

## 2. Dawson City and the Conservation of its Heritage Resources

### 2.1 Overview History of Dawson



Part of the settlement at Tr'ochëk, 1895. (Coutts Collection, Yukon Archives, PHO 95; from Dobrowolsky and Hammer, *Tr'ochëk*)

On 17 August 1896, American-born prospector George Washington Carmack, his Tagish wife, Kate Carmack, and their two Tagish partners, Skookum Jim and Dawson Charlie, found gold – ‘thick between the flaky slabs, like cheese sandwiches’ – in the rocky bed of Rabbit Creek, near where the Klondike River flows into the Yukon River. The four renamed it Bonanza Creek, staked their claims, and before long word was out. The world’s greatest gold rush had begun. In 1897 prospectors from near and far made the long and difficult trip to here and created an instant city at the confluence of the

two rivers. Joseph Ladue established the town on a flat moose pasture, which he named Dawson City. The flats had been traditional hunting lands of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in. Their fishing camp of Tr’ochëk, just south of the Klondike River, was also overrun by the miners. Chief Isaac, the leader of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, decided to move about 5 kilometres down the Yukon River to the relatively peaceful site at Moosehide, and the way was left clear for new development.<sup>8</sup>

Some 30,000 people from Canada, the U.S., and around the world reached the Klondike goldfields by the late summer of 1898. The prospectors focussed on the rich placers of Bonanza and Eldorado Creeks. They and the other newcomers settled in and around Dawson City, making Dawson the largest centre west of Winnipeg. The young boom town quickly became a full-service mining community, with a robust commercial, entertainment, religious, transportation, and administrative infrastructure. Dawson was also an incredibly well photographed community. The new arrivals came with their simple and portable cameras from Kodak, which had been introduced in 1888.<sup>9</sup>

The federal government was well prepared for these events. A detachment of the North-West Mounted Police had come to nearby Forty Mile in 1895. When the rush began, the police insisted that every prospector arriving from Skagway, Alaska, have money and supplies to last not less than six months – which meant hauling a ton of goods over the tortuous Chilkoot Pass. Dawson City was surveyed in 1897-98 by James Gibbon,

8 The historical material has been excerpted principally from Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, *Dawson City Conservation Study*, vol 4, by Margaret Carter; Parks Canada, *Dawson Historical Complex: Management Plan*, pp. 3-4; Helene Dobrowolsky, *Hammerstones*; and Harold Kalman, *A History of Canadian Architecture*, vol. 2, pp. 691-6. Full references to these and other sources are provided in Appendix 8.

9 See <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/kodk/hd-kodk.htm>. Reference kindly provided by Barbara Hogan.



View of Dawson City from the Dome, July 1902. (National Archives of Canada, C6366; from IAND, *Dawson City*)

D.L.S., and laid out in the familiar British colonial gridiron pattern. A large civil service came to Dawson to register the claims and carry out other administrative functions. Before the century was over, Dawson's streets were lined with log and wood-frame business establishments, houses, churches, and public buildings. Most were designed in the frontier vernacular of the day. Some – particularly the government buildings designed from 1899 by the Department of Public Works' resident architect, Thomas W. Fuller – were architectural symbols of political authority, designed in a simplified Palladian-Georgian vocabulary.



Old Territorial Administration Building, now the Dawson Museum, 2007, a Palladian-Georgian design that symbolized the authority of Government. (Photo: H. Kalman)



Queen Street, looking west to the Yukon River, 1904, showing the vernacular commercial buildings that filled downtown. (National Archives of Canada, C14546; from Kalman, *History of Canadian Architecture*)

The vernacular buildings, public buildings, and landscapes of the Dawson City of 1900-10, many of which survive to this day, stand as marvellous reminders of the Klondike Gold Rush, an event of great international significance. Enhancing and commemorating the Gold Rush Dawson has been the focus of conservation efforts for the past half century.

