Why Athabasca?

How did technological development and economic activity play into the unique feature of the long "landing" at the elbow of the Athabasca River? What brought homesteaders and developers to Athabasca? Why did members of the Board of Trade feel justified in describing Athabasca Landing as "The Last Great West" and the "Gateway to the North?" Was the bypassing of the main line of the Canadian Northern Railway the death knell to the boom of 1912–1914? In a compelling survey on the occasion of its centennial, historian Greg Johnson examines many long-held assumptions about the origins of the Town of Athabasca.

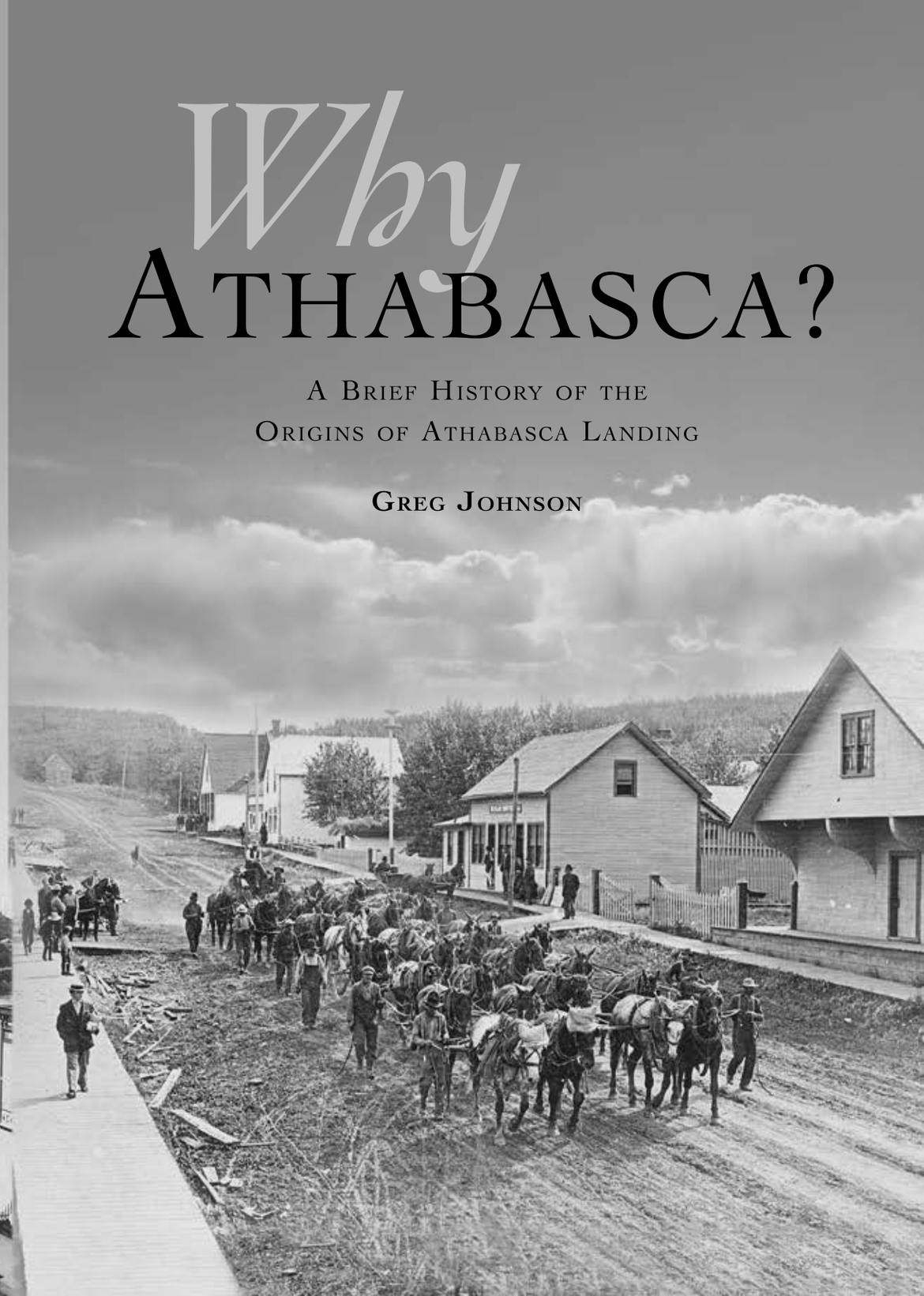
Athabasca Heritage Society

Front cover photo: Arrival of a marine boiler, c. 1911. The photograph was taken from the first balcony of the original Grand Union Hotel. Athabasca Archives, *775*.
Back cover photo: Athabasca Landing photographed from the roof of the new Imperial Bank of Commerce which was under construction. The new HBC store was being built across Morgan (49th) Avenue, c. 1913. Athabasca Archives, *4774*.

Why Athabasca?

A Brief History of the Origins of Athabasca Landing

Greg Johnson



Preface and Acknowledgements

Although this short history of the origins of the Town of Athabasca, Alberta appears on the occasion of the Town's centenary, I want to make it clear that it is not an exercise in boosterism. All too often one reads local histories that are little more than acts of self-congratulation suitably spiced with statements such as "this place is absolutely unique" or "this place was the first to do so and so." What I am attempting to do here is to take a serious look at the question of why Athabasca was established, especially in the larger context of national and even international developments. Athabasca was "unique" to the extent that it was favoured by geography and possessed the peculiar feature of the long "landing" beside the Athabasca River. Yet, in and of itself, the "unique" geographical setting and natural landing tell us little about the larger reasons why people were attracted to the area or why they built a town. Some authors

South shore of Athabasca River, 1879. Library and Archives Canada, PA-051139.

have tried to argue that Athabasca and the landing area were part of an elaborate trail system which spanned hundreds if not thousands of years, the implication being that the formation of the town was the outcome of natural historical and geographical forces.[1] That is an interesting idea but it is not supported by the archaeological evi-

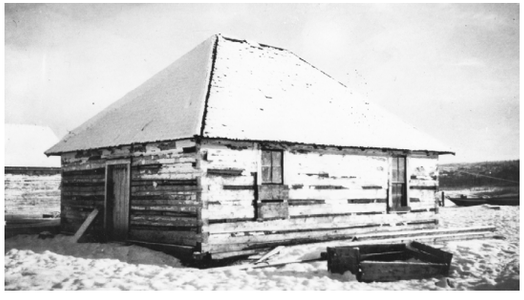
dence. There were some good reasons why Athabasca was not the scene of much human activity before the latter half of the nineteenth century, the most important being that people really had no reason to go to the area. It was not a rich source of food or other desirable commodity and it does not appear to have been part of any major transportation network. The key trail system lay to the north and to the east, in Calling Lake and Lac La Biche. Those areas were abundant sources of food, and the archaeological and early historical evidence for human occupation at Calling Lake and Lac La Biche is conclusive.[2] So, geography alone is not enough to account for the establishment of Athabasca. But, when the geographical feature of the landing is placed in the context of a particular type of technology and economic activity at a particular point in history, the arrival of Europeans at what was often called "The Elbow of the Athabasca" makes more sense.

Men loading Hudson's Bay Company scows at Athabasca Landing, n.d. Athabasca Archives, 16722.

That story is part of a much larger tale of European expansion into the Northwest which was initially driven to a significant extent

by the fur trade. Indeed, the fur trade and especially economic spinoffs like transportation played an important role in early economic development at Athabasca. Yet, the fur trade can only partly account for the existence of the Town of Athabasca. The Hudson's Bay Company cut the first Landing Trail to Edmonton in 1875 and 1876 and built the first documented structure at Athabasca in 1877. For the next twenty years the Landing was often a beehive of activity during spring and summer but despite claims to being "The Gateway to the North" the population of Athabasca in 1897 was reported to be 10 persons of European origin![3] More than a decade later, in the 1911 Census of the Prairie Provinces, the population of the Landing officially stood at 227 persons, with another 553 persons living in what could be roughly considered the present day County of Athabasca.[4] Then a big economic boom took over and by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 the population peaked at more than 2,000 and the town experienced a tremendous growth spurt. Neither the fur trade nor transportation nor any notions of Athabasca as "The Gateway to the North" can adequately explain that boom. Rather, it must be understood as part of a much larger Anglo-dominated colonial settler revolution that was international in scope (the term "Anglo" here is used in its widest definition to include English, Irish, Scots, Welsh and even Americans). In that regard the terms "Last Best West" or "Last Great West" associated with the colonial settler boom in Western Canada and the mentality behind that boom are very important factors in understanding the phase of development that led to the actual building of the town. In this regard the idea of Athabasca as a transhipment point and gateway to the North fanned the flames of the boom mentality far more than it caused the town to seemingly spring from nowhere. I would go so far as to contend that many of those settlers and most certainly the business community had a reasonably clear idea about what they wanted to

accomplish and their vision was much larger than a small town in north central Alberta.



Original Hudson's Bay Company post, n.d. RCMP Archives.

A few years ago the Town Archivist, Marilyn Mol, and I undertook a complete rewrite of the *Athabasca Historical Walking Tour* booklet. In the course of doing background research on the Brick School, one of the more imposing buildings in the old downtown section of Athabasca, we had occasion to read an article Marian Little (née Gill), the first principal of the school, wrote in 1937. She recalled that during the course of deliberations over building materials the members of the School Board declared: "What is needed up here is a symbol of the permanence of British institutions."[5] The Brick School was built in 1913 and 1914 at the height of the colonial settler boom in Athabasca and it is clear from Little's recollection that the school was intended to be more than just a school. It was meant to be a symbol of the culture and the power of the British Empire. Ever since I read that remark about the symbolic importance of the school I have been haunted by it in a peculiar way and this short pamphlet represents the beginning of an attempt to try and get at a deeper meaning and ultimately a more comprehensive explanation of the making of places like Athabasca.

Athabasca Public School. Athabasca Archives, 16773.

Anyone who embarks upon a study of the history of Athabasca or Northern Alberta for that matter must acknowledge the pioneering work that David Gregory and his team of researchers completed for the seventy-fifth anniversary of Athabasca and which was published under the title *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*.[6] Although I come at things from a slightly different angle than Dr. Gregory, I have drawn both on his book and on the research, which is housed at the Alice B. Donahue Library and Archives. For a small town Athabasca has an impressive collection of material managed by the incredibly able Town Archivist Marilyn Mol and I would like to thank her for sharing her considerable knowledge of local history and for assisting in pulling together material for this short history. Extremely generous assistance was provided by Margaret Anderson, who did the layout. I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues David Gregory, Mike Gismondi, John Ollerenshaw and Bob Tannas for reading the manuscript and offering up suggestions.

Although it would have been nice to produce a longer work covering more of the history of Athabasca, I was working under some pretty tight time constraints. I researched and wrote most of this brief history in my spare time. However modest the present offering, it is my birthday present to the Town of Athabasca on the occasion of its centennial.

Why Athabasca?

On October 19, 1911 the Province of Alberta issued a Proclamation that had special significance for a place fur traders and explorers once called "The Elbow" of the Athabasca. As if the Province was bestowing a gift, the Proclamation began:

To whom these presents shall come

GREETING……..

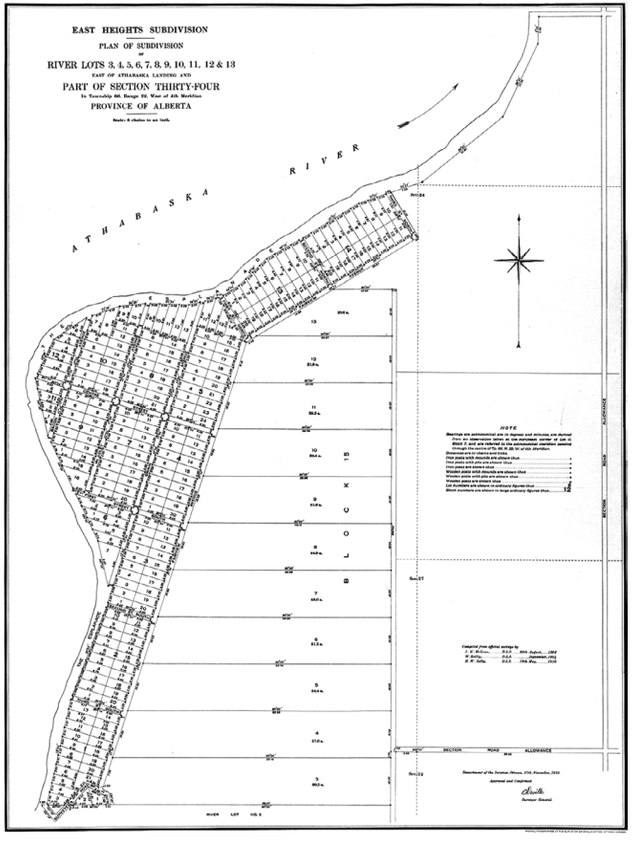
{ WHEREAS satisfactory proof having been
{furnished that the preliminary acts and requirements
{requisite to the erection of the hereinafter described
{area into a Town as prescribed by the Municipal
{Amendment Ordinance, 1901, having been complied with

NOW KNOW YE that by and with the advice of the Executive Council for the Province of Alberta, I do by this My Proclamation, declare that on, from and after the NINETEENTH day of September, 1911, the said area be erected into a Town Municipality to be known as

THE TOWN OF ATHABASCA LANDING

And so, with the stroke of his pen, George Hedley Vicars Bulyea, the first Lieutenant-Governor of Alberta, fulfilled at least some of the hopes and aspirations of those who had come to stake their future in Township Sixty-six, in Range Twenty-Two, West of the Fourth Meridian.[7] But the proclamation was much more than the mere naming of a town. In important respects it symbolized Athabasca's transition from a frontier society largely based on the fur trade to a largely British based colonial settler society based on agriculture and industry. Changes to the very nature of the area that was to make up the town and surrounding region partly reflected that transition. Athabasca Landing was to consist of River Lots 1, 2, and 3 West, River Lots 1 and 2 East; Sections

