fish wheel (Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Archives)

“Across the river. By the steamboat there. Used to be line of fish tied up on the cache. And then we go down the boat, steamboat, play there all night, and go back tired and sleep all day. In the morning, same thing again. Go play around and have to help our parents and them pack fish and put it on the fish rack. Then we'll go down steamboat again and play and then we'll go, get hungry, go back up to camp, eat, sit? Tent. Never come to town. Some do, do come town, but they go right back, with the ferry. Go to Moosehide with boat.” – John Semple, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Life on the River Oral History Project, 2000.

The Henry family fish camp across the Yukon River from Moosehide in 1954 or 1955. A wall tent, a line of laundry and a series of caches can be seen. (Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Archives, Grace Haldenby collection)





Chief Isaac, his son, and Walter Benjamin in birch bark canoes on the Yukon River near Dawson, ca. 1898. (Alaska State Library, Metcalf Collection, PCA 34-121)

Waterways

The Yukon River has long been a primary mode of travel and connection for Yukon people. For countless generations, Yukon First Nations have navigated the river's currents, traveling to hunt and fish, and to gather and trade with their neighbours. Along this stretch of the river's 3,190 kilometre length, generations of Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and their ancestors have used moose skin boats, log rafts, and bark canoes to travel Chu Kon'dëk (the Hän name for the Yukon River) with ease.

During the Klondike Gold Rush and the years that followed, large boats were needed to transport people and cargo to Dawson City and other communities along the river. Stern wheel steamboats were well suited to the swift and shallow Yukon River. From the Gold Rush until the early 1950s, over 250 sternwheel steamers operated within the Yukon River drainage system. They were the major form of transportation for almost 60 years.

Four sternwheelers and five barges, three loaded with sacks of ore, moored at the Dawson City waterfront. (G. Townsend Collection, Parks Canada, 202800)





Percy Henry (L) and Archie Roberts (R). (Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in photo and Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Archives, Jackie Olson Collection)

Sternwheeler stories

The influx of outsiders who arrived with the Klondike Gold Rush, and in the decades after, relied on sternwheelers for transporting people and supplies to and from newly established communities along the river. The presence of these newcomers had big impacts for Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in – as did the rapid growth of the sternwheeler business on the river.

Like other First Nations along the Yukon River, many Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in contributed to the sternwheelers' operation and navigation. Taking seasonal work in the shipping industry, they worked as deckhands, longshoremen and woodcutters during the summer – spending the rest of their year on traditional activities like fishing, trapping and hunting. Percy Henry and Archie Roberts, both Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Citizens, worked as deckhands during World War II. They worked hard, in 12-hour shifts, packing wood and unloading freight.

First Nations people living along the Yukon River grew up learning how to read the river and its currents. When he was a young man, JJ Van Bibber provided valuable navigation help to Captain Marion of the steamer *Klondike*. After the ship left Dawson, bound for Alaska, the wide-open waters of the river were challenging to navigate. No buoy markers guided the way, unlike on the upper Yukon River from Whitehorse. Captain Marion trusted JJ's knowledge of the river's shifting eddies and sandbars. He would hand over the wheel when he needed a nap during the long journey:

"...[Y]ou had to know what you were doing. They used the steamer Klondike. I steered that one, I'm very proud to say." – JJ Van Bibber, Yukon News, October 7, 2005.



Martha Taylor (l) and Mary McLeod. (Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in photo)

Wood camps

Yukon River sternwheelers were powered by wood, and lots of it.

In 1916, the steamer Schwatka alone burned 2,181.75 cords of wood. The whole fleet burned thousands of cords each season. Woodcutting was a major industry along the length of the river.

Many First Nations families spent part of each year working in wood camps. They cut cord after cord of wood with handsaws and piled the wood beside the river to be loaded onto the boats during fueling stops, or floated them in rafts to Dawson City or other access points on the river. Families would often spend part of the year at a wood camp and the rest of the year on the land. Some would cut wood to supplement income from trapping.

