

# Athabasca Historical Walking Tour

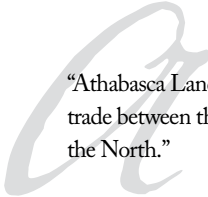


James Hislop's and Ed Nagle's outfit leaving Athabasca Landing, 1901. Photograph courtesy of Provincial Archives of Alberta, B-2863.

# Athabasca Historical Walking Tour

This brochure attempts to interest visitors as well as local residents in some of the heritage buildings in the Town of Athabasca and points of historical significance along the riverfront. The self-guided tour begins at the Athabasca Train Station. From there you can walk either along the riverfront or toward the downtown core. A map with the route of the tour is included on the back of the brochure.





“Athabasca Landing, a funnel through which percolates the whole trade between the wheat-belt and the Arctic, is the true gateway of the North.”

Agnes Deans Cameron,  
*The New North* 1909



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This brochure is a complete rewrite of two previous editions and a revision of the 2008 edition. It has been prepared by Greg Johnson, Marilyn Mol and Margaret Anderson, with generous assistance from Gina Payzant and the Athabasca Archives.

While every effort has been made to ensure that the entries in this booklet are accurate, history is not an exact science and we have no doubt that some inaccuracies have found a home here. If you spot any problems please let us know. The material in this booklet is under copyright and may not be reproduced without the permission of the authors.

Text photographs courtesy Marilyn Mol, Christine Nelson, Margaret Anderson, Alice B. Donahue Library and Archives and Alan Hunter (page 18).

Cover photograph courtesy of the  
Provincial Archives of Alberta, B2863.  
Inside cover photograph courtesy of  
Glenbow Archive, NA-2788-5.

First edition 1995  
Second Edition 2000  
Third Edition 2008  
Forth Edition 2017 and 2018  
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My life is gliding downwards; it speeds swifter to the day  
When it shoots the last dark canyon to the plains of Far-away.  
But while its stream is running through the years that are to be,  
The mighty voice of Canada will ever call to me.  
I shall hear the roar of rivers where the rapids foam and tear,  
I shall smell the virgin upland with its balsam-laden air,  
And shall dream that I am riding down the winding woody vale,  
With the packer and the packhorse on the Athabaska Trail.  
I have passed the warden cities at the Eastern water-gate,  
Where the hero and the martyr laid the corner-stone of State,  
The habitant, Coureur-de-bois and hardy voyageur.  
Where lives a breed more at need to venture or endure?  
I have seen the gorge at Erie where the roaring waters run,  
I have crossed the Inland Ocean, lying golden in the sun.  
But the last and best and sweetest is the ride by hill and dale,  
With the packer and the packhorse on the Athabaska Trail.  
I'll dream again of fields of grain that stretch from sky to sky,  
And the little prairie hamlets where the cars go roaring by,  
Wooden hamlets as I saw them—noble cities still to be  
To girdle stately Canada with gems from sea to sea.  
Mother of a mighty manhood, Land of glamour and of hope,  
From the eastward sea-swept Islands to the sunny Western slope,  
Ever more my heart is with you, ever more till life shall fail,  
I'll be out with pack and packer on the Athabaska Trail.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle,  
“The Athabaska Trail,” June 18, 1914

## The Origins of Athabasca

The origins of the modern town of Athabasca are to be found in the complex interplay of the fur trade and missionary activity, quirks of geography and shifts in transportation technology during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the much wider Anglo-dominated colonial settler revolution which swept into western Canada in the first decade of the twentieth century. First Nations peoples had lived and traveled along various sections of the Athabasca River for perhaps thousands of years before people of European origin began



Library and Archives Canada, a051139.

arriving toward the end of the eighteenth century. In 1778 Peter Pond, an American fur trader and associate of the North West Company, wintered on a section of the river near present day Fort McMurray and took out a small fortune in high quality furs. It was not long before the rival Hudson's Bay Company began moving into the region. The fur traders were followed by Catholic and Protestant missionaries who began establishing missions and engaging in a stiff competition for Christian converts. Soon the search was on for quicker and cheaper transportation routes into the region.

The Athabasca River was an obvious choice for a transportation corridor. From its headwaters in Jasper National Park the river flows across much of central Alberta before heading north to Lake Athabasca where it forms the southernmost headstream of Canada's longest river, the Mackenzie. At 1231 km (about 739 miles) long, the Athabasca is the thirteenth longest river in Canada. In a

curious way that unlucky number is an appropriate symbol for the river because one of the problems traders, travellers and missionaries confronted was a series of rapids between present day Athabasca and Fort McMurray. The most treacherous of these was the 1.6 km (one mile) long Grand Rapids, located about 260 km (165 miles) 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 (about thirty-two feet in half a mile and more than sixty-four feet over the mile long stretch of rough water). In 1867, Oblate missionaries, wanting to reduce their dependence on the Hudson's Bay Company for shipping, hired a twenty-six year old Métis boatman by the name of Louison Fosseneuve to transport a group of Grey Nuns from Lac La Biche to Fort Providence. Fosseneuve managed to pilot his scow through part of the rapids and demonstrated that the Athabasca River could be used to transport goods. Local legend has it that Fosseneuve "shot" the Grand Rapids in a flat bottom scow and became known as Captain Shot but it was really just a change in nickname. He had been Sure Shot the buffalo hunter before he became Captain Shot the river guide and a legendary figure in the North West who suffered a tragic death from blood poisoning a few months before the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.