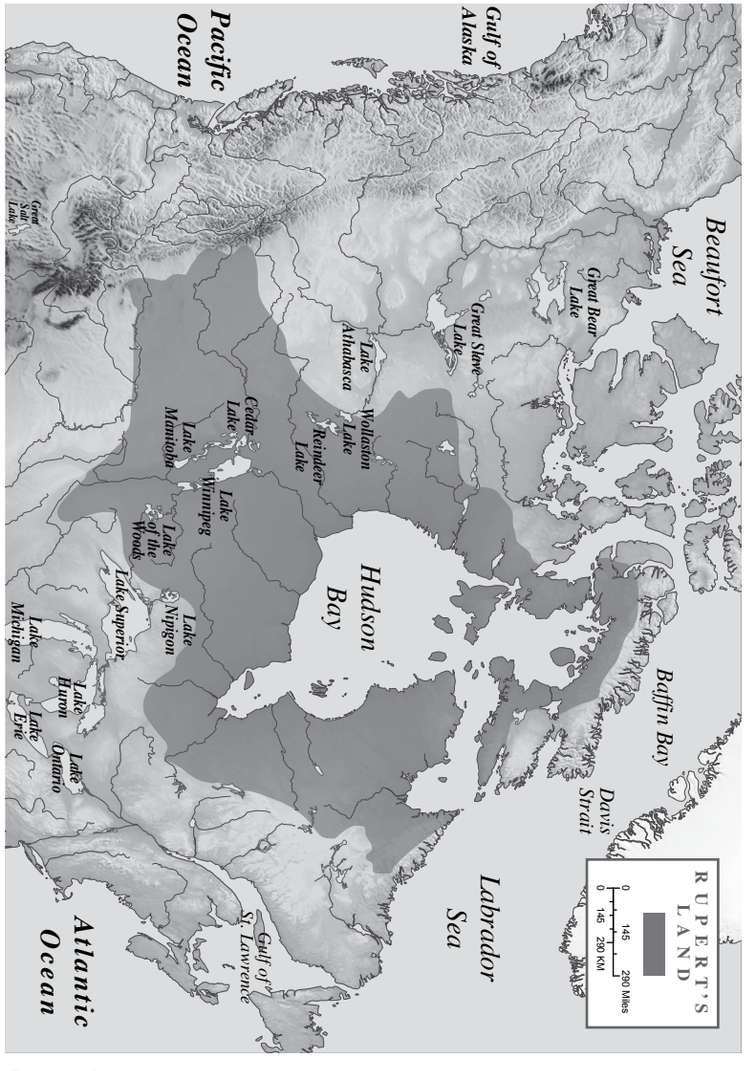
20 and 21 on the North Side of the Athabasca River, Sections 16, 17, 20, and 21 on the south side of the river, and the Hudson's Bay Company Reserve.



East Heights subdivision. Plan of subdivision of river lots 3, 4...13 east of Athabaska landing and part of section thirty-four in Township GG, Range 22, West of 4th Meridian; Province of Alberta. Compiled from official surveys by J.K. McLean, D.L.S. 20th August 1898. W. Reilly, D.L.S. September, 1904. H.Q. Selby, D.L.S. 12th May 1910. Department of the Interior, Ottawa, 17th November, 1910. Library and Archives Canada, NMC-43566.

"River Lots" were long narrow strips of land that ran back from the river in the same way land had been laid out for the habitants along the St. Lawrence River during the frontier era in New France. "Sections" were parcels of land surveyed in square grids; each section being one square mile or 640 acres. It was a very different pattern of land development which essentially spelled the end of the frontier as large tracts of common property became private property. The presence of the Hudson's Bay Company Reserve might first seem an anomaly considering that the Company once oversaw an enormous fur trade empire and was generally against settlement.[8] That, too, was a sign of changing times because by the latter part of the nineteenth century it seemed like the writing was on the wall for the fur trade. In 1888 the Company bought a section of land bordering the Athabasca River with an eye toward potential future development; though many HBC officials wanted to operate as if they still had a monopoly on trade.[9] Nonetheless, it is one of those strange ironies of history that the company, which had been so opposed to settlement in the west, came to own a piece of prime real estate in what would become the core of the Town of Athabasca.

The Hudson's Bay Company—or HBC for short—played an important but generally indirect role in shaping the history of the Town of Athabasca. Established by Royal Charter in 1670 as "The Company of Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson's Bay," the HBC was a joint stock merchandising company granted exclusive trading rights over the Hudson Bay watershed. The territory was named "Rupert's Land" in honour of Prince Rupert of the Rhine, a nephew of King Charles I of England and a major investor in the HBC. It was a massive area, about one-third the size of present day Canada. Despite having such control the HBC spent much of its first century "asleep by the frozen sea," as one critic put in 1749.[10]

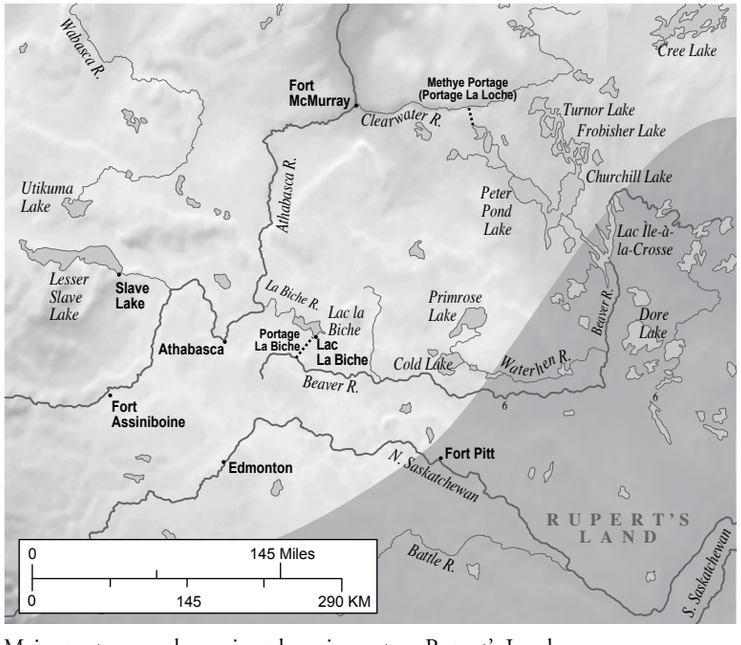


Rupert's Land.

The Company set up a number of trading posts called "Factories" along Hudson Bay and waited for First Nations peoples to come to the posts to trade furs for European goods. Such a strategy avoided the costs and the dangers of travelling inland to trade for fur and the Company earned enough to pay a handsome ten per cent dividend to shareholders.[11] But there was competition, from French traders until the Conquest of 1759, when British forces defeated the French on the Plains of Abraham in present day Quebec City; and then from what HBC personnel called "Pedlars" and "Licentious Fanaticks," derogatory terms used to describe the St. Lawrence traders who moved in to fill the vacuum left in the aftermath of the Conquest.[12] The "Fanaticks" were mostly Highland Scots, English and American traders who began to move inland to intercept First Nations peoples travelling to Hudson Bay. The new Pedlars from Quebec were aggressive and successful and by the early 1770s they were presenting a serious threat to the HBC. The Company responded in 1774 by establishing Cumberland House, an inland trading post located at the southeast corner of Cumberland Lake on the Saskatchewan River system about 90 km west of present day The Pas, Manitoba. This move on the part of the Hudson's Bay Company triggered what the great fur trade historian E.E. Rich called "The Invasion of Athabasca."[13]

It was not an invasion in the sense that massive numbers of Europeans began moving into what the French called *pays d'en haut*, meaning "up country." Nonetheless, Hudson's Bay Company and St Lawrence traders began leapfrogging each other into the Northwest, establishing some eighty-nine new posts in fur trade country between 1774 and 1789.[14] A real turning point came in 1778 when First Nations people guided Peter Pond, a Yankee trader from Connecticut, over the Methye Portage. Located in present day northern Saskatchewan, the Methye Portage was the longest and one of the most ardu-

ous portages in the western Canadian fur trade. This 20km portage took Pond from the north end of Lac La Loche to the Clearwater River. From there he travelled down the Clearwater to the Athabasca River. The confluence of the two rivers is the site of present day Fort McMurray. He wintered on the Athabasca River, probably about 70km south of Lake Athabasca and showed up at Cumberland House in early July 1779 with a massive load of very high quality beaver pelts.[15] More importantly, the region from which Pond acquired those beaver pelts was technically outside the domain of the Hudson's Bay Company. The Clearwater and Athabasca Rivers were not part of the Hudson Bay watershed so under the terms of the Royal Charter the HBC did not have exclusive trading rights there.



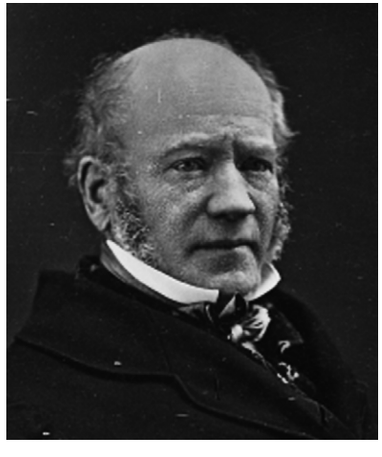
Major portages and carrying places in western Rupert's Land.

Shortly after his trip to the Athabasca, Pond became a shareholder in the famed North West Company and fur traders began moving into Athabasca country in earnest. In the fall of 1798 the great geographer, map maker and fur trader-explorer David Thompson, who had defected from the HBC to the North West Company, reached Lac La Biche, about 100km east of present day Athabasca and established Red Deers Lake House. The following spring he began a circle tour that took him as far west as the Lesser Slave River and then down the Athabasca River, past a geographical quirk explorers and traders began calling "The Elbow" of the Athabasca River.[16] Peter Fiddler of the HBC was hot on Thompson's trail, establishing rival posts at Lac La Biche in 1799 and on Lesser Slave Lake in 1800. By the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century Thompson had reached the Rocky Mountains and in 1811 he made it over the mountains to the mouth of the Columbia River near present day Astoria, Oregon. The upshot of this activity was the emergence of a society which was beginning to experience the effects of the complex interplay between exploration, trade rivalry, changes in transportation technology and the introduction of European style agricultural settlement into Western Canada. The interaction of those forces often escalated into violence and even bloodshed, as it did in June 1816 during the so-called Seven Oaks Incident that left twenty-one settlers dead after a confrontation between Métis, who were led by Cuthbert Grant of the North West Company, and Red River settlers and Hudson's Bay Company personnel near present day Winnipeg, Manitoba. The Seven Oaks Incident—"massacre" to the European settlers; *la Victoire de la Grenouillière* for Métis—was one of the most blatant examples of how far the fur trade rivalry had gone.[17] Hudson's Bay Company traders remained determined to destroy the "Nor'Westers," going so far as to arrest seven wintering North West Company partners as they travelled inland in 1819.

George Back, 1796–1878. Hudson's Bay Company and Northwest Company Forts at Île-à-la-Crosse, 1820. Library and Archives Canada, C-141430.

The rivalry came to an end when the two fur trade companies "merged" in 1821. In reality it was more like a hostile takeover on the part of the Hudson's Bay Company that was sanctioned by the British Parliament. The North West Company disappeared and an Act of the British Parliament extended the Hudson's Bay Company's Royal Licence and trade monopoly to the Arctic Ocean in the north and the Pacific Ocean in the west for twenty-one years.[18] That extension gave the HBC economic control over an area that represented about one twelfth of the Earth's land mass.

Although the "merger" solved the trade rivalry and accompanying bouts of bloodshed in immediate terms there were still outstanding issues fur traders had to confront. One of the more important matters was transportation. Finding an easy and efficient way into Athabasca country was a real problem. At the time of the merger in 1821 there were four primary routes into what was considered Athabasca country. One was the Wollaston Lake Portage, the most northerly route situated in present day north eastern Saskatchewan. The second was the Methye Portage that Peter Pond crossed in 1778. The third was Portage La Biche, which ran from the Beaver River to Lac La Biche. It was the route David Thompson took in 1798 and which became part of the first Canadian transcontinental route. A fourth route lay along the North Saskatchewan River, which traders and explorers could use to access the lower reaches of Athabasca country. Each one of these routes posed problems. Wollaston Lake was suited only for northern travel. The 20 km Methye Portage was long and arduous. The route along the North Saskatchewan River was dangerous because the river functioned as a line of demarcation between the Cree, who tended to control the north side of the river, and the Blackfoot, who controlled the south. The region between Fort Edmonton and Fort Pitt (located in present day Saskatchewan just east of the Alberta-Saskatchewan border) was often the scene of raiding and warfare between Cree and Blackfoot peoples.[19] The Portage La Biche route was also difficult. The Beaver River meandered all over the place and water levels were often so low that travellers and traders frequently had to drag the canoes through the river. In 1824 HBC Governor George Simpson—the "Birchbark Napoleon"—ordered that Portage La Biche be abandoned in favour of an overland trail from Fort Edmonton to Fort Assiniboine, located on the Athabasca River about 130 km northwest of Edmonton.[20]



George Simpson, (1787–September 7, 1860) c. 1850. McCord Museum, I-78494.0.