Dawson did not, however, begin with the Gold Rush. The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in people lived and hunted in and around Tr'ochëk as part of their seasonal rounds, and this area forms an important portion of their traditional territory. Severely compromised by mining activity in the early 1990s, Tr'ochëk was purchased by the federal government in 1997 as part of the *Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Final Agreement*. The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in are currently planning for the future of the old camp<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> *Tr'ondëk Management Plan*, Draft, 2007.

Nor did Dawson end with the Gold Rush. As the placer gold accessible to miners with a spade and pan became exhausted, new mechanized forms of mining dug deeper into the creek gravels. Steam shovels and other machines were overtaken by the massive dredge. The first dredge was brought to the area in 1905, and by the outbreak of World War I a dozen of them were working the creeks. The Yukon Consolidated Gold Corporation (YCGC), which in 1923 absorbed a number of other operators, dredged the area until 1966. Its Dredge No. 4 has been preserved by Parks Canada on Bonanza Creek as a national historic site.<sup>11</sup>



This house on Second Avenue was built in the 1920s by the Yukon Consolidated Gold Corporation. It tells an important part of the Dawson Story. (Photo: H. Kalman)



Ruby's Place and The Odd Fellows' Hall are seen in the aftermath of the 1979 flood. With the flood waters going all the way up to 6th Avenue, this section of 2nd Avenue would have been under a considerable amount of water. (Photo: Lambert Curzon, courtesy of Jay Armitage)

The population of Dawson dwindled during the YCGC era, since a single dredge could do the work of several hundred men. Nevertheless, gold remained the mainstay of the economy. Dawson consolidated itself as the administrative service centre for the region. Many Gold Rush-era buildings became derelict and new types of architecture took their place, creating a landscape in which one could read the successive generations of living and working in Dawson.

The forces of nature did more damage in a few days than attrition had done in decades, as the Flood of 1979 took a heavy toll on the City's old buildings.<sup>12</sup> The aftermath of the flood saw the construction of a large, new dike along the Klondike and Yukon River shorelines. The dike has prevented further floods, but it has also obstructed views of and access to the rivers, which have played so important a role in Dawson's existence over the years.

Tourism began to develop after the Second World War, and the Klondike Visitors' Association was formed in the early 1950s to bolster the industry. The KVA and the federal government together recognized the value of Dawson's heritage to attract tourism, which would stimulate an increasingly stagnant economy. The story of heritage conservation in the service of making Dawson a tourism destination is related in the next section.

<sup>11</sup> Parks Canada, *Dredge No. 4: Management Plan*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Jay Armitage and Sue Parsons, *The Dawson City Flood of 1979*.

## 2.2 Heritage Conservation in Dawson

The Government of Canada began to take an interest in Dawson City in the 1950s. Jean Lesage, Minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources in the St. Laurent government, made northern development a priority and in 1956 asked the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) to consider ways in which historic sites could be established in the North.<sup>13</sup>

Nothing happened until April 1959, when Prime Minister John Diefenbaker visited Dawson and raised the possibility of developing the town as a historic tourist attraction, as part of his northern vision. Minister Alvin Hamilton expressed ‘concern about restraining the encroachment of commercialism upon truly historic features’ and in November 1959 the HSMBC recommended ‘that Dawson be regarded as a “historical complex” of national importance and studied as such.’<sup>14</sup> Dawson’s heritage value was perceived from the start as an integral ensemble of historic resources.



The Palace Grand Theatre, looking east on King Street, 2007.  
(Photo: H. Kalman)

With the encouragement of the federal government, the Dawson Festival Foundation was organized to produce a Gold Rush Festival in 1962. It was intended to use the old auditorium (known as the Auditorium Theatre or Nugget Hall) as the primary venue. However, officials decided that it would be cheaper and faster to demolish the old building and replace it with a modern replica. This was the reconstructed Palace Grand Theatre, the first conservation intervention in Dawson.