Flooded HBC warehouse on the riverfront, 1904. Athabasca Archives, 00757.

In the meantime, the Hudson's Bay Company, having swallowed up the North West Company in what most Canadian historians mistakenly call a "merger" (it was



really more like a hostile takeover), constructed a trail from Edmonton to Fort Assiniboine, located 150 km (90 miles) to the north east of Edmonton. Much of the trail was little more than a corduroy road built over muskeg, making it a very dangerous pathway, and soon the search was on again for a better route. Traders and explorers had known of a section of the Athabasca River called the “Elbow.” It was a place about 150 km due north of Edmonton where the river dipped to the south and ran along a natural landing point before turning north again. On a map it looks just like a bent elbow and if you take a walk along the river front you will have to appreciate that what appears as a landing area was not made by people but is a natural quirk of geography.

The Hudson’s Bay Company decided to take advantage of this geographical feature and in 1875 began constructing a road from Edmonton to the “Elbow.” A makeshift track was completed the following year and dubbed the Athabasca Landing Trail. The Hudson’s Bay Company built a small seasonal trading post at Athabasca Landing in 1877 (not in 1848 as is commonly claimed). Commercial activity expanded throughout the 1880s, especially after the Hudson’s Bay Company decided to make Athabasca the headquarters for its new network of steamboats. During the late 1890s, a significant number of adventurers and gold seekers traveled through Athabasca to the Yukon goldfields. Athabasca also served as the starting point for the Treaty 8 Commission in 1899. By the turn of the twentieth century, a “tent city” had sprung up along the river and the landing was developing into a boat building centre for traders and adventurers going northeast to Fort McMurray and northwest to the Peace River area. Local craftsmen constructed flat bottomed scows and York boats, many of which were dismantled and the wood used for construction purposes once the journey was completed. Stern-wheel paddle steamers were also built at Athabasca.

Yet, despite all this activity and claims of being “The Gateway to the North,” there was little in the way of permanent development and settlement. In 1897 the population of Athabasca was reported to be all of 10 persons of European origin. More than a decade later, in the 1911 Census of the Prairie Provinces, the population of the town officially stood at 227, with another 553 living in the surrounding area. When



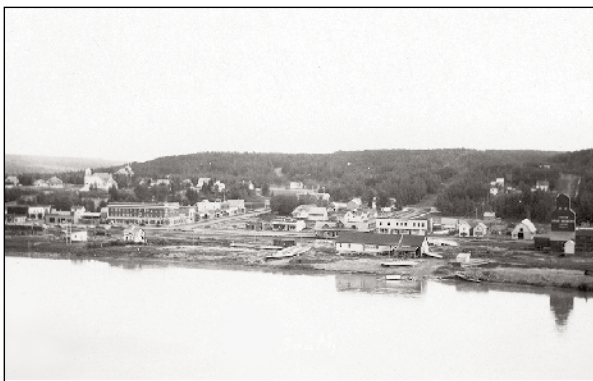
“Gateway to the Last West.” Athabasca Archives, 00734.

Robert W. Service, the famous “Bard of the Yukon,” passed through Athabasca in 1911 he described the place—somewhat ruefully—as “a huddle of shacks.” But Service also noted that Athabasca appeared to be booming. Indeed, by the end of 1912 the town had an estimated population of 1,100. The fur trade and economic spinoffs such as transportation certainly played a role in the early commercial development of Athabasca Landing but did little to promote the growth of the Town of Athabasca. That part of the story must be understood in the context of a much wider Anglo-dominated colonial settler revolution that was international in scope and largely fueled by a series of boom and bust cycles which eventually made its way into Western Canada. It is true that settlers began arriving in the Athabasca area around the turn of the century. In 1901, for example, a homesteader named Georges Shank came to Athabasca and began farming on a piece of land near present day Whispering Hills primary school. But settlement was sporadic. An immigration centre was opened in 1910 but it remained in operation for just six months. Then a boom really began to take hold. How significant was it? In 1901 Alberta’s (or what would become Alberta) population was about 73,000. By 1911 it had risen to about 374,000 and by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 there were close to 470,000 people in the province. During 1913, the influx into the north via Athabasca was enough to warrant the establishment of a more permanent immigration centre, making the town one of the four major immigration centres in Alberta (the others being located at Calgary, Edmonton and Red Deer).

Athabasca's population, which had numbered about 1,100 at the end of 1912, doubled by the end of 1913 and the Town was increasingly known as "The Gateway of the Last Great West."