Mary McLeod remembers life at a wood camp a few miles downriver from here:

"In the old days steamers ran every day down the river. [...] Steamers all used wood. The woodman got people to cut wood. Then they haul that wood up to town of Dawson and load on steamers. Lots of wood camps, up rivers, up creeks. Little Dave told my husband to look after wood camp at Eight Mile Creek, below Moosehide. It was maybe 1940s. We were there nine years. Lots of good berries there – blueberries, raspberries, cranberries, highbush berries, black currants. We have fish trap just up creek from wood camp. Lots of moose, caribou near there." - Mary McLeod



Ship shape

The set of ways and the shipyard facilities were built circa 1900 by the Canadian Development Company. In 1901, the British Yukon Navigation Co. (the river division of the White Pass & Yukon Route) bought their fleet of steamers and their facilities - including this shipyard. It was smaller and simpler than the large shipyards in Whitehorse. At the West Dawson Shipyard, boats were repaired and stored up on the ways over the winter. While river ice melted in the spring, the boats were prepared for the coming navigation season.

This shipyard was used until at least the 1920s. The four boats you can see today were put up on the ways between 1916 and 1924. This seasonal drydock became permanent storage and the boats have been here since. The Klondike Highway between Dawson City and Whitehorse was completed in 1953 and the growing road network replaced the river as the main transportation route of the territory. The last steamboat was retired in 1955 and the era of sternwheeler river travel was over.

The steamer *Evelyn/Norcom* sits behind the ways at Hootalinqua. Located on the Thirty Mile section of the Yukon River near Lake Labarge, Hootalinqua was another location on that stored and repaired steamboats. (MacBride Museum of Yukon History, 2011.7.30)



What's a ways?

Slipways or ways are large parallel timbers sloping down to the river, used to launch and haul in boats. While on the ways, boats were built, stored for the winter, or repaired. Yukon sternwheelers were regularly grounded or damaged by ice. To keep freight and people moving along the Yukon River and its tributaries, repair facilities were essential. The ways underneath the boats at the West Dawson Shipyard are no longer visible.



The site from the river in the 1950s. (Dawson City Museum, 2019.4.123)

Big boats

These four wooden-hulled steamboats (*Lightning*, *Seattle No. 3*, *Schwatka* and *Julia B.*) are larger than most early Yukon River sternwheelers. Shorter, smaller boats had a longer operating season. Bigger boats could carry more cargo and passengers, but they had a shorter season because they needed deeper water to travel safely. When changes in hull design allowed larger boats to draw a shallower draft (depth of the vessel below the waterline), boats of this size came to dominate Yukon River trade. Smaller boats fell out of use on the Yukon River as they couldn't compete with the profitability of larger vessels.

Three of these boats were built in the 1898 shipbuilding rush. Shipyards along the west coast of North America built more than 130 sternwheel steamers in a single year to meet the demand for transportation to the Klondike. The *Julia B.* was built later, in 1908.

Nautical archaeologists studying these boats have noted the wide range of construction techniques. Hull design, hogging systems, boiler types, and rudder and tiller systems show a wide range of approaches to engineering and design. Shipbuilders along the West Coast attempted to meet the unique challenges and hazards of Yukon River conditions while rushing to meet the sudden demand. They used what they'd learned from other river systems to inform their work. The boats here were some of the more successful attempts, and all remained in service for many years.

The four boats were used and repaired until they were too damaged or no longer needed. After retirement, they were valued for their parts. Equipment and planking were removed from these boats and used to repair and upgrade other boats.



The site in the 1950s. (Dawson City Museum, 2019.4.127)

WEST DAWSON SHIPYARD WALKING TOUR

We welcome you to
experience our history.
Please respect the privacy of
the nearby property owners.