The abandonment of Portage La Biche left a trade as well as a power vacuum along the Athabasca River between the "Elbow" and the confluence of the

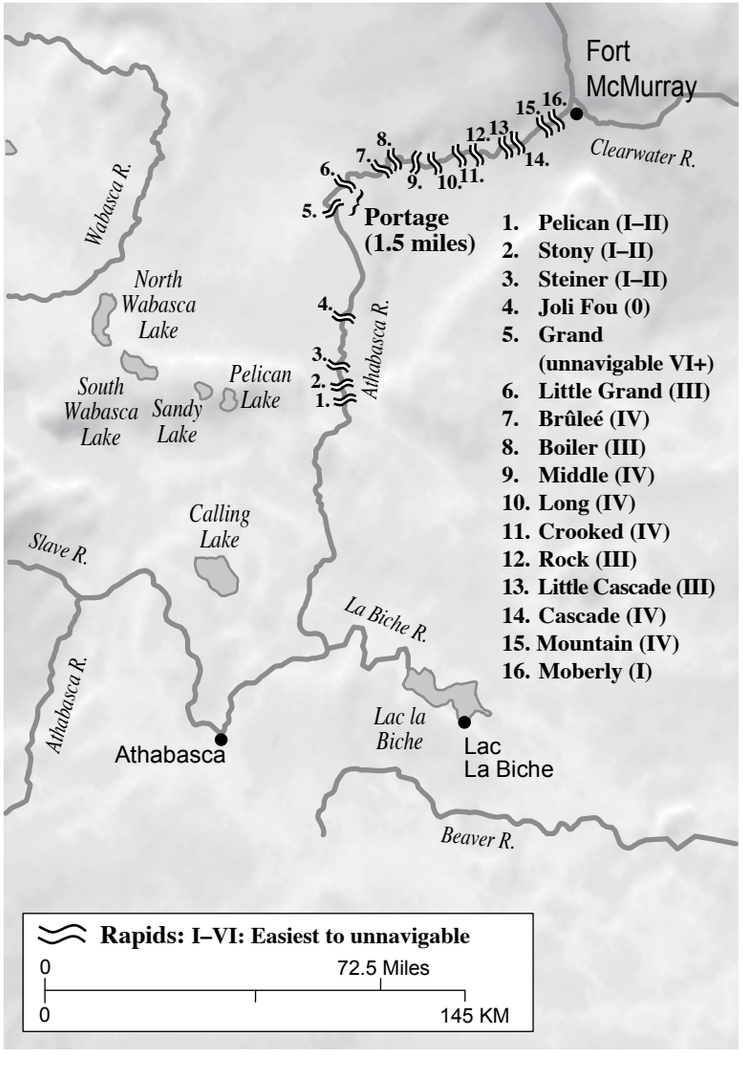
Athabasca and Clearwater Rivers. For fifty years this section of the Athabasca River was largely the preserve of *les gens libres*, primarily Métis freemen or free traders who the Cree called *O-tee-paym-soo-wuk*. One of the principal reasons why people shied away from using the central section of the river was the presence of a series of rapids between present day Athabasca and Fort McMurray, the most treacherous of which was the 1.6 km long Grand Rapids located about 260 km downstream from Athabasca. At this point the Athabasca River drops some eleven metres over less than a kilometre and more than twice that much over the entire stretch of the rapids. One observer later noted that trying to navigate the Athabasca River "was admitted as unquestionable by the Indians [sic] travelling these areas, and by the rowers in general, [and] that if any barge ever tried to overcome these obstacles, no one could save his life."[22]

There was one person, however, who possessed a steely determination to overcome the obstacles posed by the Athabasca River. His name was Alexandre-Antonin Taché and he was not an explorer or a fur trader but a Catholic missionary who belonged to the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. As a young man Taché had expressed an overwhelming desire to preach the Gospel "among the Indians in the west."[23] He moved west in the summer of 1845 when he was just twenty-one years old; travelled widely and soon became familiar with most of the major transportation networks in the North West. In 1850 the then twenty-seven year old missionary was elevated to Bishop. Four years later, after a trip to Europe to be consecrated, the young Bishop made an extended tour of his diocese. During that trip he visited Lac La Biche, where the Oblates had established a mission. According to Taché's biographer, the Bishop "immediately recognized the area's strategic importance due to its location between the Churchill and Mackenzie River basins and resolved to utilize this mission as a source of supply and point of transhipment for the Mackenzie missions."[24]

It was a visionary idea but with practical and pragmatic ends. In terms of the geography of the Northwest, Lac La Biche was ideally positioned to act as a major centre for transhipment. It was located between the difficult Methye Portage to the north and the Saskatchewan River to the south and it could be reached both by water and cart road from the east. The lake was an abundant source of food, particularly whitefish, and the climate and land were favourable for the cultivation of barley, potatoes and some wheat. Above all, Taché believed that using Lac La Biche as an entrepôt and warehouse would cut costs and it would reduce the Oblate dependency on the Hudson's Bay Company for transport.[25]

Mgr. Alexandre Taché, OMI, [1867–1887]. Missionary Oblates, Grandin Collection at the Provincial Archives of Alberta, OB205.

The snag, of course, was the series of rapids. Although he was probably aware of reports about the dangers of the Athabasca River, Taché decided to examine firsthand the viability of using the river to carry freight. To that end he led a little known but extraordinarily important expedition down the Athabasca River in the summer of 1856.



Rapids on the Athabasca River.

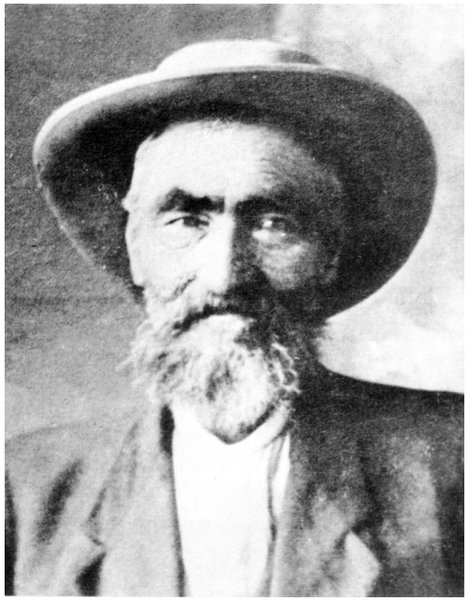
Taché and his crew left Lac La Biche on June 24 and arrived, without mishap, at Fort Chipewyan eight days later. The Bishop's verdict was unequivocal. In a letter to Fathers Jean Tissot and Augustin Maisonneuve, he concluded that:

> In a word I believe this [Athabasca] river to be very navigable … there is no easier. Even though the water was excessively low and our men faint-hearted … I believe some North canoes, manned by four men and loaded with fifteen to twenty pieces could descend in 12 days and ascend easily in 16 days, so that one month would suffice you to do all the Athabaskaw [sic].[26]

The significance of Taché's trip for the history of the Athabasca river basin cannot be overstated. Here, for the first time, was a person of European descent declaring that the Athabasca River could be used as a viable transportation route.

Towards the end of the summer of 1856 the Oblate missionaries cut a cart road from Lac La Biche to Fort Pitt. The idea was to ship goods over the North Saskatchewan River to Fort Pitt and then overland to Lac La Biche and from there down the La Biche River to the Athabasca and either upstream to the Lesser Slave Lake or downriver to points north. But, for reasons which are still not clear, it was eleven years before Taché put his larger plan into effect. The occasion was the need to transport a group of Grey Nuns to Providence Mission on the west end of Great Slave Lake. Rather than use the traditional route over the Methye Portage, Taché directed the nuns to Lac La Biche. They were to meet Bishop Henri Faraud, who would accompany them down the Athabasca River to their destination. Faraud hired Louison Fosseneuve, a Métis buffalo hunter turned boatman, to act as a guide.

The story of that 1867 trip has acquired legendary status in the popular history of northern Alberta. The standard version is



Captain Shot, Louis Fousseneuve. Courtesy of the Bob Duncan Collection, Fort McMurrary Historical Society.

that Fosseneuve—with amazing bravado and considerable panache—"shot" the Grand Rapids with his scow, thereby acquiring the nickname Captain Shot. The outcome of this feat was just as legendary. In little more than an afternoon Fosseneuve single handedly "altered the freight route" of the North by "driving a nail" into the coffin of the Methye Portage and making Athabasca the "gateway" to the North.[27] It all seemed to go like clockwork, the smooth and inevitable working out of the forces of history. While Fosseneuve succeeded in transporting the nuns to their destination, often with an element of high adventure, other parts of the story are perhaps a bit less mythical.

In fact, things very nearly went wrong from the start. The nuns had wintered at St. Boniface (Manitoba) and were supposed to meet Bishop Faraud at Lac La Biche in late June. The plan was to travel north with a Hudson's Bay Company boat so that the crews could help each other. Owing to grassfires and bad weather the nuns did not reach Lac La Biche until July 30, some twenty-six days later than expected. By that time water levels in the La Biche and Athabasca rivers had dropped dramatically, making an already dangerous trip even more perilous. The HBC boat had already left so Bishop Faraud, the nuns, and Fosseneuve and his crew were forced to make the journey alone. They left the Lac La Biche Mission on August 3. It took three days alone to make the 70km trip down the La Biche River to the Athabasca. The river was so low that the passengers had to get out and walk along the shore a great deal of the way. Once they were on the Athabasca the travelers breathed a sigh of relief. One of the nuns, Sister Adeline Lapointe, kept a journal of the trip. "After our third day of anxiety and fatigue," she wrote, "we saw at last the Athabaska [sic] River, which promised us two or three days of smooth sailing." She went on to note that "we were able at first to enjoy the innocent pleasure of feasting our eyes upon scenery truly grandiose. The fast-running Athabaska carried us along towards the north, as if by enchantment, whilst giving us time to admire the picturesque and varied spectacles which every turn of the river presented."[28] But then …

> One day, about two o'clock in the afternoon, we heard in the distance a booming monotonous noise, seeming to come from the river. As far as the eye could reach there was nothing to account for the sound. I asked what it might mean, and I was advised to wait and see. In two hours we had reached Grand Rapid. At this place enormous rocks form an island in midstream. The waters on both sides fall into depths, on which one cannot look without growing dizzy. How our hearts beat high as we approached the island, for it was on that island that we had to land, at the very spot where the divided waters race madly to either side. One wrong turn of the oar might have sent us headlong down the rapid, but our skilful guide brought the boat safely, away from either current, into a little landing-place

between two rocks. There we got out, and passing from one trunk of a tree to another we were on the island, saying a fervent *Deo Gratias*. The men, not without much labour carried all the luggage to the other extremity of the island, a distance of half a mile. But the barge remained. This could not be carried. It had to be drawn. The man-power was unequal to the task. The Bishop, looking very grave, came to ask us to bear a hand. We were harnessed two and two, and our additional help was such that the barge was successfully brought to the further end of our island.[29]

From a trip down the Athabasca River circa 1904, Grey Nuns and a priest board a Hislop and Nagle Company scow below rapids variously described as Boiler Rapids or Grand Rapids. Glenbow Archives, PA-3760-42.

Another Grey Nun, Sister Elizabeth Ward, recalled in a letter that "We laughed a great deal while we were pulling and it is while we rest in the shade of a magnificent spruce tree that I write to you these lines."[30]

Hislop and Nagle Company scow being guided through rapids on Athabasca River, c. 1904. Annotated: "Scow running light, note freight on bank...The trunks in picture belong to Mrs. Ed Nagle...The Grey Nuns were with Hislop and Nagle boats going down river." Glenbow Archives, PA-3760-41.

The nuns faced other trials but they arrived safely at Nativity Mission on Lake Athabasca on August 13 and then made their way to Providence Mission, arriving toward the end of the month. While it is clear that they ran some of the rapids on the Athabasca—Sister Lapointe noted in her journal that "some of the Sisters professed to enjoy shooting the rapids"—it also seems to be clear that Fosseneuve did not "shoot" the Grand Rapids in 1867. Moreover, there is some question whether he was even piloting a scow on that trip. Archival material suggests that Fosseneuve might have been guiding a boat which had been built by Bishop Faraud in 1866 and Christened *Aurora*. Faraud called it *petite bere neuve*, which could indicate a York boat. Although Sister Lapointe mentioned a "barge" in her account she also noted that the craft had an iron keel, thus suggesting that it could have been a York boat rather than a flat bottom scow.[31]

Despite the successful outcome (however qualified it might be) of the 1867 trip the transportation network did not change over-

night, as some writers have tried to suggest. Indeed, the following year the HBC informed the Oblates that it would only transport goods from what is now Fort McMurray to the northern missions; a move which indicates that the Company was still sceptical of the viability of using the Athabasca River as a transportation corridor south of Fort McMurray (the story of what happened to the HBC boat in 1867 remains to be told). Bishop Henri Faraud, who had accompanied the nuns in 1867 and who was more or less forced to take up residence at Lac La Biche as a result of HBC's decision over shipping, also remained doubtful about using the Athabasca River as a major transportation route.[32] For close to a decade it was business as usual. Then, in 1874 there was a shift that led the Hudson's Bay Company to explore the possibility of building a road from Edmonton to a place on the Athabasca River commonly known as the Elbow.

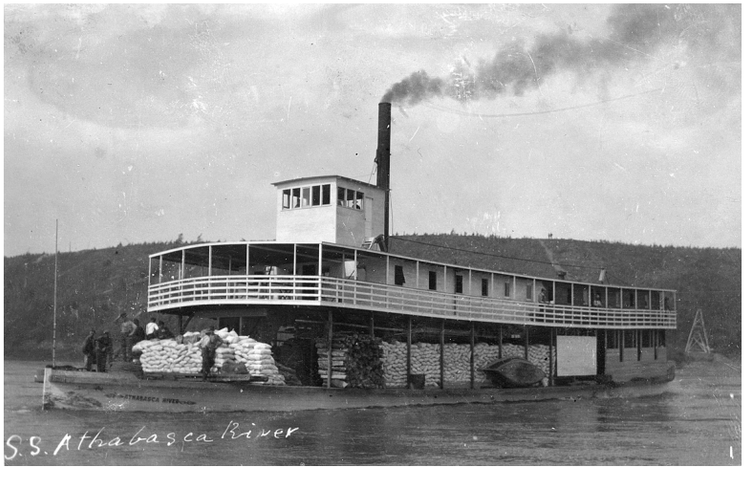
There were a number of reasons for this shift, the most important of which was the union of the Province of Canada, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia in 1867 to form the Dominion of Canada. An explanation of the causes of Confederation in 1867 is beyond the scope of this study but one very important factor was the perceived threat posed by the United States. The Americans had purchased Alaska in March 1867 and Hamilton Fish, the American Secretary of State, was expressing interest in acquiring Hudson's Bay Company lands.[33] Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, and others believed that Canada had to settle and consolidate the Northwest and British Columbia in an effort to counter what they saw as bullish American expansionism.[34] To that end the Canadian government asked the British government to sanction the transfer of Rupert's Land to Canada. The British Parliament granted the Canadian request and passed the Rupert's Land Act in 1868. The Act authorized the sale of Hudson's Bay Company lands to the Canadian

government.[35] In the "deed of surrender" worked out in March 1869 the Hudson's Bay Company was to receive £300,000 (about $1.5 million at that time), one-twentieth of the land in the "Fertile Belt" and an additional fifty thousand acres around the Company's trading posts. The HBC received a total of about seven million acres of land.[36] The transfer was supposed to take place on December 1, 1869 but Métis in and around the Red River Settlement were growing increasingly uneasy about the coming transfer and a group led by Louis Riel rebelled. The Red River Rebellion was a significant turning point for Western Canada and for the Hudson's Bay Company. Fur trade historian Andy den Otter has written that:

> The 1869-70 Red River insurrection was the catharsis forcing the Hudson's Bay Company to come to terms with the new order imposing its ways upon the Canadian Northwest. Riel's confrontation with the first major wave of the new technological society was a clear warning that the tradition-bound fur business might succumb unless it adopted the techniques of the modern business world.[37]

What were those techniques of the modern business world? Above all, HBC authorities knew that the Company would have to reduce operating expenses and increase efficiency. The Company focused on transportation and decided to cut costs by using steamboats. To that end, on May 7, 1872 the HBC launched its first steamboat, *Chief Commissioner,* named in honour of Donald Smith, President of the HBC's Council of the Northern Department and Chief Commissioner of the HBC in Canada. The Company hoped to use steamboats on Lake Winnipeg and the Saskatchewan River to ship all of its trade goods in a single season. Such a strategy would reduce storage and especially labour costs. Initially, the move to steamboats was not very successful. *Chief Commissioner* was un-

able to navigate low water on the little Saskatchewan (Dauphine) River so it was taken to Lake Winnipeg, which was too rough and dangerous for the keelless steamer. A second steamboat destined for the Saskatchewan River sank on its maiden voyage.[38] Not to be deterred the Company ordered the construction of a third steamer, *S.S. Northcote*, a 150-foot replica of the stern-wheelers that plied the Mississippi River. James A. Grahame, who had replaced Smith as Chief Commissioner, wrote to his superiors in September 1874: "If she is successful the relief to our transportation business will be immense and with the proper boat on Lake Winnipeg our Interior Districts can be fully supplied with goods at a shorter time and less expense."[39] The maiden voyage was successful and on July 22, 1875 the *Northcote* steamed into Edmonton carrying cargo from Lower Fort Gary. The transhipment and voyage had taken an unprecedented thirty-three days.