This latter stage of the boom was largely driven by what some historians call the "progress industry," a term which describes a complex interplay of various economic activities at particular points in history. For the most part, the progress industry was driven by growth and development and that growth and development was in turn driven by a whole series of things: transportation infrastructure, speculative real-estate, immigration, access to easy credit and, perhaps above all, by expectations of a rosy future. In many ways Athabasca was a textbook case of the economic boom cycle associated with the progress industry. Some of the unbounded enthusiasm and optimism for the future can be seen in a pamphlet the local Board of Trade issued on Dominion Day in 1912:

"Athabasca is now an incorporated town of about one thousand inhabitants, with two schools, three churches, one hospital, two licensed hotels, 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, 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



Athabasca, c. 1914. Athabasca Archives, 00692.

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; and all this is here on account of the volume of business occasioned by the shipping through this "Inland Port," and it was all here before the completion of the railroad. What its growth will be after railroad connections are established must surely surpass all records of growth of Western Canada."

Even a major fire, which destroyed much of the downtown business sector on August 5, 1913, did not dampen spirits. In fact, the rebuilding that occurred in the aftermath of the fire probably served to extend the boom in Athabasca at a time when much of Western Canada was falling into an economic depression. The fundamental cause of that depression was a credit crunch and a steep decline in investment, much of which came from Great Britain. In Athabasca's case, the situation was compounded by some major shifts in transportation networks. The railroads to the Peace River country and to Fort McMurray not only made river transport obsolete but the major lines bypassed Athabasca. The town declined rapidly, from more than 2,000 in 1913-14 to 497 in 1916 and then to 425 in 1926. The town essentially went bankrupt in 1920 and would not enjoy full financial autonomy again until the 1970s. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s survival depended on the trapping and lumbering industries, and homesteaders from the United States, Great Britain, Quebec and Ontario and Eastern Europe. There was a brief revival of the old Athabasca Landing Trail during the construction of the Alaska Highway during the Second World War but the population would not hit the 1,000 mark until the 1950s, when the town began to experience some of the growing post-war economic prosperity.

Although Athabasca has benefitted and suffered from subsequent economic boom and bust cycles, the 1911 to 1914 boom was the one that established the town. It is not surprising that some of the outstanding buildings on the historical walking tour were constructed during that period. As you proceed along the tour you might stop, just for a moment, and ponder the fate of the hopes, the dreams and the aspirations of a bygone era.



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"The Cage," transportation across the Athabasca River. Athabasca Archives.

# 1 The Athabasca Train Station 5101 – 50th Avenue



Canadian Northern Railway train station, c. 1913. Athabasca Archives, 00679.

On May 14, 1912, amid much fanfare, the Canadian Northern Railway completed its line to Athabasca. The first train, likely piloted by George Clinton Messenger, arrived on May 25, 1912 at 11:30 in the morning. (George Clinton Messenger was born in 1872 and moved to Alberta from Ontario during the settler boom. He worked on railroads for some 40 years, much of it in the Big Valley-Drumheller area. He retired in 1936 to the Lahaieville district west of Athabasca. He died in 1945.)

A round trip from Edmonton took fourteen hours and cost \$5.40, a significant sum of money at the time. By September 1912, close to 180 passengers were arriving with each train, and by the following summer, daily train service was available in Athabasca. Local promoters believed that Athabasca would be a major depot connecting the prairies with the Canadian Northwest.

On September 7, 1912, Canadian Northern announced that Athabasca would get a station. At the end of September, construction began on a "standard second class station" using Plan 100-39. That meant a two-storey wood-frame (instead of brick) building. Designed by the architect Ralph Benjamin Pratt, the station was 92 feet long and 24 feet wide with a concrete basement. The main floor contained an office, a baggage room at one end of the station, an "express room" at the other end and two waiting rooms in between, one of which was designated a "women's waiting room." The second storey contained the station agent's living quarters. The main floor had white maple floors with burlap-covered walls. The station was completed by





Christmas 1912 at a cost of \$8274.00.

For a number of years, growth in the town of Athabasca centred on the station. Local entrepreneur Isaie Gagnon built a new hotel, The Athabasca, across the street. An early advertisement for the hotel boasted that it was “very new and up to date—opposite the train station.”

Passenger service was discontinued in the late 1940s. Freight and grain transport continued until 1993, when all train service stopped. Fortunately, the building was not destroyed and remains as a fine example of early railway architecture in Alberta. The Athabasca Heritage Society has played a key role in preservation and restoration of the building.

## 2 Bayliss Brothers / Kaspersky's Lumber 5102 – 50th Avenue

According to the best available information, this building might have been constructed some time after 1916 for Ernest and Harry Bayliss. The Bayliss brothers were employed as engineers for A.F.A. Coyne and Co., Petroleum Operators and



Prospectors. Subsequent records suggest that the building was purchased by Herbert Hayes in 1927. In 1933, Hayes sold it to Stefan Kaspersky, which is rather interesting given that it was the middle of the Great Depression. Nonetheless, Kaspersky managed to establish a very successful business and by 1934 he was also dealing in cement and bricks. Kaspersky's eventually became the largest lumber and hardware retailer in the Athabasca area. Stefan lived in the house and used the front part of the building as an office. In 1975 his son, Mike, took over the business and operated it until 1989, when it was dissolved. The building has since housed several local businesses, including a number of restaurants.