Yukon River (Chu Kon' Dëk)



Seattle No.3 and Julia B. in
the 1950s. (Dawson City
Museum, 2019.4.124)



The site in 1966. (Carl
Skip Larsen, photo
courtesy of Dave
Barrett)





Yukon Archives, Kathleen Wheeler fonds, 89/52 #26

Lightning

The steamer *Lightning* was built in 1898 by BC Iron Works in Vancouver, British Columbia. This boat mostly transported passengers along the upper Yukon River between Dawson City and Whitehorse.

The *Lightning* was later owned by 'King of the Klondike' Joe Boyle and was used to haul coal from Coal Creek to Dawson City. In October 1914, it transported Boyle's Yukon contingent from Dawson to Whitehorse en route to Europe to fight in WWI.

The boat was retired by 1916, but its useful days weren't over: the *Lightning* was heavily salvaged after retirement. Much of the ship's structure – including the longitudinal bulkheads, central keelson and hull planking – were sawn out almost completely to be used in other boats.

Lightning on the ways in 1916. (Dawson City Museum, 2012.12.1.153)





Schwatka c. 1913. (Dawson City Museum, 1991.42.27)

Schwatka

The steamer *Schwatka* was built in Port Blakely, British Columbia circa 1898. It mostly worked the lower Yukon River, relaying freight between Tanana and St. Michael, Alaska, and occasionally traveled to Whitehorse.

It was built to be a freight boat for the Canadian Pacific Railway's all-Canadian Stikine route to the Klondike – which CPR abandoned soon after. The *Schwatka* was sold to a smaller transportation company and came north to work the Yukon River anyways, while most of the other Stikine route boats never made it to the Yukon.

Retired by 1923, the steering gear from the *Schwatka* was reused on the steamer *Klondike* in 1929. The *Schwatka*'s nearly intact paddlewheel measures 17 feet in diameter. Protected by the other boats, river ice has done less damage to this eye-catching feature.



Dawson City Museum, 1995.27.11

Seattle No. 3

The steamer Seattle No. 3 was built in 1898, prefabricated by the Moran Bros. in Seattle, Washington, then shipped to the Aleutian Islands in Alaska for assembly. From there, it sailed through the Bering Sea to the mouth of the Yukon River near St. Michael, Alaska. It was built with a strong, stout hull to survive the journey. This boat worked the lower Yukon River and Tanana River, towing barges and freighting.

In 1907, a deckhand was jailed for stealing 59 pounds of gold from the Seattle No. 3 while traveling to Dawson from Fairbanks. He deserted while the boat was at a woodpile overnight. The gold was later found at the bottom of the river!

The Seattle No. 3 was retired here by 1923. In 1927, the compound engines were removed and placed in the steamer Tutshi, which operated on Tagish Lake.



Dawson City Museum, 1998.22.618

Julia B.

The steamer *Julia B.* was built in 1908 in Ballard, Washington. The boat was named for Julia Burrichter, the wife of Frank Burrichter, owner of the Yukon Transportation and Trading Company – and the boat's original owners.

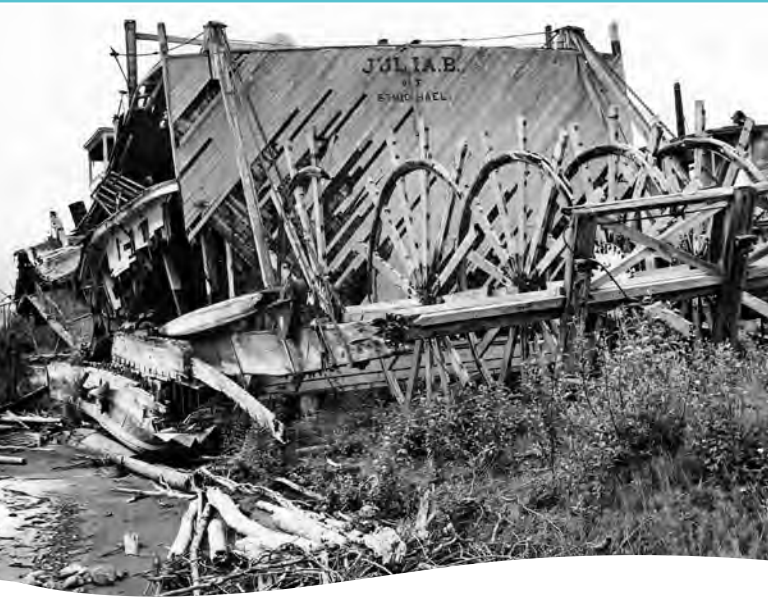
The *Julia B.* was built as a freight boat and worked the lower Yukon River between St. Michael and Fairbanks, Alaska. A normal load was 1,600 tons of cargo and four barges, pushed in front and alongside. As a large cargo boat, the *Julia B.* was prone to groundings in shallow waters. She often operated with a smaller sternwheeler to help pull her free when stuck.