HBC steamer the *S.S. Athabasca River*, 1912. Athabasca Archives, 13698.

When the *Northcote* made its voyage to Edmonton the HBC was still using the old Fort Assiniboine trail to ship goods to the Slave Lake district. That trail had been cut in the 1820s after the HBC had abandoned the Portage La Biche route but by the 1870s the Assiniboine trail was deteriorating rapidly. In early June 1875 Richard Hardisty, the Hudson's Bay Company's Chief Factor at Edmonton, wrote to Chief Commissioner Grahame complaining that:

> The road for Fort Assiniboine is a very bad one, so bad that freighters won't attempt it; several animals have been entirely ruined in going through the road in summer time. …From Indians acquainted with the country, I have been informed that a good road could be made with very little trouble to a point on the Athabasca [River], two days down from Fort Assiniboine, which would shorten the trip [to Lesser Slave Lake] by land as well as by water by two days.[40]

What is particularly interesting about Hardisty's letter is the way in which he approached the topic of a road from Fort Edmonton to the Athabasca River because more than a year earlier, in May 1874, he had reported to Donald Smith (who became the Hudson's Bay Company's Land Commissioner in 1874 and who was also Hardisty's brother-in-law) that "Mr. [John] Bunn has just returned from … the Athabasca … and considers that the road can be practical enough and that 12 men in the course of the summer with a good superintendent could make a passable road."[41] Hardisty might have been anticipating the use of steamboats on the Saskatchewan River; he obviously had little confidence in the Fort Assiniboine Trial. It is also clear that he believed transporting goods to Lesser Slave Lake via Athabasca would shave two days off of freighting time, thus cutting expenses; moves which were very much in keeping with the Company's new aim of increasing efficiency and cutting operational

costs. There was an additional reason for increasing efficiency in Athabasca country. During the early 1860s gold seekers flocked to the Cariboo region in British Columbia. A number of them migrated to the Quesnel Lake area. By the mid-1860s the Cariboo gold rush was busting and a number of prospectors traded their picks for paddles and began "free trading" in fur along a broad front that included the Athabasca River.[42] By the early 1870s they and others were beginning to cut into HBC profits. Chief Factor Hardisty reported in the spring of 1874 that whiskey traders were moving into the area and he expressed concern over "those around who will bring in supplies either from [Fort] Benton [Montana] or Red River."[43] If anything, that made the move towards greater transportation efficiency all the more compelling.

There was one other probable reason why Hardisty advocated building a road from Fort Edmonton to the Elbow on the Athabasca River: to control competition. Despite the fact that the Hudson's Bay Company had relinquished its hold over Rupert's Land, it often acted as if it still operated under Royal Charter. One of the things the Company wanted to do was to control the actual pace of economic and business development in the West. In a telling letter he wrote in January 1880 Charles J. Brydges, who had replaced Donald Smith as Land Commissioner the previous year, warned his superiors that

> … unless the company is prepared to make its boats available for public traffic and especially in regards for the Indian Department … there will undoubtedly be an opposition line of boats put upon the river, which will have the effect of opening up the whole of the northern country for supplies for fur trading purposes in direct opposition to the Hudson's Bay Company.[44]

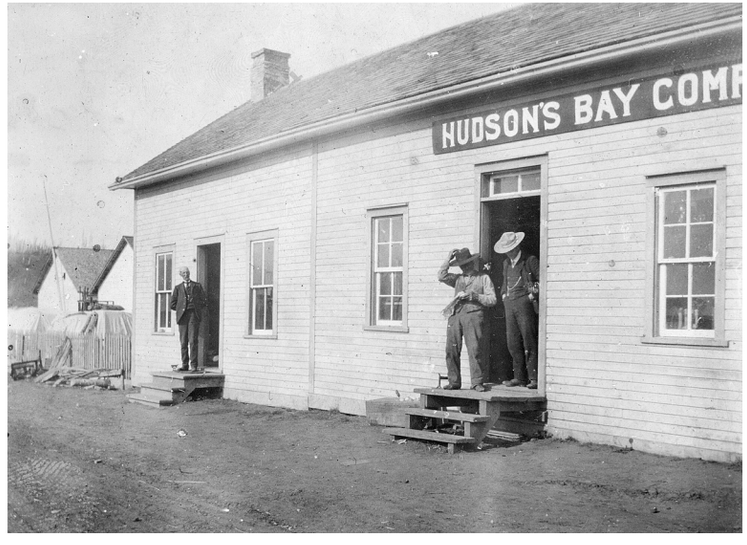
The underlying message in Brydges's letter was clear: the Company had to be generous enough to meet public demand for transport but not so generous as to open the field to competition. The idea of controlling competition was a key factor behind the decision to build a trail from Edmonton to Athabasca. Obviously, geography played a role. Even a cursory glance at a map reveals that the Elbow of the Athabasca River provided an ideal place for transhipment. It was the shortest distance between the Saskatchewan and Athabasca Rivers. The topography favoured the Elbow; the elevation of Edmonton is 668 metres, the Elbow is 533 metres (by contrast Fort Assiniboine is 622 metres). The terrain was much better than Fort Assiniboine (or so people thought at the time). Finally, there was a natural geographical quirk at the Elbow in the form of a long flat landing area ideally suited to loading and unloading boats.

The Athabasca Landing Trail coming into town from the south, n.d. Athabasca Archives, 21.

In the fall of 1875 the HBC began financing the construction of what would become the Athabasca Landing Trail. Progress was slow and only about half the trail was completed before Christmas. One HBC

official complained about "the difficulty of procuring good labourers." Workers managed to finish the trail the following summer at cost of $4,059.00.[45] At least one writer has argued that the Athabasca trail "was an almost instant success."[46] Considerable emphasis must be put on the "almost." True, the Hudson's Bay Company built a 720 square foot warehouse in 1877 and it would appear that the Company more or less abandoned the Fort Assiniboine trail and began using the "Landing" as the transhipment point for goods destined for the Slave Lake district. But, as David Gregory aptly pointed out in his pioneering study of Athabasca: "Nothing much changed at Athabasca Landing between 1877 and 1882."[47] In fact, nothing much really happened until the 1885-86 trading season, some ten years after the initial construction of the Athabasca Landing Trail. On January 15, 1885 HBC Inspector J. McDougall wrote to his boss Chief Commissioner Joseph Wrigley that "It gives much satisfaction to learn that the practicality of the route to the north via Edmonton and [the] Athabasca River is at last to be tested."[48]

Although the evidence is scanty, it would appear that the new route passed the test because at the end of the 1886 trading season the Hudson's Bay Company abandoned the one-hundred and eight year old Methye Portage and began focusing more attention on what was now being called Athabasca Landing.[49] For example, the HBC built a three thousand square foot freight warehouse to replace the old seven hundred and twenty square foot building erected in 1877. The old warehouse was converted into a dwelling house, which was probably used by HBC Clerk Leslie Wood—the first person to take up permanent residence at Athabasca in any official capacity.[50] The following year, 1887, saw more activity. The Company constructed a twenty-four by eighteen foot retail outlet (which the company called a sale-shop), a ten by eighteen foot office, a 1200 square foot two-storey house and a 100 by 25 foot workshop to aid in the building of a steamer, the *Athabasca*, which was launched in August 1888.[51]

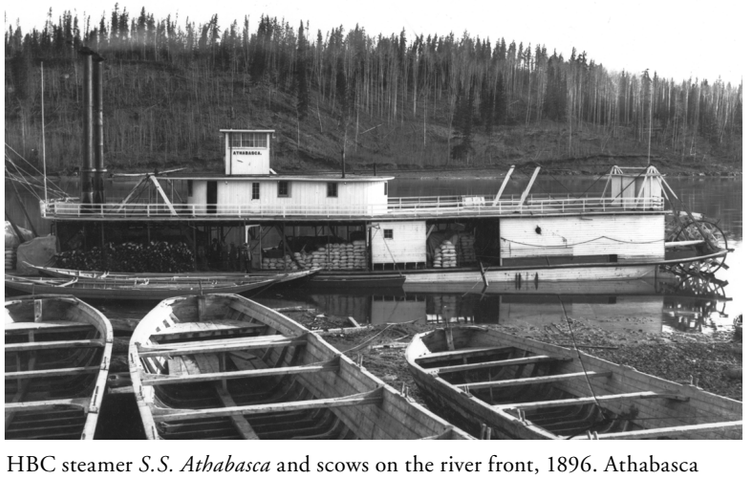


The first Hudson's Bay Company store and warehouses near the river front. L–R, Leslie Wood, clerk, Jock Irwin, handyman and Russell E. Bannerman, clerk, n.d. Athabasca Archives, 758.

Despite the apparent flurry of activity two important details must be kept in mind. The first is the relative scale of early river transport. Old photographs from the first decade of the twentieth century show long lines of scows being built at the Landing. Yet, in 1887 the Hudson's Bay Company sent just three inland boats and five flat bottom scows carrying a cargo of between eighty and ninety-five tons of freight—compared to the more than two hundred and thirty tons shipped in 1891 and the five hundred and sixty-eight tons shipped in 1895.[52] A second important point was the lack of profitability operating at Athabasca Landing. Athabasca was a virtual bee-hive of activity in the spring when the ice came off the river but that did not necessarily mean large economic returns for

the Company. In 1888 Harrison Young, then in charge of Fort Edmonton, complained that:

> It has been necessary since this Post [Athabasca Landing] was established to keep quite a large stock on hand for payment of workmen, boat men & freighters, there is no great amount of profit to the post in this and the amount of trade small. *This post is kept up for convenience of other districts and for general service, more than in hope of making a profitable trade at it*. If a pretty complete stock of goods is not kept on hand, tripmen and others would not purchase any supplies and would draw more cash in payment of wages. The capital employed will however be greatly reduced after this as it is not likely that as many men will be employed around the place in future [emphasis is added].[53]

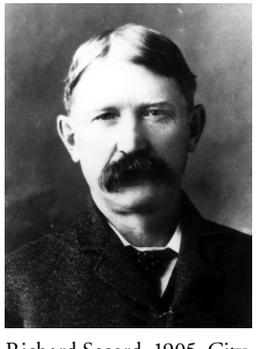


HBC steamer *S.S. Athabasca* and scows on the river front, 1896. Athabasca Archives.

Clearly, Young was sceptical about the long term business potential for Athabasca Landing. One reason why he predicted fewer employees was the launching of the *S.S. Athabasca* in 1888 and the expectation of greater efficiency, which for the Hudson's Bay Company meant paying fewer employees for greater shipping capacity. Another reason might have been the downturn in the fur market in the late 1880s. In September 1889 HBC Inspecting Officer E.K. Beeston reported that "No cash is now allowed to be paid for furs."[54] Although not stated explicitly, Beeston's observation indicated that the Company wanted to introduce what was essentially a "truck" system at Athabasca. In a truck system workers were paid in Company goods or some form of Company currency that could usually only be spent at a Company store. The Hudson's Bay Company issued "Made Beaver" and other types of tokens until well into the twentieth century. This type of system usually favoured the Company and was often exploitive because there was no competition. A worker could in effect become a slave to the Company because they would "owe my soul to the company store," as Merle Travis put it in the 1946 recording "Sixteen Tons."

Obverse and reverse of HBC "Made Beaver" trading token, c. 1865. National Maritime Museum, London, E4978-1 and E4978-2.

Despite the depressed market in the fur trade in the late 1880s there were a series of developments which pointed to a potentially more prosperous future. One of the most important was the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) at Calgary in 1883. Two years later a charter was granted to a consortium under the name "Alberta & Athabasca Railway Company" to build a line from Calgary to Athabasca. To anyone who was paying close attention, the coming of the railway would mean nothing short of a revolution where transportation was concerned. This was particularly true where time was concerned. In 1845, for example, it took Father Alexandre Taché sixty-two days to travel from St. Boniface to Montreal. By 1857 that same trip, now via rail and steamship, had been cut to twenty-four days. By the late 1880s Taché could complete the trip in sixty-two hours. News of the railway happened to coincide with growing optimism about economic development in the North West. At the end of December 1887 the Edmonton *Bulletin* reported that there was "a continued and increased confidence of the people and of trade in the surrounding and tributary country."[55] Six months later the Government announced that it was going to allocate $2000.00 to improving the Athabasca Landing trail.



Richard Secord, 1905. City of Edmonton Archives, EA-10-669-105.