In preparation for the Festival, J.R. Lotz, a Community Planning Officer with the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources, wrote an extensive and enlightened report arguing for ‘the need to preserve the buildings of Dawson City if that city is to remain a tourist attraction.’<sup>15</sup> Many of the objectives for which Lotz argued would become Parks Canada and municipal policy over the years.

Unfortunately, historian James Taylor writes, ‘the Dawson Festival was a failure. The place was just too remote, the attractions too limited, and the tourist services too primitive for it to succeed.’<sup>16</sup> The Klondike Visitors’ Association rented the sternwheeler *S.S. Keno* and the Palace Grand from the government, but without success.

13 C.J. Taylor, *Negotiating the Past*, p. 171. The Historic Sites Division, Parks Branch, Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources was a predecessor of Parks Canada.

14 Parks Canada, *Dawson Historical Complex NHS Management Plan*, Appendix 4, p. 38.

15 J.R. Lotz, *Dawson City, Yukon Territory*, p. 52. A copy is in the Parks Canada library in Dawson.

16 Taylor, *Negotiating the Past*, p. 174.

The HSMBC met in Dawson in June 1967 to attempt to salvage the vision. It recommended the acquisition of a number of buildings, the protection of others, and the institution of a commemorative program. It recommended 'that the commemorative undertaking at Dawson should deal with the full extent of the Gold Rush and its impact on Canadian history.'<sup>17</sup> The federal government geared up for a major intervention in Dawson, and 'by the 1970s it was the leading employer in the town and the mainstay of the area's tourist industry.'<sup>18</sup>

In 1974 the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, which had succeeded Northern Affairs and National Resources, issued a massive four-volume report that outlined a comprehensive, long-term program of conservation in Dawson.<sup>19</sup> This has remained a blueprint for policy and physical development in the generation since then by Parks Canada, successor to DINA as the government's conservation agency. Work over the years has included research, planning, property and artifact acquisitions, restorations, and interpretation. Parks Canada saw much of its early, hard work destroyed in the Flood of 1979, and was a leading voice in calling for a new, protective dike.

Other studies with a strong conservation message followed. Synergy West Ltd. prepared a Dawson community plan for the territorial and municipal governments in 1975. The chapter on the 'Restoration of an Historical Community' stated that 'the second rush is approaching, this time in the guise of tourism ... [and] the manner in which Dawson responds will dictate her measure of success and her life expectancy.' It recommended a community development approach to heritage conservation, emphasizing historic streetscapes over individual sites, with collaborative management and funding contributions by the three levels of government and the private sector.<sup>20</sup> Conservation was also seen as being important in the Dawson City Official Community Plan prepared in 1983 by Marshall Macklin Monaghan Limited.<sup>21</sup>

Parks Canada's properties in the Dawson townsite are collectively known as Dawson Historical Complex National Historic Site of Canada.<sup>22</sup> The agency also owns and manages the *S.S. Keno* National Historic Site, a riverboat that operated between Stewart City and Mayo Landing; and Dredge No. 4 National Historic Site, one of the largest of the YCGC's dredges.

The City of Dawson's participation in the conservation of the historic townsite has grown over the years. In 1977 the City began to control development in order to maintain the Gold Rush character of its buildings, with the passing of Bylaw #203, a new Zoning



Dredge No. 4 National Historic Site, 2007. (Photo: H. Kalman)

17 Parks Canada, *Management Plan*, Appendix 4, p. 38.

18 Taylor, *Negotiating the Past*, p. 188.

19 Indian and Northern Affairs, *Dawson City Conservation Study*.

20 Synergy West Ltd., *A Community Plan for Dawson City*.

21 We have not yet had an opportunity to consult this report.

22 The properties were previously called Klondike National Historic Sites.

Bylaw. This and subsequent municipal bylaws are listed and described in Appendix 2. The City's Planning Board is responsible for reviewing development applications and determining whether they conform to the desired character. The system works, but imperfectly, as is discussed in Section 1.1. The present Heritage Management Plan is a municipal government initiative intended to rectify the problems with the current regulations and processes.