This boat was retired by 1924. In 1929, her dynamo (steam-driven electrical generator) and winch were removed and installed in the steamer *Klondike*. The boat's side was sheared off by river ice decades ago, leaving the two locomotive-style horizontal fire tube boilers clearly visible today. The boat's hog chains drape above the boat – these would once have been carefully adjusted for tension. Hog chains (actually thin iron rods) transfer weight from the heavy bow and stern (which held the heavy boilers and sternwheel) to the centre, which had the tendency to “hog” or bow upwards in the middle. This system was important for keeping the hull shape flat, allowing flat-bottomed wooden-hulled river boats like the *Julia B.* to operate in shallow water.



“That’s my steamboat, the Julia B.” - Julia Morberg

This polaroid photo belonged to Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in Elder Julia Morberg, whose family had their fish camp right above the *Julia B.* (Tr’ondek Hwech'in Archives, Julia Morberg Collection)



Julia B. in 1970. (Yukon Archives, Richard Harrington fonds, 79/27, #443. Photographer Richard Harrington)

Why are they falling apart?

The boats at the West Dawson Shipyard show the clear record of the decades that have passed since they carried people and goods along the Yukon River. Parts were salvaged by their owners to repair and improve other boats. River ice, snow load and flooding have crushed and scraped their hulls. Exposure to the elements has deteriorated the wood and metal.

High water levels on the Yukon River have broken records in recent years, and the impacts of climate change mean we will likely see more flooding at this site. Because the hulls become waterlogged in the summer and frozen in the winter, stabilization of the ships is impractical.

Research, archaeological work and documentation of these boats continue, but natural processes of decay are being allowed to run their course. Please exercise care and respect as you visit this heritage reserve.

To experience what these vessels were like when operational, two historic Yukon River sternwheelers, the S.S. Keno National Historic Site in Dawson and the S.S. Klondike National Historic Site in Whitehorse, have been restored by Parks Canada and are open for public visitation.



Historic Sites



Julia B. in 1965. (Dawson City Museum, 2013.1.17.31)

“Across the river the Julia B., one of the three vessels in the sternwheeler graveyard, has been sheared completely in half. Bits and pieces can be seen scattered along the riverbank, and the interior of the boat, once the scene of many luxurious gatherings, is packed solid with river ice left behind by the receding waters.” (Whitehorse Star, May 25 1979)

Schwatka in 1971. (Yukon Archives, Richard Harrington fonds, 79/27, #430. Photographer Richard Harrington)





This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Caring for our history

- The West Dawson Shipyard Heritage Reserve is located on the Traditional Territory of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in. The site is surrounded by private Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Settlement Land. Respect the privacy of property owners and do not trespass on the wooded areas around the site.
- This site is protected under the Historic Resources Act. Do not enter the boats or climb on them. Do not disturb or remove artifacts and leave the site and the boats as you found them.
- Do not light campfires in this area.
- Take pictures and enjoy your visit.



Special thanks to Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Heritage, and Tom Harvey.

For additional information, please contact the Government of Yukon Cultural Services Branch at 867-667-3458.

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