The combination of the anticipated railroad, the upgrades to the Athabasca Landing trail and the forthcoming launch of the Hudson's Bay Company steamboat *Athabasca* caught the attention of Richard Secord. A great-grandnephew of Laura Secord, the heroine of the War of 1812, Richard Secord had travelled west in 1881. After teaching school and working as a clerk for fur trader John Alexander McDougall (who later became Edmonton's fourth mayor and a member of the Alberta Legislature) Secord decided to strike out on his own. On June 2, 1888 the following notice appeared in the Edmonton *Bulletin*: "R. Secord, late in the employ of J.A. McDougall, is about starting a store at Athabasca Landing. Two loads of freight went north for him on Tuesday."[56]

The Hudson's Bay Company took a dim view of this new interloper. From Edmonton, Chief Factor Harrison Young wrote—in a telling memorandum—about a year and a half after Secord arrived in Athabasca that:

> Mr. Secord does not do what I consider as a legitimate business, he makes beer, and keeps whiskey. I cannot say he sells same but practically it amounts to it. A man goes to him and buys something and gets a drink. He does not buy much fur, but does his principal business with our boat men, getting orders on their pay. He buys goods to a considerable amount from us. I have written to Mr. [Leslie] Wood [the HBC Clerk at Athabasca] to oppose him in every way, to undersell him in goods, and outbid him in price of furs, and to try and convince him that he had better leave, if he makes any offer to do so I would refund him what he paid for his lots. *I do not believe in buying him out, as I think we should be able to make him leave* [emphasis added].[57]

In the event, the HBC did not send thugs to Athabasca to "make" Secord leave. But Chief Factor Harrison Young did travel to Athabasca with the intention of buying out Secord. Young was successful, reporting to Trade Commissioner Joseph Wrigley towards the end of May 1890 that Secord "did not care to sell, but I assured him I was prepared to drop a couple of thousand in forcing him away."[58] Secord wanted $6000.00 but got $3500.00.[59]

The irony of the story was that Chief Factor Richard Hardisty had approved the sale of two lots to Secord, something which Hard-

isty's successor, Harrison Young, frowned upon. Before his untimely death after being thrown from a horse buggy in October 1889, Hardisty appears to have been growing more open minded about accepting greater economic diversity and business competition in Western Canada. At one point in the early 1880s he invested in a saw mill on the grounds that "If Edmonton gets built up into a town as is expected, the sale of lumber will then come into play."[60] His superiors were not as open minded and essentially forced Hardisty to sell his interest in the saw mill and toe the old Company line of monopoly mercantile capitalism. The Hudson's Bay Company appeared to be trying to re-establish the hold that it had on Western Canada before the transfer of Rupert's Land to the Canadian Government. Other traders, such as Colin Fraser and Peter Pruden in Lac La Biche, also gave into HBC pressure to sell out.[61] There were times when the lengths to which the HBC would go to stop competition nearly approached the absurd. In his report on Athabasca for 1891 HBC Inspecting Officer J. McDougall noted that:

> A Trader who has squatted close to the Company's western boundary has opened a road across the company's property between his house and the Edmonton road … The road is used by freighters carrying for Traders at Lesser Slave Lake & others and if not closed, it might in a short time be claimed as a public Road.
>
> What was McDougall's solution to this problem? He
>
> …suggested that a fence be built from the foot of the hill to the bridge near the river …. A cheap fence could be erected by the Company's engaged servant—say posts with two lengths of plain wire & a rail on top.[62]

Inspecting Officer McDougall went so far as to lay out a plan and the costs of such a fence.

View of Athabasca Landing looking northeast, April, 1898. Ernest Brown Collection, Provincial Archives of Alberta, B2590.

These types of business practices served to hinder rather than promote economic development in Athabasca. Visitors and traveller writers might have described Athabasca as a hub of activity and "the gate of the great North" but others saw something quite different. In 1897, some seven years after the HBC bought out Richard Secord, James Harris Wood moved to Athabasca to become a boat builder. He later recalled for a newspaper article that when he arrived "… he found our present Strathcona Street fenced in on both sides with wire fence. Inside this fence were the Hudson's Bay Store and warehouses. On the inside of the fence was prominently placed the inscription 'Trespassers will be prosecuted.'" The author of the newspaper article added, sarcastically: "One wonders on hearing this if the Hudson's Bay Company at that time intended to exclude pro-

spective customers or was it only put up as a warning to ambulating bears and other wild animals."[64] Indeed, there had been little in the way of economic diversification and growth during the seven years since Richard Secord left. When James Wood arrived at "The Landing" in the fall of 1897 there were two Hudson's Bay Company personnel, an Anglican parson and a few others to make a grand total of 10 persons of European origin! While it is true that fur traders such as the Hislop and Nagle Company and the Revillon Freres were offering serious competition to the HBC in the opening years of the twentieth century and that there was growing missionary activity and even the establishment of a North-West Mounted Police post, nearly all economic activity at the Landing was centred on transportation and its spinoffs. In 1901 the English travel writer David T. Hanbury passed through Athabasca on his way north and left an apt description of the Landing just after the turn of the century:

> At the Landing I found my men in camp; everything had got through safely, and the canoes were lying in water to soak. This post, at the head of the navigation of the Athabasca River, serves as the port of shipment for freight to the north. It has been in existence for many years, and besides a sawmill for cutting the timber required for building scows to carry supplies for the many trading-posts scattered over the country, it possesses three stores, a boarding-house and a church. The maintenance of order seems entrusted to a member of the North-West Mounted Police, while a bishop upholds the dignity of the Church. The place had a busy appearance, for now large cargoes were being dispatched.[65]

Hanbury's observation did not change much over the next half decade. Athabasca's residents were primary engaged in activities built around transportation: river freighting, sawmilling and boatbuilding, livery and stabling for horses, and some hoteling and boarding.

There can be no doubt that some people did a thriving business. The great Captain Shot, who had ferried the Grey Nuns down the river in 1867, became a living legend and a reasonably wealthy man by the turn of the century. His services were in great demand and while it is clear that he eventually did "shoot" the Grand Rapids, it was most likely in partially loaded scows. Still, the larger point to be made here, as Athabasca's *Northern News* observed in the early fall of 1911, was that around the turn of the twentieth century "There was no indication … that Athabasca Landing was to grow and be a place of so much interest as has been the case." Indeed. *Henderson's Alberta Gazetteer and Directory*, one of the standard guides of the day, reported that Athabasca Landing had a population of 250 when Alberta became a province in 1905. The official census put Athabasca's population at 227 in 1911; some growth but not a great deal. But by the end of the summer of 1911 the local newspaper was reporting that the population was closer to 500 and "rapidly increasing."[66] How rapid? *The Athabasca Times* estimated a population of 1,100 for 1912. The following year the *Northern News* reported that the Town had grown to 1,900.[67] Even if one allows for some exaggeration on the part of newspapers engaged in boosterism, the population of Athabasca nearly quadrupled in the space of just two years (the fact that the town was apparently able to support two newspapers is another indication of growth). The flurry of construction that accompanied this boom was nearly as impressive. When the poet Robert W. Service passed through Athabasca in 1911 he described the Landing as little more than "a huddle of shacks" but added that it was "booming" and he found "it was difficult to get a seat for dinner."[68] Within a year the "huddle of shacks" had been transformed into a town that boasted of

> …two schools, three churches, one hospital, two licensed ho-

tels, five restaurants, two boarding houses, two bakeries, two clothing stores, four general stores, one wholesale and retail grocery, one confectioner, one drug store, one jewellery store, three chartered banks, two butcher shops, two blacksmith shops, two implement agencies, one sewing machine agent, two millinery and dressmaking parlors [sic, parlour], two pool rooms, one furniture store, two hardware stores, one shooting gallery, one theatre, three real estate offices, two lawyers, one dentist, one photograph gallery, two sawmills, two building and contracting firms, two steamship and navigation companies, two livery and feed stables, two music teachers, two doctors, one public accountant, one tailor, five licensed dray businesses, two retail lumber yards, two dairies, one local land office, an Over Seas Club, a Canadian Club, an Independent Order of Oddfellows, one bowling alley….[69]

Athabasca Landing, 1911. Glenbow Archives, NA-2788-4.

Clearly, Athabasca was experiencing a fast and furious economic boom but explaining the causes and the nature of that boom is a complicated business. At the time there were those who believed that the rapid growth of Athabasca had simply been the result of geography and the coming together of natural historical forces. Robert

F. Truss, editor of the *Northern News*, was a proponent of this belief. In early 1911 he went so far as to declare that

> …the fur trade that has carried millions of dollars into Edmonton for the past thirty years will from now on be made at Athabaska [sic] Landing; it means that wholesale houses will be built here to supply the exchange; it means that powerful river tugs will be built here to work up the trade along this water system; it means that as this great country fills up, villages and towns will spring up along the shores of the Athabaska at distances of ten to fifteen miles apart and their supplies will reach them by water from this distributing point. …All these things … will happen at Athabaska Landing in the natural course of events, because in the very nature of things they can not help themselves.[70]

On another occasion Truss wrote: "…if there are any places on the map where nature intended a city this is one of them."[71] Others had a different explanation for the boom. In 1961 the local newspaper published a special supplement to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Athabasca. One article in that supplement, which was based on the writings of old-timer Forest Day, claimed that the boom was a conspiracy on the part of two shady real estate agents:

> The boom started when two clever men came to Athabasca and paid Philip Shank $10,000 for his homestead one and one-half miles [about 2.4km] east of town. This quarter was covered with bush except for 15 acres which had been cleared in order for Philip to get the patent. He might have taken less but the buyers didn't want that—they knew how to start a boom.
>
> When news of the sale travelled around town, the boom was on.[72]

That there was a real estate boom in the Athabasca region can-

not be doubted. That it was caused by geography, natural forces or two land agents is more dubious. Geography and "natural forces," not to mention the fur trade had been at play since the mid-1870s but it did little to spark the building of a town. Philip Shank sold his homestead in 1912, after the boom had already started, so the idea that real estate agents had manipulated a land sale to ignite a boom does not provide an adequate explanation.

What was going on was that by 1911 Athabasca was beginning to experience the Anglo colonial settler revolution that was international in scope. The term "Anglo" here, as was noted in the preface, is used in its widest sense to include British peoples and the broader "Anglo-world" that grew so dramatically between the 1780s and the 1920s. What fuelled this growth in large part were a series of boom and bust and export rescue cycles that eventually made its way to Western Canada. "Between the 1880s and the 1920s," James Belich, the author of an important study of Anglo colonial settlement has written, "the settler revolution boomed into the last viable frontiers of the Anglo newlands, from Western Australia to Oklahoma, Southern California to the Yukon."[73] A great deal of Western Canada was affected by this boom, some places even more dramatically than Athabasca. The population of Manitoba, for example, was about 152,000 in 1891. By 1916 it had climbed to some 554,000. Saskatchewan's population exploded from 91,000 in 1901 to nearly 500,000 by 1911. In 1891 there were fewer than 100,000 persons living between Manitoba and British Columbia. By the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 there were more than one million.[74] Alberta saw its population increase more than fivefold, from 73,022 in 1901 to 374,295 in 1911; more than half of which came from British (or Anglo) origin.[75] By 1914 there were probably close to 470,000 people in the province. There was also significant urban growth during the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1897 Edmonton was really

just a tiny frontier town with a population of barely 1,000. By 1905, when the province of Alberta was created, the combined population of Edmonton and Strathcona was about 11,400. Within six years the population of Edmonton nearly tripled to 31,000. During roughly the same period Calgary's population increased from some 13,500 to more than 43,500.[76]

Historians remain divided over the causes of the Western Canadian boom. Some argue that the Canadian Pacific Railroad lay at the root of the boom. Others contend that it was the end of the frontier in the United States. Still others focus on the role played by wheat farming and Canadian boosterism under the careful guidance of Clifford Sifton, the Minister of the Interior in Wilfrid Laurier's Liberal administration from 1896 to 1905. Where Athabasca is concerned there were two other potential factors behind the boom, the Klondike Gold Rush of 1896 to 1899 and the negotiation of Treaty 8 in 1899.

Cree gathered to greet the Hon. David Laird, (centre) at Athabasca Landing, 1899. Photograph by Supt. H. C. Forbes, RCMP. Glenbow Archives, NA-949-90.

There are problems with each of these explanations. The CPR, for instance, was completed in 1885 but for more than a decade the attempt to attract large numbers of settlers was more or less a failure.[77] The big boom in immigration to Canada did not begin until after Clifford Sifton left office, with the largest influx coming in 1911, 1912 and 1913 before falling off.[78] The fact that large numbers of immigrants came after Sifton, when Frank Oliver took over as Minister of the Interior and sought to close what he viewed as an "open door" immigration policy in order to keep out "undesirables" does cast some doubt on the booster activities Sifton's department carried out.[79] The closing of the American frontier as a causal factor also presents problems. While it is true that some 600,000 Americans migrated North between 1897 and 1913, including a number of Afro-Americans, some of whom settled in Amber Valley just east of Athabasca, there were areas such as Southern California and Oklahoma that were themselves still experiencing a boom.[80] Using wheat to explain the boom runs into problems with timing because the big gains in wheat come after the boom had started. The Klondike Gold Rush brought a number of gold seekers to Athabasca but it was really just a flash in the pan which had no lingering impact.[81] The Klondike Gold Rush did play a role in the decision to open up negotiations that led to Treaty 8 during the summer of 1899. The government basically wanted First Nations peoples to surrender title to a large section of land in northern Alberta and British Columbia. That certainly paved the way for the survey crews to begin surveying the area around Athabasca for homesteading but it falls short of a factor in explaining the rise of the town of Athabasca for two reasons. The first was that no one, not even the framers of Treaty 8, foresaw a large influx of settlers into the area around Athabasca. "It does not appear likely," the Commissioners reported in 1899, "that the conditions of the country on either side of the Athabasca and Slave Rivers or about Athabasca Lake will be so changed as to affect hunting or trapping, and it is safe to say that so long as the fur-bearing animals remain, the great bulk of the Indians will continue to hunt and to trap." Though the Commissioners believed that settlement would eventually come there was certainly "no immediate necessity" to allot land or lay out reserves for First Nations peoples.[82] A second reason was that the core of the town was actually part of the Hudson's Bay Company reserve, which had been laid out in 1888, more than twenty years before the boom started.[83]

All of this begs an obvious question. If neither the railway nor wheat nor boosterism nor the ending of the American frontier triggered the Anglo colonial settler boom in Western Canada, what did? Recently, historians have been looking at how various factors came together at particular points in history to make up the idea of what has been called the "progress industry." While it might not provide a full explanation of what first sparked a particular boom, one historian has pointed out that:

> Fuelling the flames once the fire had started was a diverse but interacting complex of economic activities that lay at the heart of each Anglo boom. These activities were all centred on growth and development. They included the attraction, transport, supply, and support of immigrants; the provision of easy credit; speculative markets which enhanced expectations, prices and investment; and the rapid creation of towns, farms, and transport infrastructure. Contemporaries described the collective effect of these activities as 'Progress,' and 'the progress industry' is a useful generic term for them. Most components are well known to historians. But few grasp that the progress industry was a motley whole, and that the whole was greater than the sum of its parts.[84]

Freighters loading on Strathcona Street, Athabasca Landing, c. 1911. Athabasca Archives, 685.