## 3 The Grand Union Hotel 4924 – 50th Street



Original Grand Union Hotel, c. 1911. Athabasca Archives, 02044.

Local entrepreneur Isaie Gagnon built the first Grand Union Hotel, probably in 1901 or 1902. The original building was a two-storey wooden-framed structure with balconies running the full length of the building along what was then Strathcona Street (now 50th Street). The hotel suffered some damage in the spring flood of 1904 and underwent a major renovation in 1907 when a third storey was added. It was then completely destroyed in the great fire of August 5, 1913.

At the time of the fire, it is not clear who actually owned the hotel. The Grand Union Hotel Company Limited had taken over the hotel in 1910, but there is some evidence to suggest that Gagnon still had a principal interest in the hotel



Grand Union Hotel, c. 1914. Athabasca Archives, 00963.

because he tried to sell it just before the fire. Gagnon owned a number of buildings in Athabasca, including the Athabasca Hotel. Unfortunately, he carried no insurance and suffered some heavy losses as a result of the fire. Shortly after the fire, the local newspaper reported that the Grand Union Hotel Company was going to construct a temporary building. It is not known if Gagnon was part of the Company at the time. Whoever was involved in the new venture, construction soon began on the new Grand Union Hotel. Architects Magoom and McDonald of Edmonton designed the new hotel and the firm of Charles Carmichael and Company were contracted to do the work.

The Grand Union Hotel opened again in January, 1914. The official grand opening took place on February 9, 1914, when manager Harry Campbell and his wife hosted a gala event attended by more than three hundred people.

Built on a 24-inch brick foundation, the new hotel measured 50 by 120 feet. It was three stories high. The basement housed a barber shop, billiard room, commercial sample room, fuel room, vegetable cellar, and cooling rooms.

The ground floor housed the office, a writing and check room, a dining room with a seating capacity of 150, a 20-by-59-foot barroom, and a rotunda that measured 30 by 40 feet. There were fireplaces in the dining room and the main rotunda, both constructed with native boulder stone. One newspaper reporter quipped that the fireplace grate in the lobby was a special place where one could find "a medley of humanity, railroad magnates, freighters, real estate agents and tradesmen, all hugging the attractive novelty as if it were a chunk of gold." The fireplace was dismantled and carted away in 1950.



Delivery behind the Grand Union Hotel. Athabasca Archives, 00919.

The second floor sported a large parlour as well as rooms and suites and a balcony which could accommodate fifteen people. The third floor was reserved for rooms and suites. The local newspaper boasted that the new hotel featured "48 rooms, 8 suites, 14 toilets, electric lights in all rooms, 60 lbs. water pressure all over the building, and the comfort of each room guaranteed."

What price for all this luxury? Rooms and suites ranged from \$1.<sup>50</sup> to \$2.<sup>50</sup> a day.

The building was the first location for several medical practices, including those of Dr. Joseph Olivier, Dr. Edwin Wright, Dr. Josephine Brown, and Dr. Revell, a local dentist.

The Grand Union Hotel has seen a great many changes since its opening. The second floor balcony has been removed. Much of the exterior plaster work has been removed. For a number of years, it was painted white but was restored to the original brick in 2003. Many of the windows have been replaced, though the windows above the Tavern sign are



original, and the interior has been extensively renovated. The present-day Grand Union Hotel has a small restaurant, a bar and rooms to rent.

## 4 The Royal Café 4919 – 50th Street



The Royal Café opened for business in June 1930. The contractor for the building is known today only as Mr. Armstrong. The owners, Charlie Mah Chung and Sam Mah Wing, hosted the grand opening with a large number of townsfolk attending a free dinner and dance. The proprietors lived upstairs in one half of the building and rented rooms in the other half. In the fall of 1935, the owners made some upgrades and advertised in the local newspaper that the rooms were “Now Equipped with Hot & Cold Running Water” along with “New Bath Rooms and Toilets with up-to-date Sewage Disposal.” A single bath could be had “at any time” for thirty-five cents. Mr. Mah Chung and Mr. Mah Wing owned the café until the mid 1950s, when Don Mah and Howie Mah took over the business. Don Mah eventually moved to Edmonton and Howie Mah owned the café until the early 1970s.

Roy Rogers took over the business in 1975 and operated it until 1978. He changed the name of the café to The Sportsman Café. The entire top floor was used as a rooming house.

In 1980, Gary and Elaine Berger purchased the building.

Elaine ran a clothing store and hairstyling salon until a fire destroyed both businesses in 1986. The upper floor suffered smoke and water damage and was never repaired. In recent times, the building has housed a number of different businesses.

## 5 Bergeron's 4918 – 50th Street



Bergeron's Sash & Door Factory, c. 1925. Athabasca Archives, 00027.