The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in is a key partner in this process. The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in achieved self-government in 1998, establishing the terms by which many aspects of land management – e.g., heritage management, fish and wildlife management, and forestry – will be carried out jointly by the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and other levels of government. *The Self-Government Agreement* also provides the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in with the ability to determine the future of its settlement lands, some of which fall within the Dawson city limits.

Since the City of Dawson falls, in turn, within the traditional territory of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, the First Nation is an active player in heritage conservation. The *Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Final Agreement* ensures that the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in participate in the management of heritage sites pertaining to their culture anywhere within their traditional territory, and that they must be consulted on legislation that pertains to heritage resources.

Interviews with the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in done for this plan indicate that their focus is on the region's natural and cultural heritage and on the spirit of the place, rather than on the built heritage. The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in are particularly interested in preserving visual and physical connections between places which their people value – connections to the rivers (which were compromised by the dike), between their traditional use sites and camps, and to valued places such as the Slide and the Dawson-to-Moosehide trail. Tr'ondëk was designated a National Historic Site by the Government of Canada in 2002.

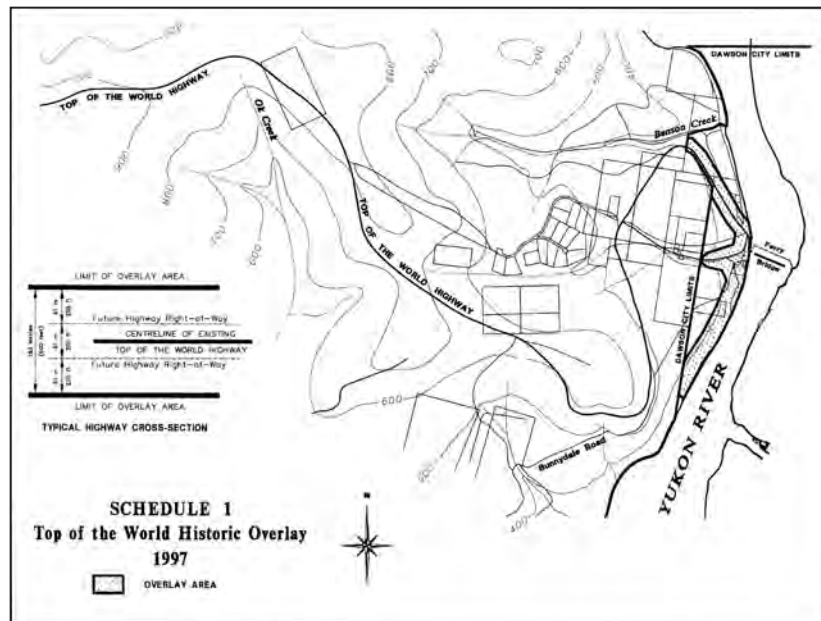
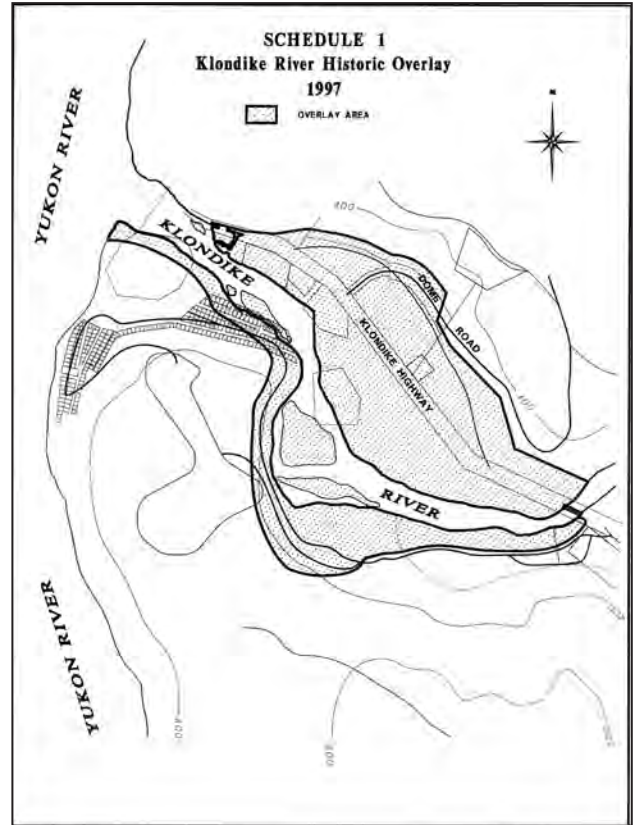
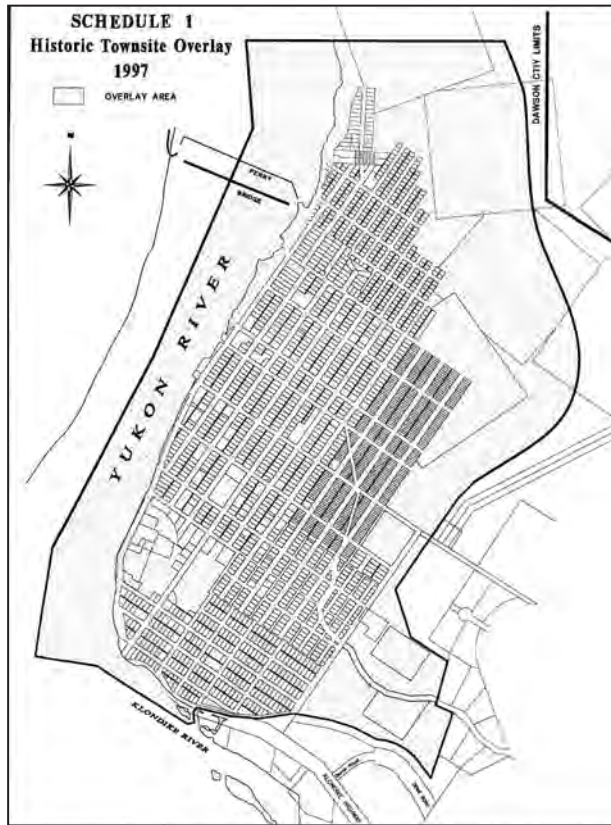
The present Heritage Management Plan attempts to accommodate the various perspectives of the Dawson community.