The idea that the whole was greater than the sum of the parts is crucial in understanding the nature of the colonial settler boom that began to hit Athabasca around 1911. There was no single cause for the economic boom; rather, it was the coming together of a number of factors at a particular point in history. Obviously there were some necessary preconditions. One of the most important was transportation infrastructure. Another was access to money and credit. Beyond those two factors was the importance of the boom town itself. "Boom towns were the bases of explosive colonization," writes James Belich. "They gathered, supplied, and supported the armies that marched out to the camps of the progress industry and the farms of boom-time agriculture. They provided rest and recreation, hotels, banks, newspapers, and post offices. They were also themselves sites of explosive colonization, whose lead industry was building themselves, often several times over."[85] This idea that the boom was actually fuelled by the building of towns is part of a "revisionist" historical understanding of the Anglo world. But note the following scene:

> Emigration is pouring in astonishingly, several boats landing daily loaded with passengers. Those intending to go back in the country, usually purchased their supplies here, and the stores were almost overtaxed, so profitable was their trade. The hotels and boarding houses were crowded to overflowing. The principal business streets fairly hummed with the rush of busy life. Building was never so brisk; an army of workmen and mechanics labored night and day to keep up with the demand for dwellings and stores. Another small army was engaged in grading streets, and laying gas pipes, the air being continually shaken with the concussion of blasting rock.[86]

With the exception of the blasting rock and the immigrants arriving by boat (and the use of the word labor), that scene could easily describe what was going on in Athabasca between 1911 and 1914; even if the quote is taken from a description of what was going on at St Paul, Minnesota in 1857. In this regard Athabasca provides a nearly textbook perfect case study of the boom town, right down to the pre-promoters, the pre-boom settlers and the commercial elites who often took a leading role during colonial settler booms. One excellent example of the pre-promoter was M.J. Gauthier, who moved to Athabasca in 1906 after "being drawn thither by a study of its position as a distributing centre for the empire stretching north, east and west from its boundaries."[87] But that was not all. Gauthier went on to note that:

> The great agricultural possibilities of the surrounding country also appealed to me and I reasoned that, with such great natural advantages, this point on the map at that time was destined to commercial pre-eminence.
>
> Events [as of 1912] have and are justifying my liveliest expectations. The coming of the railroad has set in motion those forces which build cities, forces which lay dormant until those twin creators of commerce—water and steel—met at this point, and it is patent to the poorest thinker the consequent tremendous development that must now take place in the vast area tributary to Athabasca.
>
> My faith in our future I have exemplified by opening up some months ago one of the largest furniture stores in Alberta. Success has attended my efforts, and I extend a cordial invitation to all who may visit our fair town to inspect the goods I carry.[88]

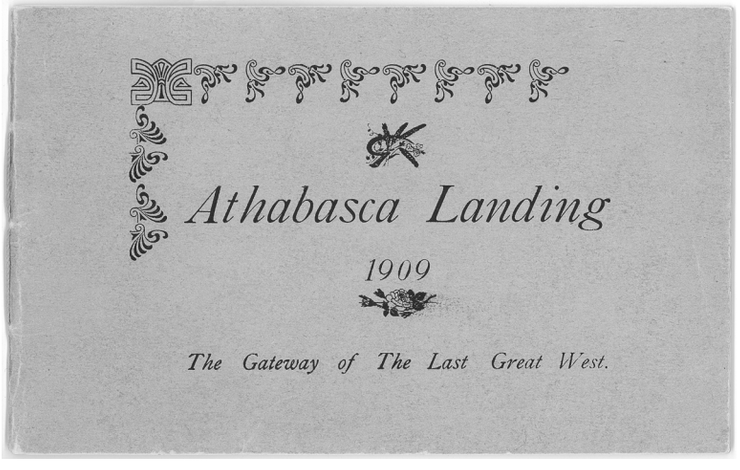
Gauthier was by no means the only one to promote Athabasca. James "Peace River Jim" Cornwall had moved west in the mid-1890s and ended up at Athabasca, where he worked at a variety of occupations before establishing the Northern Transportation Company in 1903 in partnership with Fletcher Bredin and J.H. Wood (the same J.H. Wood who had moved to Athabasca in 1897). Cornwall became a staunch supporter and booster of northern Alberta and especially the Peace River country. He was sometimes known as "Apostle of the North." In 1910 he financed and led an eighteen man expedition from Athabasca to the Peace River region. His goal was simple. It was to promote agricultural settlement and the development of transportation. Cornwall was well aware of the importance of transportation infrastructure as a necessary precondition for attracting immigration; of course, his idea was to have the railway—

which had been promised off and on since Richard Secord's time in Athabasca—terminate at the docks of the Northern Transportation Company.[89]

Louis Fossenueve, unidentified man, Emily Murphy and Jim Cornwall by the railway tracks at Athabasca Landing, c. 1912–1914. Athabasca Archives, 17857.

One person who joined Cornwall's expedition was A.L. Sawle, Manager of the Athabasca branch of the Imperial Bank of Canada and secretary of the Athabasca Board of Trade. The Board of Trade had been founded in 1908 by a group of Athabasca businessmen (there were no women on the original board); ironically, HBC clerk Leslie Wood was the first President of the Board. The Board of Trade aimed to "assist in regulating trade and commerce for the good of Athabasca Landing and district."[90] Indeed, it often appeared as if the board was taking the lead in promoting Athabasca.[91] For instance, in 1909 the Board issued a twenty-eight page pamphlet extolling the virtues of Athabasca Landing, promising that the railroad would be extended from Edmonton to Athabasca that summer,

claiming that the soil was a "black loam" and making references to the "light snowfall" and "prevalent Chinook winds" that were supposed to characterize the area.[92] For the most part this was shameless boosterism and must be viewed as such. But historians who ridicule or dismiss this type of boosterism on the grounds that it was far removed from reality or that it played little or no role in attracting settlers miss an important point because behind the wild optimism and the rhetoric there was a vision and often a plan for the future.[93]



The business sector had a vision of Athabasca as the major distribution point for the Peace River country and the Northwest. "All roads to the north and the famous 'Last Great West,' commence at Athabasca Landing," declared one piece of promotional literature, "and in a very short time steel rails will also run northward and westward from here."[94] Many in the business community—with substantial support from local newspapers—believed that the railway would cement Athabasca's position as the major northern distribution and transhipment centre and provide the foundations for

even wider economic activity. "I can picture Athabasca Landing in the near future," general store owner R.C. Farrell told a local banquet in 1912, "as a large city with its factories, shipbuilding plants, elevators and mills. I can see on the bank across the river a magnificent C.N.R. Hotel looking as majestic as the Chateau Frontenac at Quebec—a railway station with daily trains going and coming from Fort McMurray, Lac la Biche, Pelican, Wabisca, Battleford, Edmonton, Grouard and Peace River Crossing."[95] This economic activity would be supplemented by Athabasca acting as metropolitan centre for the distribution and marketing of agricultural products. And all of this was tied into something larger still: the British Empire. At the first annual banquet of the Athabasca Board of Trade, held in February 1912, E.G. Gilroy reminded the members that:

> … Our Empire is the greatest empire the world has ever known. It is held together by bonds of loyalty and blood, which even time cannot wither nor war break asunder. …We all understand why all parts of our Empire are welded together in an unbreakable chain of dominions that encircle the earth, but gentlemen there is one thing that I wish to point out to you this evening … That point, gentlemen, is this, that the stronger trade relations that we have with our mother and sister countries, the closer our relations will be, and therefore the stronger the bond of union between us. Now, to my mind the different boards of trade have a vast and important influence over trade in as much as they really foster the present trade and seek to improve it by looking for and opening up new channels, for the future. Every new piece of territory that we can secure trade with, every piece of business that we can get from or give to an undeveloped country will be the means of furthering the cause of not only the local town or city, but will tend to so deepen the bond of sympathy and loy-

alty that already exists between the different parts of our Empire to such an extent, as to be the wonder, and at the same time the admiration of the whole world.[96]

Grand Union Hotel, Athabasca Landing c. 1911. Athabasca Archives, 00218.

Obviously, some caution must be exercised against reading too much into these types of statements. It is impossible to say how many members of the Board of Trade were ardent supporters of British imperialism or even how many thought of themselves as lowly "colonials." But even if there was merely a sentimental attachment to Great Britain, the Empire (or Empire-Commonwealth) made for a powerful symbol. Some recent scholarship has suggested in the period before the outbreak of the First World War the Empire "was partly conceived as an English-speaking cultural community, sharing a common language, literature and religion" as well as being "envisaged as a political community of laws, ideals and institutions."[97] What is not known is what French Canadians—and there were a number of prominent French Canadians in Athabasca—thought about any attachment to the British Empire, though there is no hard

evidence to suggest that they rejected it out of hand. That aside, an important thing to note here is that the business community was not mired in a purely local context. There was a larger context and in that scenario the attainment Town status in September 1911 was just one milestone in the march for greater things. "We are now a chartered town," Harvey Cull, Athabasca's first pharmacist, told that same Board of Trade banquet, "but do not let us be content with that; we want to be a city, and a city to be proud of."[98]

Members of the Board of Trade certainly understood the need for growth and for infrastructure. What they do not appear to have fully comprehended was that it was the actual building of town infrastructure and other public expenditures that was primarily fuelling the boom. In 1909 the Athabasca Board of Trade had thirty-four members and approximately as many businesses. By the winter of 1914 the Board of Trade had more than 80 members. Moreover, by that time several key economic drivers were in place: banking and postal facilities, expenditures on public works, private or public expenditures on transportation and local manufacturing. In 1909 Athabasca had one bank. By the summer of 1912 it had three banks. In 1909 one person, James McKernan, served as postmaster, telegraph operator and land agent in charge of a sub-office of the Dominions Land Office. By the summer of 1912 there were three real estate agents in town and plans to build an immigration hall were drawn up. It was subsequently opened in 1913. By early 1913 the postmaster was complaining of having to work eighteen hours day owing to the massive 111% increase in money orders and postal notes, from $19,509.55 in 1911 to $41,177.47 in 1912 and a 59% increase in the sale of postage stamps.[99] The local newspaper, the *Northern News* reported that building permits for 1913 would total about $750,000, which would be more than $17,000,000.00 in current dollars.[100] Some of the building projects for that year included

the Methodist (later the United) Church, the Gagnon Block, the Olivier Block, the Public (Brick) School, and several other buildings and offices. In addition to this construction the Town embarked on an ambitious program of public works that included gas works, road grading, sidewalk construction, a sewage systems and septic plant and $165,000 for water works—for which Town Council authorized the sale of $86,000 in debentures to help fund the project.[101] The *Northern News* even reported that a survey had been conducted to lay a subway along what was then Litchfield Avenue (now 50 Avenue).[102] What partly fed these building projects were two sawmills, two retail lumber yards, two brick yards, one of which was turning out 15,000 bricks per day, and a concrete (cement) plant.

The Gateway to the Last West, Athabasca Landing, c. 1911. Athabasca Archives, 735.

This construction boom was accompanied by an ambitious booster campaign that sought to advertise Athabasca's appeal. Although the idea of Athabasca as "The Gateway to the North" did not die, by 1911 it was supplemented with slogans like "Athabasca Landing The Gateway To The Last Great West" and "Athabasca Landing, The Town to Tie To."[103] Those who tied to the town early did so much more economically than those who came later. Lots which had sold for between $100.00 and $200.00 in 1910 were selling for an average of $2000.00 by 1912. One of the most impressive sell offs occurred on Friday, December 15, 1911 when in the space of about six hours 170 Hudson's Bay Company lots sold for a total of $175,000.00.

Opening sale of lots by the Hudson's Bay Company, December 1911. Glenbow Archives, PA-3689-224.

The following summer, in August 1912, A.A. Greer's real estate office sold nine lots to someone from Eastern Canada who paid an average of $3,622.00 per lot.[104] The real estate boom in Athabasca was nearly matched by a homestead boom. In April 1911 the *Northern News* reported that the number of homesteads for which people filed at Athabasca during the first three months of 1911 "exceeded that of the same period last year by over 1500 (homestead entries) and also exceeded the number of entries for the entire previous year."[105] Who came? Although a full blown analysis of land surveys and tax assessments remains to be done, two separate studies based on family histories and homestead entry forms have suggested the following:[106]

Place of Birth	Percentage Frequency
United States of America	36-39%
Canada	27-29%
United Kingdom (Great Britain)	22-23%
Europe	14-15%
Other	1%

The overwhelming majority, about seventy per cent, of settlers were Anglophones. This aspect of the wider boom was aided by two farm implement agencies, two livery and feed stables and five hauling business that were known at the time as "dray" business (a dray was a low cart without sides designed to carry heavy loads) and, after May 1912, by the Canadian Northern Railroad. There was even a boom—now long forgotten—in the capture and sale of live foxes, some selling for as much as $6,000.00. In one case a black female fox was captured and sold for $2,350.00 and resold within an hour for $3,500.00.[107]

Harry Overholt's fox farm. Athabasca Archives 286.

The sum total of all these activities was an explosive colonial settler boom and it was that boom that led to the actual building

of the town. Small wonder that Forest Day would later write that it seemed like Athabasca "grew up almost overnight."[108] In this regard Athabasca more or less followed a classic pattern of municipal boosterism in the period before the outbreak of the First World War. Alan Artibise, a leading urban historian, has written that boosterism during this period

> …focused on a variety of policies: rapid and early achievement of legal, city status; bonusing of railways and industry; the attraction of immigrants; the expansion of civic boundaries; the adoption of a form of the single-tax; efforts to attain status as both provincial capital and home of a provincial university; governmental reform; deficit financing; and huge public works programmes, especially in the areas of urban transportation, power development, and water and sewerage works.[109]

With the exception of trying to become the home of a provincial university, Athabasca falls quite neatly within every one of Artibise's categories (there had even been some interest expressed in becoming the provincial capital in 1905, though it is doubtful if Athabasca's bid received serious consideration).

The interesting phenomenon that will require a much more complex explanation beyond the scope of this study is how and why people thought the boom would never end. Even a major fire that struck the downtown core of Athabasca on August 5, 1913 and destroyed thirty-five businesses only slightly dampened spirits. At least two authors have argued that the fire dealt an irreparable blow to the town.[110] In fact, if anything, the fire extended the period of the boom at a time when the rest of the Canadian economy was beginning to experience a downturn. *The Athabasca Times* estimated the damage "conservatively at $335,000." Over the course of the remainder of 1913 and into 1914 about $100,000 went into new construction,

including a substantial outlay on the new Grand Union Hotel which opened its doors in January 1914, barely six months after the fire. One newspaper boasted that "Athabasca will rise from the ashes like a phoenix and will soon outstrip her former self in all lines of progressive development." Indeed, for a time the town continued to boom, now fuelled by additional outlays for a faulty water system which completely failed to supply enough water to fight the fire.[111]

The Grand Union Hotel on fire August 5, 1913. Athabasca Archives, 16758.