This building was built by Horace Bergeron, probably in 1913. It was financed by Horace's father, Onesime Bergeron, who had moved to Athabasca from Morinville in 1911 to farm. The building served as a sash and door factory and furniture business. The Bergeron family lived at the rear of the store with their fourteen children. The south end of the building eventually housed Oscar Crawford's fur-buying shop.

In 1936, Bergeron rented part of the building to local retailers Michael and Lena Demchuk. They set up a second-hand store. In 1946, Bergeron sold the building to the Demchuks, who proceeded to remodel it. A local newspaper reported that the store was “one of the most



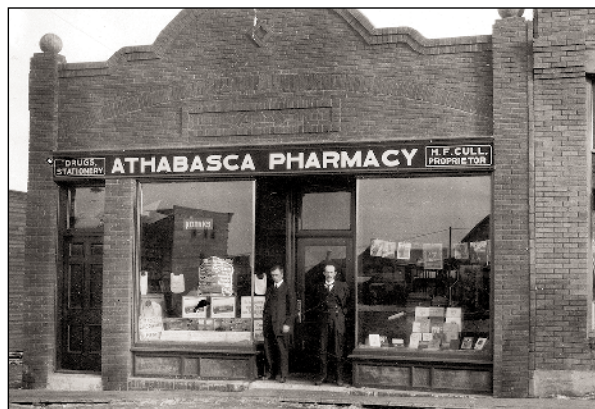


spacious mercantile establishments in town.” The same year, the Demchuks were joined by their daughter, Nettie, and her spouse, Nick Evasiuk.

Oddly enough, the building was still sitting on its original skids when the Demchuks decided to put in a basement. During the renovation, ashes were found under the building, indicating that a previous building in that location had been lost to fire, likely the great fire of 1913.

Nick and Nettie Evasiuk’s son, Dave, took over after the death of his father in 1997 and operated the store until his own untimely death in 2007.

## 6 Athabasca Pharmacy 4916A – 50 Street

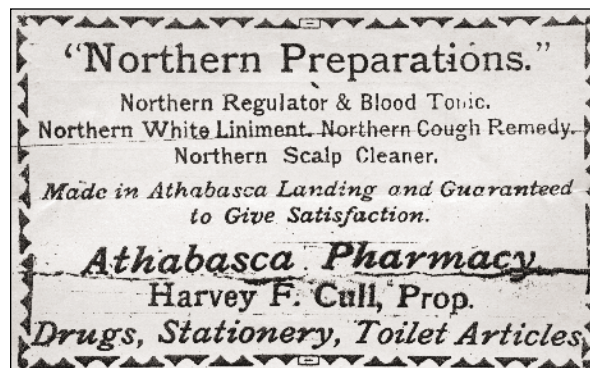


Athabasca Pharmacy, 1913. Athabasca Archives, 00706.

Harvey F. Cull opened what is generally acknowledged to be the first pharmacy in Athabasca in 1910. The original business was located on Litchfield Avenue along the waterfront. In 1913, Cull moved the business to what had been the Methodist Hall on the west side of Strathcona Street. Like others, he was wiped out by the great fire of August 1913. In September, Cull hired contractor H.A. Barrow to construct a new building, one designed by a Mr. Binnie. The original building was 25 by 35 feet with a full basement that had 18-inch-thick cement and rock walls. The exterior walls were Alsip and Tregillus brick. The interior of the building was plaster over metal lath, probably the first metal lath to be

used in Athabasca. Clearly, Cull had visions of another fire on his mind. The builder used British Columbia fir for the wainscoting. Another feature of the building was forced air heating, described in the newspapers at the time as a “hot air furnace.” The Athabasca Pharmacy—sometimes known locally as Cull’s Drug Store—reopened in November, 1913. One of the more interesting stories is that Harvey raised prize White Wyandotte chickens in the basement of the pharmacy.

The following advertisement for the Athabasca Pharmacy appeared in the Northern News in August 1921:



Athabasca Archives Newspaper Collection.

Harvey Cull served the community until ill health forced him to retire in 1935. He moved to Vancouver and died there on February 7, 1936.

Cull had sold the business to Fred Mills, who continued to





run a pharmacy until he moved to a larger store in 1947. Thomas McLean then purchased the building in October 1947 and, for a number of years, operated an electrical business in one half of the building; a barber shop was located in the other half. In 1964, Thomas and his brother-in-law, Herman Leicht, formed McLean's Electric Company and opened a jewellery and giftware business as a sideline. In 1952, they had added a single-storey addition to the back of the building and then added another storey in 1970. Thomas retired in 1970, and Herman and Doreen Leicht bought the businesses and the building. It changed hands again in 1981, when Phil and Betty Brown took over the business from Leicht. New owners have been in the building since 2001.

## 7 Olivier Block 4914 – 50th Street



Taylor Block, c. 1940. Athabasca Archives, 01245a.

This building was constructed for Dr. Joseph Olivier by the local builder, Joseph Daigneau, in September 1913, just after the great fire. It was a two-storey structure measuring 50 by 50 feet and faced with brick veneer. Dr. Olivier had his medical practice on the second floor. In November 1913, the main floor housed the Royal Bank and the Rex Pool Hall. Between 1913 and 1929, the building also served as the town post office.