### ***2.3 The Current Policy Framework***

The Heritage Management Plan is intended to be compatible with current policy documents of all levels of government. These include:

#### **Over-arching Statutes, Regulations, Policies, and Programs**

- Municipal Bylaws and Policies
  - Various municipal policies, such as the statements that Dawson should be a compact town and should provide seasonal accommodation
  - Zoning and Historical Control Bylaw
  - Property Maintenance and Nuisance Abatement Bylaw
    - ◊ Including amendment (Bylaw 08-04)



The Zoning and Historical Control Bylaw establishes three 'historic overlays' or control districts (City of Dawson)

- Official Community Plan
- Design Guidelines for Historic Dawson (Parks Canada, c. 1980)
- Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Agreements
  - Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Final Agreement
    - ◊ Especially Chapter 13, Heritage Resources
  - Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Self-Government Agreement
- Yukon Statutes and Programs
  - Yukon Historic Resources Act
  - Yukon Municipal Act
  - Yukon Historic Sites Inventory
  - Yukon Register of Historic Places
- Parks Canada Policy
  - Cultural Resource Management Policy
  - Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada
  - Management Plans for the Dawson Historical Complex National Historic Site
  - World Heritage Site draft nomination
- Integrated Community Sustainability Plan
  - Community Vision

A comprehensive list and discussion of relevant past and present statutes, policies, bylaws, and management plans is contained in Appendix 2.