The problem with booms and especially with Anglo colonial settler booms is that they inevitably go bust. There were hints of problems across Western Canada as early as the summer of 1913. In June the Deputy Receiver General in Winnipeg, Manitoba reported that "the present financial stringency is being felt very acutely throughout this whole Western Country and businessmen are inclined to take a gloomy view of the outlook."[112] From Victoria, British Columbia D.B. McConnan, the Deputy Receiver General, reported a few months later that there was "a terrible falling off. [The]…Real Estate business has gone flat, there is practically nothing doing."[113] In early July 1913 *The Athabasca Times* reported that "Athabasca, like many other places in eastern and western Canada, has suffered some inconvenience on account of the sudden and unlooked for tightening up of the money market." The newspaper brushed off this development on the grounds that Athabasca was "favorably [sic] regarded in financial circles."[114] By the fall of 1913, however, W.T. White, the federal Minister of Finance, was warning Prime Minister Robert Borden of "a possible falling-off of revenues," advising that "no further tenders should be called in cases where the work can stand until the next year."[115] After completing a tour of Western Canada another government official observed in December 1913: "Throughout the whole West the number of unemployed is considerably larger than in former years. Unemployment is not confined to any particular trade or occupation but is general." In early January 1914 *The Athabasca Times* made another passing reference to tighter credit and then, buried away on the last page of the January 29, 1914 edition, was the following notice:

I, Geo. H. Wyatt, carrying on business as a Dry Goods Merchant, Coles Street, beg to announce that, in order to improve my financial position in other connections, I am now engaged

SELLING OUT

my Large and Entire Stock[117]

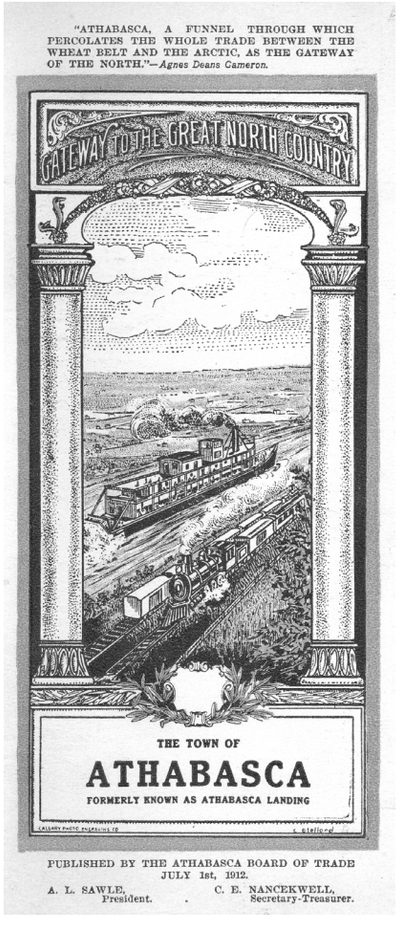
By April 1914 lots which had been selling for thousands of dollars were going on sale for seventy-five. Before the summer had ended a number of businesses had folded and at the end of the 1914 freighting season Peace River Jim Cornwall—the "Apostle of the North"—announced that he was closing operations in Athabasca.[118]

What was happening was that outside investment and easy credit was beginning to dry up. Between 1900 and 1914 foreign investment in Canada climbed from $1.225 billion to about $4 billion. Seventy-two per cent of that investment came from Britain and the lion's share of it went into Western Canada.[119] One investment paper pointed out in June 1914 that British investors "have applied for municipal and city bonds, thinking that Canada would benefit by the money, whereas the bulk has been swallowed by issuing houses, financial parasites, and underwriters. …People begin to realize that Canada is playing the risky game of keeping solvent by borrowing more with which to pay back, and that only while money is advanced can the country keep straight."[120] This situation was not entirely lost on the editor of *The Athabasca Times*, who noted in a small column in March 1914: "As the town has found out to its cost, it is very easy to fall into a financial hole, but it is a very difficult matter to climb out." The paper chose to downplay the implication of this development by making reference to the "business-like [Town] council" and hoping "the town's affairs will be straightened up within a short time."[121] In the end the Town's affairs were not straightened out and in 1919 the Provincial Government ended up appointing an administrator to oversee financial affairs.[122]

The overall situation was compounded by the news and then the realization that the main railway lines were going to bypass Athabasca. It is important to note, however, that this was not the root cause of the bust. The root cause was the credit crunch and most of Canada plunged into a depression in 1913 and 1914. Certainly railroads were part of the problem. Some have argued that "all four western provinces … had recklessly participated in financing the new transcontinentals and their myriad networks of branch lines." Nonetheless, a big part of the problem stemmed from the fact that that the previous Liberal administration, as Prime Minister Borden later recalled, had underwritten three transcontinental railways "for which the credit of Canada was pledged." The Prime Minister feared that the government might have "…to face … the actual or potential insolvence [sic, insolvency] of the four western provinces if aid was withheld."[123] In the end several of those railroads, including the Canadian Northern, either went bankrupt or nearly bankrupt and the federal government ended up nationalizing railways and creating the Canadian National Railway.

Town folk gathered at the train station to send off Athabasca's young men to enlist, 1914. Athabasca Archives, 16753.

The general situation was compounded by the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, though it is again important to note that the war was really more of a coincidental rather than a causal factor of the Town's growing misfortunes. The outbreak of the war, accompanied as it was by an outburst of patriotism and euphoria, probably softened somewhat the growing realization that the town was sinking into an economic morass. About 110 men from



Board of Trade promotional brochure, 1912. Mr Nancekvill's name is mispelt. Athabasca Archives, accession number 85.42.

Athabasca and the neighbouring hamlet of Colinton fought in the First World War. While this was not an insignificant contribution to the war effort, it was not enough to cripple the town. But as the money supply and credit tightened the depression deepened; businesses began to dissolve and the exodus began. At the height of the colonial settler boom the population of Athabasca was between 1,900 and 2,000 (*Henderson's Alberta Gazetteer and Directory* put it at 2,500). By 1916 it had slipped to 497 and by 1921 it had fallen to 425.[124] More than 200 towns in Alberta lost between 45% and 100% of their populations during the great bust, so Athabasca did not suffer alone.[125] It would be more than fifty years before the population would recover. But that is another story.

Why Athabasca: Some Concluding Remarks

At the beginning of this short study I noted that I had been haunted in a peculiar way by a comment that Marian Little recalled the members of the school board making during deliberations about the construction of the Brick School in 1913. "What is needed up here is a symbol of the permanence of British institutions," the board had declared. According to Little, when the school was completed the Department of Education was so impressed that it included pictures of the building in a promotional handbook sent to Britain, presumably to attract immigrants to Alberta. What is striking about Little's recollection is the cultural attachment to things British.

Laying the cornerstone ceremony, Athabasca School, September 1913. Athabasca Archives.

It was certainly the case that the School Board was made up of the elite of Athabasca and they were all of Anglo descent. It took me a long time to figure out that it was the common cultural ancestry and the attachment to Anglo-Saxon structures that was the point of the exercise. And when that development is linked to the Anglo

colonial settler revolution the founding of the Town of Athabasca begins to make a great deal more sense. Why? The short answer is that many writers have argued that it was transportation that built Athabasca. What I have tried to show here is that while transportation may have been an important sub-theme, the Landing had been a transportation transhipment point for more than thirty-years before any semblance of a town was built. Indeed, if one were to take 1876 as the starting point and 1911 as the real beginning of the building of the town, then it is closer to thirty-five years. In this sense there were complex parallel historical developments; one based on transportation, one based on the building of the town and yet another based on the homesteaders who came to the Athabasca area. My focus here has been primarily on the town and my contention is that the building of the town must be understood within the context of a much larger Anglo colonial settler boom Western Canada experienced between 1905 and 1914. That boom was framed as the "Last Best West" or similarly framed slogans and it should come as no great surprise that the local newspaper *Northern News* ran part of its masthead as "the Last West." In the end, a better description, to borrow a phrase from another author, might be that Athabasca was simply a "West Too Far."[126]

Endnotes

1. For example, C.D. Denney, *The Athabasca Landing Trail* (Edmonton: Privately Published, 1970-71), 1; J.G. MacGregor, "The Athabasca Trail," New Trail Magazine, Winter 1951, 213 and J.G. MacGregor, *The Land of the Twelve Foot Davis* (Edmonton: Applied Art Products, 1952), 289. In early January 1911 Robert F. Truss, editor of the *Northern News* wrote that Athabasca would become an economic powerhouse and distribution point "in the natural course of events, because in the very nature of things they can not help themselves." *Northern News*, 7 January 1911.
2. See E.J. McCullough, *Prehistoric Cultural Dynamics of the Lac La Biche Region*, Archaeological Survey of Alberta, Occasional Paper No. 18 (Edmonton: Alberta Culture, Historical Resources Division, 1982); Ruth Gruhn, *Archaeological Research at Calling Lake, Northern Alberta*, Archaeological Survey of Canada, Paper No. 99 (Ottawa: National Museum of Man Mercury Series, 1981) and Gregory A. Johnson, *Lac La Biche Chronicles: The Early Years* (Lac La Biche: Portage College and the Town of Lac La Biche, 1999). To be sure, a small number of artifacts have been found in the area around Athabasca but nothing on the scale to be found in and around Lac La Biche.
3. *Northern News*, Athabasca, Alberta, 23 September 1911.
4. Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1946, "Report on the Census of the Prairie Provinces." See also Donald Norman George Stone, "The Process of Rural Settlement in the Athabasca Area" (M.A. Thesis, Department of Geography, University of Alberta, 1970), 61.
5. *Athabasca Echo*, Athabasca, Alberta, 8 February 1937.
6. E. David Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History* (Athabasca: Athabasca Historical Society, 1986). The research team included Eileen Hendy, Dr. Josephine Brown, Alice Donahue, Louis Da Costa, Frank Falconer Jr., Edith Jordan, Vi Kowalchuk, Morgan Newington, Annie Rypien and Robert Tannas.
7. Provincial Archives of Alberta (PAA), Edmonton, 80.22, "Proclamation," 19 October 1911.
8. Note the following comment an anonymous Hudson's Bay Company shareholder made at a meeting held in London, England on 12 July 1871: "The

policy of the Hudson's Bay Company from the beginning was to keep out every vestige of civilization and every attempt at colonization." Quoted in Arthur Ray, *The Canadian Fur Trade in the Industrial Age* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1990), 3.

9. Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg, A-12/l103/1, folio 1. The ledger indicates that the company paid $1280.00 for the land and $317.22 for the survey. See also Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 32.
10. Toby Morantz. *The White Man's Gonna Getcha: The Colonial Challenge to the Crees in Quebec* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 98.
11. E.E. Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), 143.
12. Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857*, 133. General James Murray, the Governor of Quebec, coined the term "Licentious Fanaticks" to describe the new traders.
13. Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857*, 163.
14. R. Cole Harris, ed. *The Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume 1: From the Beginning to 1800* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987): Plate 62. The HBC established 23 and the St Lawrence traders 66 posts. In the period before 1774 only 17 new posts had been established.
15. E.E. Rich claims that Pond brought out about sixty tons of furs (about 80,000 beaver pelts). See Barry M. Gough, "Peter Pond," in Francess G. Halpenny, ed. *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol V: 1801-1820* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983): 683. On other aspects of Peter Pond's contributions see John W. Chalmers, ed. *The Land of Peter Pond* (Edmonton: Boreal Institute for Northern Studies, 1982).
16. Though it should be made clear that there were other "elbows" such as the Elbow of the Bow and Pembina Rivers.
17. See Rich, *The Fur Trade*, 221-32. For a Métis perspective see Lawrence J. Barkwell, *The Battle of Seven Oaks: a Métis Perspective* (Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, 2010).
18. Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 84 and Rich, *The Fur Trade*, 240. Another twenty-one year extension was granted in 1838.These extensions carried implications for the Royal Proclamation of 1763 that guaranteed First Nations peoples certain rights. Rupert's Land was excluded from the Proclamation but the legal status of the extension of the HBC Royal Charter into the rest of what became Western Canada is still being debated.
19. See Hugh A. Dempsey, *Indian Tribes of Alberta* (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1986), 12.
20. For the larger story in the shift in HBC transportation policy see Johnson, *Lac La Biche Chronicles: The Early Years*, 87-91.
21. See Johnson, *Lac La Biche Chronicles*, 100-102. While there is a reasonably substantial body of historical material dealing with the area up to 1824, there is almost nothing on the period from 1824 to the early 1850s.
22. Bishop Henri Faraud, quoted in Johnson, *Lac La Biche Chronicles*, 178. I have placed a [sic] behind the term "Indians" because that term is problematic and is not particularly welcome in First Nations cultures today. Throughout this short study I use the term First Nations to refer to those peoples who were living in various places at the time of contact. The term "Indian" will only appear when a historical figure is quoted.
23. Quoted in Jean Hamelin, "Alexandre-Antonin Taché," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Volume XII (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 1003.
24. Raymond J.A. Huel, *Archbishop A.-A. Taché of St. Boniface: The "Good Fight" and Illusive Vision* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2003), 40.
25. There was one other reason behind these decisions and that was to beat the Protestant missionaries.
26. Archives Deschâtelets, Ottawa, TA0287, Monsignor Taché to Fathers Tissot and Maisonneuve, 18 July 1856. See also Juliette Champagne, *Mission Notre-Dame-des-Victoires Lac-la-Biche, 1853-1963*: *Entrepôt et Couvent-pensionnat Interpretative Matrix and Narrative History,* (Lac la Biche Mission Historical Society and Historic Sites Services Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism, 1992), 34. A North canoe was a standard freighting canoe, usually about twenty-five feet in length. A "piece" was a package of goods weighing ninety pounds or roughly 41 kilograms.
27. Some standard accounts include Emerson Hough, "The Commerce of the North: How the Fur Gets Through," *Saturday Evening Post*, 14 March 1914, 28-31; F.J. Alcock, "Scow Brigade on the Athabaska," *Canadian Geographical Journal,* February 1932, 98; Francis Dickie, "Louis the Strong – 'Cap Shot'," *The Western Producer Magazine*, 6 December 1962, 1-2; and J.G.

MacGregor, *Paddle Wheels to Bucket-Wheels on the Athabasca* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 101-2 and 148-150.