Dr. Olivier had moved to Athabasca in 1911 and practiced in several locations before the great fire, including the

Grand Union Hotel. He played a key role in the establishment of the Sacred Heart Hospital and, in 1913, he married nurse D. Johnson. Along with his brother, Edmund, Dr. Olivier owned a number of buildings in Athabasca, including a boarding house, a livery barn, and the building that housed the Northern Trading Store. For reasons which are not clear, Dr. Olivier left Athabasca and moved to Coleman, Alberta in December, 1915. A local newspaper reported that he left much poorer than when he arrived.

Little is known about the building from the time that Olivier left until it was sold to James Herbert Taylor in 1928. Taylor immigrated to Canada from Yorkshire, England in 1913 and started homesteading twelve miles east of Athabasca in the Parkhurst District. He was joined by his fiancée, Sarah, the following year. They were married in All Saints Anglican Church. A builder by trade, Taylor worked building boats along the river. Presumably, he managed to save enough money to purchase the Olivier Block, which then became the Taylor Block. The Taylors moved into town, built a new house, and opened Athabasca's first groceteria in their newly acquired building. James died of tuberculosis in 1930, but Sarah continued to run the business until 1954, when she retired. She remained in Athabasca until 1980, when she moved to Golden, B.C., to be closer to her son, Dr. James Taylor. Mrs. Taylor died in 1982 at the age of ninety-five.

In the mid-1930s, the building was divided. The groceteria stayed on the south side. Henry Miller ran a butcher shop in the centre and Madeline Semaka's ladies' clothing and dressmaking shop took up an 8'-foot-wide space along the full length of the north side of the building. Mrs. Semaka was there from 1936 to 1943. She lived at the back of her shop with her two children. Ben Shaw bought Miller's business in the late 1930s and ran it until 1946, when he moved to a new location. Like Mrs. Semaka, he lived for a time at the back of his shop.

Behind the groceteria, Sarah Lumley had a hairdressing shop which Kay (Barr) Shaw took over and ran from 1946 to 1949.

The upper level was just as busy as the main floor. Percy G. Davies bought out the law practice of P.W.L. Clark in 1938. Davies came to Athabasca once a week but, in 1941, his



younger brother, Trevor F. Davies, opened a permanent law practice in town. He rented space upstairs for about five years. Various clubs rented office space on the second floor, as well as a number of families who rented suites before building their own homes.

In 1954, Steve and Carol Wasel bought the building and set up a barber shop and variety store. In 1958, the building changed hands again. Bob and Hazel Berrea opened a dry goods and Singer Sewing Machine outlet which they operated for more than forty years. In 1999, Cheap Seats Sporting Goods relocated to the old Olivier Block.



## 8 Alberta Government Telephone Building 4907 – 50th Street



AGT building. Athabasca Archives, 00436.

AGT opened its first telephone exchange office in Athabasca in 1912. Alvah Lewis served as the switch-board operator. Initially, only local phone service was available; long-distance service came shortly after. The first phone exchange was located in Harvey Cull's Pharmacy (see entry 6). All of the equipment was lost in the great fire of 1913, but service was quickly re-established and, by the end of 1913, there were 118 subscribers to the telephone service.

After the fire, the long-distance service was moved temporarily to the Hudson's Bay Company store. Eventually, a new telephone exchange office was installed above the post office in the Olivier Block. In 1918, AGT moved the exchange to a dedicated building. Surviving records indicate the building was known as a type "B" special. The original design was a 24-foot, 8-inch-by-28-foot, 8-inch brick-veneered structure with an 11-foot-by-7-foot, 6-inch kitchen wing. The building had a concrete foundation, stove heat, gasoline lighting, and wiring for electric lights. Though it was a "cottage" design, the original building had a flat roof. The total cost of the building was \$3021.<sup>00</sup>, including \$525.<sup>00</sup> for the land.

This building served as the telephone exchange until July 17, 1964, when it was closed. The building was then used to store equipment. Some renovations have taken place over the

years, the most noticeable being the addition of a hip roof to replace the original flat roof, and a stucco facade.



## 9 Dr. Brown's House 4817 – 49th Street

Dr. Brown's house is an important heritage building for two reasons. The first is its association with Dr. Josephine Brown. Born in 1919, Dr. Brown graduated from the University of Alberta's medical school in the spring of 1947 and moved to Athabasca in the fall to practice with Dr. Edwin Wright. She served as a general practitioner in Athabasca for the next forty years. She estimates that she delivered more than 2,000 babies during that time. She also served on Town Council for twenty-three years and was a founding member of the Athabasca Pottery Club. For many years, she was a board member, volunteer and supporter of the Library and Archives. In June 1990, Athabasca University awarded her an Honorary Doctorate. As a fitting tribute to her long career, Dr. Brown's



named appeared on the list of Alberta's 100 Outstanding Physicians of the Century during the provincial centennial in 2005.