28. Archives des Soeurs Grises de Montréal, Montreal, Quebec, File L025/B, 2, *,02, Correspondance générale 1868-1870, Copie d'un Journal adressé à Demoiselle Symes, 8 June 1868, pp. 1-39 (Demoiselle Symes was a benefactor who lived in London, England). Parts of this journal are translated and appear in P. Duchaussois, OMI, *The Grey Nuns in the Far North*, 1867-1917 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1919), 92-117 (quote is at 105).
29. Copie d'un Journal adressé à Demoiselle Symes, quoted in Duchaussois, *The Grey Nuns in the Far North*, 106-7.
30. Quoted in Champagne, *Mission Notre-Dame-des-Victoires*, 75.
31. See Champagne, *Mission Notre-Dame-des-Victoires*, 73; Archives Deschâtelets, Ottawa, HE 1821 F26K, H. Faraud à J. Lestanc, 13 juillet 1866; and Duchaussois, *The Grey Nuns in the Far North*, 108.
32. Raymond Huel, "The Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the Hudson's Bay Company: a Mutuality of interests in the Interior of the Canadian North-West," *Vie Oblate Life*, 57, 3 (décembre-december 1998), 448 and Champagne, *Mission Notre-Dame-des-Victoires*, 79-80.
33. C.P. Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict, Volume 1: 1867-1921* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), 17.
34. These fears had some foundation. In 1868, for example, President Andrew Jackson said that he supported "the acquisition and incorporation into our Federal Union of the several adjacent continental and insular communities as speedily as it can be done peacefully, lawfully, and without violation of natural justice, faith or honor. Foreign possession or control of those communities has hitherto hindered the growth and impaired the influence of the United States." Quoted in Gerald M. Craig, *The United States and Canada* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1968), 148.
35. An older but still useful work on Confederation and the transfer of Rupert's Land is W.L. Morton, *The Critical Years: The Union of British North America, 1857-1873* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), 204-44. Confederation was the union of the three British North American colonies of Canada, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia in 1867. Following the Rebellion of 1837 Upper and Lower Canada were united in 1841 to form the Province of Canada or just "Canada" but many people continued to refer to Upper or Lower Canada or to Canada East and Canada West.

36. *Charters, Statutes, Orders in Council Relating to the Hudson's Bay Company* (London: Hudson's Bay Company, 1931), 197.
37. A.A. den Otter, "The Hudson's Bay Company's Prairie Transportation Problem, 1870-85," in John E. Foster, ed., *The Developing West: Essays on Canadian History in Honor of Lewis H. Thomas* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1983), 27.
38. A.A. den Otter, "The Hudson's Bay Company's Prairie Transportation Problem, 1870-85," 27-29 and Arthur J. Ray, *The Canadian Fur Trade in the Industrial Age*, 18-19.
39. Quoted in A.A. den Otter, "The Hudson's Bay Company's Prairie Transportation Problem, 1870-85," 29.
40. Quoted in E. David Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 18. This document appeared in William A. Oppen's University of Alberta Honours Paper, "Athabasca Landing" (1971-72), 23, and was drawn from correspondence he had with one Mrs. J. Craig at the Hudson's Bay Archives in London, England. A copy of Oppen's paper can be found in Alice B. Donahue Library and Archives, Athabasca, Alberta (hereafter Athabasca Archives), Accession 98.16.
41. Quoted in C.D. Denney, The Athabasca Landing Trail, 2 and Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 18.
42. Arthur J. Ray, *The Canadian Fur Trade in the Industrial Age*, 26
43. Quoted in C.D. Denney, *The Athabasca Landing Trail*, 2.
44. Quoted in A.A. den Otter, "The Hudson's Bay Company's Prairie Transportation Problem, 1870-85," 34.
45. Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 19.
46. Oppen, "Athabasca Landing." 25.
47. Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 22.
48. HBC Records, B.60/b/3, McDougall to Wrigley, 15 January 1885.
49. In *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 24-26, David Gregory mentions that in late 1881 Chief Factor Richard Hardisty had been ordered to send scows down the Athabasca River. Little is known about the outcome of that particular trip but it seems fair to assume that it was not entirely successful given the tone of McDougall's January 1885 letter to Wrigley. Much more research needs to be conducted on the ten or so years between 1876 and 1886 to ascertain if there were other factors holding back decisions about transportation. On the closing of the Methye Portage see C.S.

Mackinnon, "Some Logistics of Portage La Loche (Methy)," *Prairie Forum*, 1980, Vol. 5, No. 1, 62. Methy was an alternate spelling of Methye.

50. The term official is used here quite deliberately. There are some local oral traditions that lay claim to earlier habitation but nothing has so far turned up in the historical record to indicate people were living at Athabasca when the trail was initially completed in the mid-1870s.
51. HBC Records, D25/19, fo 293, Inspection Report, 9/10 October 1891 and Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 32 for information on the steamship *Athabasca*.
52. Hudson's Bay Company Records, D25/19/fo. 293, Inspection Report by J. McDougall, 9-10 October 1891; Oppen, "Athabasca Landing," 44; and Report of the North West Mounted Police for 1895, 109.
53. HBC Records, B242/e/3 fo.4 Report by H. Young, N.D. 1888. A copy of this report is held in Alice B. Donahue Library and Archives, Athabasca, Alberta, Acc. 86.37/7.
54. HBC Records, B.242/e/1 fo.4, Inspection Report, Athabasca Landing Post, E.K. Beeston Inspecting Officer, 26 September 1889.
55. Quoted in Richard Y. Secord, ed. *A Builder of the Northwest, The Life and Times of Richard Secord, 1860-1935* (Edmonton: Richard Y. Secord, 1981), 20.
56. Edmonton Bulletin, 2 June 1888 and Secord, ed. *A Builder of the Northwest, The Life and Times of Richard Secord*, 21.
57. Hudson's Bay Company Records, B242/e/3 fo. 1, Harrison Young memorandum, "Athabasca Landing," December 1889.
58. Hudson's Bay Company Records, D20/60/fo. 174, Young to Wrigley, 22 May 1890; quoted in Secord, ed. *A Builder of the Northwest, The Life and Times of Richard Secord*, 27 and Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 36.
59. Hudson's Bay Company Records, D20/60/fo. 174, Young to Wrigley, 22 May 1890.
60. Quoted in Shirlee Anne Smith, "Richard Charles Hardisty," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, 1881-1890, Volume XI, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=5565.
61. See *Edmonton Bulletin*, 21 June 1890. On August 9, 1890 the *Bulletin* reported that "the Hudson's Bay Company are now the sole traders of Chipewyan." See also Secord, ed. *A Builder of the Northwest, The Life and Times of Richard Secord*, 26.
62. Hudson's Bay Company Records, D25/19 fo. 293, Inspection Report by Inspecting Officer J. McDougall, 9/10 October 1891.
63. For example, H. Somers Somerset, *The Land of the Muskeg* (London: William Heinemann and Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1895), xxii.
64. *Northern News*, "People We Know," 23 September 1911.
65. Quoted in Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 69-70. Hanbury's book was published in London in 1904 under the title *Sport and Travel in the Northland of Canada*.He later moved to San Francisco and died at nearby White Sulphur Springs in October 1910. See *San Francisco Examiner*, 26 October 1910.
66. Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1946, "Report on the Census of the Prairie Provinces;" Stone, "The Process of Rural Settlement in the Athabasca Area," 61 and *Northern News*, "People We Know," 23 September 1911.
67. Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 108.
68. Robert Service, *Ploughman of the Moon: An Adventure into Memory* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1945), 408.
69. Athabasca Archives, 85.42, Board of Trade Pamphlet, "Gateway to the Great North Country," 1 July 1912, 27.
70. *Northern News*, 7 January 1911; also quoted in Donald Norman George Stone, "The Process of Rural Settlement in the Athabasca Area, Alberta" (M.A. Thesis, Department of Geography, University of Alberta, Edmonton, 1970), 68.
71. *Northern News*, 11 March 1911.
72. Athabasca Archives, 85.70, "The Landing Trail Post," 1961, Echo Printing.
73. James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 394. Belich notes that "Leaving aside the 400 million people in Britain's subject empire, English-speakers grew over sixteenfold in 1790-1930, from around 12 million to around 200 million – a far greater rate than Indian and Chinese growth, as well as Russian and Hispanic" (3-4).
74. Populations figures retrieved from http://canadachannel.ca/HCO/index.php/5._The_Immigration_Boom_1895-1914
75. Statistics Canada, Population, urban and rural, by province and territory, retrieved from: http://www40.statcan.gc.ca/l01/cst01/demo62j-eng.htm and see also Howard Palmer, with Tamara Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*

(Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1990), 77-79.

76. Figures from Palmer and Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, 137 and Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 107.
77. Robert Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook, *Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 54.
78. Numbers may vary depending on the source. I have used numbers posted at the Canadian History Portal: http://canadachannel.ca/HCO/index.php/5._The_Immigration_Boom_1895-1914. Between 1890 and 1900 about 414,155 immigrants came to Canada. If that time line is extended, from 1890 to 1905, about 970,321 people immigrated to Canada over the fifteen year stretch. Compare that to the period from 1910 to 1914, when 1,545,237 immigrants came to Canada. If that time line is extended back just a bit to 1907, about 2,134,666 people came to Canada. Certainly not all of those immigrants travelled west but the basic point to be made is that it is problematic to use the CPR as a causal factor to explain the boom.
79. Brown and Cook, *Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed*, 68.
80. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, 409.
81. Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 53-67, devotes an entire chapter to the Klondike Gold Rush.
82. Canada, Privy Council, O.C. No. 2749, 6 December 1898; Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), *Treaty No. 8, Made June 21, 1899 and Adhesions, Reports, Etc.* (Ottawa: Queens Printer and Controller of Stationery, 1966), 7.
83. Was the HBC reserve set up on land that was not surrendered by treaty? Or was the area of the Town and everything east of the Athabasca River surrendered under Treaty 6? The answers to those questions are important but are outside the scope of this short study.
84. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, 185 and see also 414 where he contends that "The progress industry, not wheat exporting, was the boom-time prairies main employer."
85. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, 195.
86. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, 195.
87. Athabasca Archives, 85.42. Gauthier's statement appeared in a promotional pamphlet published by the Athabasca Board of Trade on 1 July 1912.
88. Athabasca Archives, 85.42.
89. See L.V. Kelly, *North with Peace River Jim* (Calgary: Glenbow-Alberta Institute Historical Paper No. 2, 1972). This is a reprint of Kelly's original 1910 book, edited and with an introduction by Hugh A. Dempsey. The eighteen men who joined Cornwall included Emerson Hough, then a famous novelist and journalist who had connections with Theodore Roosevelt and Arthur E. McFarlane of the famed *Saturday Evening Post*. On James Cornwall see Harold Fryer, *Alberta: The Pioneer Years* (Langley, B.C.: Stagecoach Publishing, 1977), 85-90 and see also David W. Leonard, *The Last Great West: The Agricultural Settlement of the Peace River Country to 1914* (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Ltd., 2006).
90. *Northern News*, 24 February 1912.
91. The role commercial elites played in the Western Canadian boom is well documented. See, for example, Alan F.J. Artibise, "City-Building in the Canadian West: From Boosterism to Corporatism," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 17, 3 (Autumn 1982), 35-44 and Theodore Binnema, "'A Feudal Chain of Vassalage': Limited Identities in the Prairie West, 1870-1896," *Prairie Forum*, 20, 2 (Spring 1995), 1-18.
92. Athabasca Archives, 82.25.
93. For example, Kenneth H. Norrie, "The National Policy and the Rate of Prairie Settlement: A Review," in R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer, eds., *The Prairie West: Historical Readings* (Edmonton: Pica Pica Press, 1985), 246-50 downplays boosterism as does Jeremy Adelman, *Frontier Development: Land, Labour and Capital on the Wheatlands of Argentina and Canada, 1890-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
94. Athabasca Archives, "*Go To Athabasca Landing*," nd. But probably 1910.
95. *Northern News*, 24 February 1912.
96. *Northern News*, 24 February 1912.
97. See Andrew S. Thompson, *Imperial Britain: The Empire in British Politics, c. 1880-1932* (London: Pearson Education, 2000), 17-18.Howard Palmer, *Alberta: A New History* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1990), 78-79 makes a similar point but adds the social Darwinist dimension.
98. *Northern News*, 24 February 1912.
99. *Northern News* 25 January 1913.
100. *Northern News*, 25 January 1913. The current dollars is an average derived from several internet based inflation indexes.
101. *The Athabasca Times* 8 January 1914
102. *Northern News*, 25 January 1913.

103. Athabasca Archives, 85.25 and *Northern News*, 18 March 1911.
104. *Northern News*, 23 December 1911 and Oppen, "Athabasca Landing," 117-18.
105. *Northern News*, 15 April 1911.
106. Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 91 and Stone, "The Process of Rural Settlement in the Athabasca Area," 117-18.
107. *The Athabasca Times*, 1 January 1914 and Athabasca Archives, 02.16, Scott Willey, "Reminiscing."
108. Athabasca Archives, 85.70, "The Landing Trail Post," 1961, Echo Printing.
109. Alan F.J. Artibise, "City-Building in the Canadian West: From Boosterism to Corporatism," 37.
110. Oppen, "Athabasca Landing," 85 and Judy Larmour, *Laying Down the Line: A History of Land Surveying in Alberta* (Victoria: Brindle and Glass Publishing, 2005), 110.
111. Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 141-47.
112. Brown and Cook, *Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed*, 198-99.
113. Library and Archives Canada, RG 19, Records of the Department of Finance, Deputy Minister's Office, vol. 281, D.B. McConnan, Deputy Receiver General, Victoria to T. Cooper Boville, Deputy Minister of Finance, Ottawa, 21 October 1913; also quoted in Brown and Cook, *Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed*, 372, note 44.
114. *The Athabasca Times,* 10 July 1913.
115. W.T. White to Robert Borden, 11 October 1913, quoted in Brown and Cook, *Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed*, 199.
116. Warren Caragata, *Alberta Labour: A Heritage Untold* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1979), 52.
117. *The Athabasca Times*, 8 January and 29 January 1914.
118. Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 148-49.
119. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, 412-13.
120. Quoted in Brown and Cook, *Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed*, 199.
121. *The Athabasca Times*, 12 March 1914.
122. Oppen, "Athabasca Landing," 94.
123. Quoted in Brown and Cook, *Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed*, 201.
124. Gregory, *Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History*, 194.

125. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, 418 and David D. Jones, *Empire of Dust: Settling and Abandoning the Prairie Dry Belt* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1987), passim.
126. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, 418-22.