The second reason why this building is important is its association with the Athabasca Medical Centre, an architecturally significant building that was constructed in 1955 and was unfortunately destroyed by a fire in February 2010. The original medial centre was a low-profile building with a flat roof and cantilevered eaves and glass block that reflected the basic design profiles for smaller commercial buildings of that era. Dr. Brown added two medical offices to the east wing in the early 1960s. The basement contained an apartment where Dr. Brown lived until 1962, when she built the house that matched the profile of the medical centre.

## 10 Post Office 4909 – 49th Street



The Post Office officially opened to great fanfare on a cold windy day in late February 1955. The ceremony was attended by as many as five hundred people, including a number of provincial and federal officials as well as local dignitaries and an R.C.M.P. escort. H.V. Bayliss, who had been postmaster in Athabasca since 1937 was reported as saying that the new post office "was a great step forward, and at last the staff would now have room to work." Built on the site of the old Town Office, the Post Office reflected the growing modernization of the Town of Athabasca and Athabasca County. The building is a fine example of the corporate design style employed in



Federal Government buildings in Canada during the 1950s. The original Post Office was 72 by 68 feet. Like hundreds of similar structures built across Canada during the 1950s, it is predominantly a brick structure with some stonework and a flat roof. Other features of the building—perhaps a bit unusual in buildings in northern Canada in the 1950s—are the plate glass doors as well as the pattern and style of the windows along the front façade.

## 11 Dr. Grant Olsen Dental Office 4912 – 49th Street



The origins of this building are shrouded in mystery. Town records indicate that a building permit for the block of land upon which this building stands was issued in 1947. Yet, there is no evidence that a building was constructed in 1947 or, for that matter, for most of 1948. Throughout most of 1948, Dr. Grant Olsen practiced dentistry on a part-time basis at the Grand Union Hotel. At the end of the year he began advertising in the local paper that he would be spending the first and third full week in Athabasca at his “Parlor on Skinner Street.” He moved to Athabasca and began practicing full time in June 1949. Then, in mid-June 1952, an announcement appeared in the local newspaper that the law office of Davies and Chamberlain had opened an office in the Grant Olsen Dental Building. This would appear to be one of those rare occurrences when the local newspaper overlooked the construction of a new building in the downtown core.

The building itself is a two-storey wood-framed structure that employs architectural features common in multi-use buildings during the 1940s in Western Canada. This particular building had offices and apartments. This combination of business and residential accommodation in the same building was, in part, a response to the initial economic uncertainties in the aftermath of the Second World War, when many Canadians feared a return of the Great Depression. The flat roof, rounded corners and glass blocks give the building an Art Moderne look. Dr. Olsen practiced dentistry in Athabasca until 1955, when he moved to Edmonton and the practice was taken over by Dr. Peter Steblyk.

## 12 Hunter Motors 4908 – 49th Street

This building is significant for its association with David B. Hunter, a prominent businessperson and politician. Born in Edmonton in 1914, Hunter spent most of his youth on a farm in the Elnora area. He enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War, serving first as a pilot/instructor and then in Europe with Canadian Bomber Command’s 419 Squadron. He was discharged in 1945 with the rank of Squadron Leader.



Hunter Motors. Athabasca Archives, 00049.

Hunter returned to Edmonton after the war and began working for International Harvester. He moved to



Athabasca in 1946 and established Hunter International Truck and Implement in what was really an oversized garage. Business was good and, in 1948, Hunter contracted local builder Abe Funk to construct a new home for his dealership. Another local contractor, Steve Kaspersky, handled the cement work.

The Hunter Vehicle Dealership building is architecturally interesting because of the Art Moderne features it displays. The rounded corners, the central vertical signpost and the semi-circular entrance with panels of glass blocks are good examples of the type of Art Moderne design popular in the immediate postwar era. The building also reflects the technology and esthetics of the increasingly prominent automobile culture. At 2500 square feet, 1500 of which were devoted to showroom, this building would be considered small by present standards. That was not the case in 1948. Shortly before the new building opened its doors, the local newspaper reported: “Imposing Structure a Distinct Asset to Town and Credit to Owner in Planning and Construction.”

Although Hunter continued to handle International trucks until the mid-1960s, he also sold Volkswagen Beetles and Ramblers. Between 1955 and 1964, Hunter had a partnership with Arnold Gillis. In 1966, Hunter's became a General Motors Chevrolet-Oldsmobile dealer and the dealership remained at this location until David Hunter's son, Alan, moved to a new location at the east end of town in 1994.

## 13 Dr. Wright's Athabasca Medical Centre 4902 – 49th Street

This building was constructed for Dr. Edwin Wright in 1949. Although the building appeared as Dr. Wright's Medical Centre in newspaper advertisements, it was known locally as the Athabasca Medical Centre. The construction of this building attracted considerable attention, including a front-page feature in the local newspaper of the day, the *Athabasca Echo*. Note the sense of optimism in the writing:

“Dr. E.K. Wright's contribution to the steadily mounting structural expansion and beauty, the new modern institution



styled as ‘Athabasca Medical Centre’ swung open its portals wide, in all its splendour, yesterday, right on schedule, with many citizens visiting the budding plant and paying their respects to the Doctor's foresight and unbounded faith in the future of the town and district.”

The newspaper went on to report that “Occupying a ground area of 42 feet by 50 feet, and finished completely in ornate stucco, and with glass blocks and vitrolite surfacing the castings of the two main entrances, on the corner of Morgan Avenue and Evans Street, the southern portion of the ground floor of the structure, with entrance at the street corner, is devoted to Peterson's Rexall Drug Store, with an enticing coffee bar to soothe the lighter demands of the inner man in liquids and solids.”

The building also housed a veterinarian and the second floor contained three 4-room apartments. This building is a good example of the mixed-use buildings that were constructed to meet the increased demand for services and housing after the Second World War. This particular building was designed by architects Maitland and Aberdeen of Edmonton.

Dr. Wright moved his practice to Dr. Brown's medical centre (see entry 9) in 1962. He died, tragically, in a plane crash while on holiday in Japan in 1966.

## 14 Anglican Church Rectory 4810 – 49th Street



In his July 1909 report to the Missionary Society of the Church in Canada (MSCC), Bishop George Holmes complained that “The mission house at Athabasca [Landing] is old and dilapidated and full of vermin and quite unfit for habitation and a disgrace to any church.” The Anglican Church—as the Church of England was known—subsequently purchased several lots along what is now 49th Street. In 1910, Malcolm Scott, the Diocesan Archdeacon, supervised the construction of a house which was intended as a home for Archdeacon Edwin Robins and as a hostel for missionaries. This building was later called the Bishop’s Court or Bishop’s Lodge.

By the fall of 1914, Bishop Holmes was dead, ill health had forced Archdeacon Scott to return to his home in Winnipeg, and Robins, now Bishop Robins, had decided to move to Peace River Crossing. The Bishop’s Court was subsequently rented to the Inspector of Provincial Police and, in 1917, became a hospital.

The available evidence suggests that in the meantime, a separate rectory (pictured above) was built for Cambridge University graduate Reverend Spencer Baron, likely in 1914. Shortly before Baron arrived, a young clergyman named Robert Little had helped out with parish duties. He returned as rector of All Saints Church and Archdeacon of the Diocese of Athabasca in 1928. Little and his wife, Marian (Gill), took up residence in the rectory and lived there until 1950. The

house continued to serve as the rectory until 1967, when it was sold to Aubrey and Edna Lewis. Mrs. Lewis lived in the house until 2004. It then became an antique and picture-framing business, and a residence.

An interesting and somewhat rare feature of the property is the two-bay carriage house located at the rear of the rectory. In the 1950s, Reverend Jack Gibbons built a flower garden in the shape of a Celtic cross. Other defining features of the property are the oak trees, a reasonably unusual sight in this part of the country.

## 15 Frank Robert Falconer House 4806 – 49th Street



Frank Falconer Sr. moved to Athabasca in 1910 and opened the first hardware store in town. He later branched into harnesses and other farm equipment, notably tractors, which were often sold even before they were unloaded from the train. Falconer ran his business until 1963, when he retired.

In addition to his business activities, Falconer was an avid curler; he played in the town band and was a member of the Board of the United Church. He was mayor for many years and was serving in that capacity when the town essentially declared bankruptcy in 1920–21 after failing to pay a water and sewer debenture issued in 1913 during the economic boom. He sat as a Liberal member of the Alberta Legislature during an equally depressing period from 1930 to 1935.

But it was not always hard times for Frank Falconer. He benefited from the economic boom and in 1912, he was prosperous enough to hire Lance Smith to build a house. At the time, it was one of the more majestic homes in Athabasca. Falconer lived in this house until 1967, when his wife, Catherine (MacIntyre) died. He moved to Edmonton, where he died in 1970.

The Falconer house has had a bit of a checkered history since he left. For several years, Family and Community Support Services used it as an office. It became a family home again in the late 1980s and, in the 1990s, it was a bed and breakfast. One of the more interesting features of the house is that it still retains much of its original appearance both inside and out.

## 16 Joseph Arthur Daigneau House 4804 – 49th Street



During the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897-98, Athabasca Landing was part of an alternative route to the Yukon. The influx of travellers triggered a mini economic boom, and some of the would-be gold seekers decided to stay in the area. Joseph Daigneau was one of them. After working at a number of jobs in different towns, including a stint as a cowboy, he decided to settle in Athabasca. Records indicate that he took a homestead in May 1907 on land that is now part of Athabasca University. He named his homestead “Villas des Springs” but he soon began pursuing other business opportunities.

A carpenter by trade, Daigneau was convinced that Athabasca would grow dramatically and he began constructing

buildings, the most prominent of which were the Daigneau Block and Harbour for Horses. Ironically enough, when Daigneau began building the Daigneau Block in 1911, Isaie Gagnon and Jack Lessard, two of Athabasca’s more prominent businesspersons, said, “Are you crazy man, the town will never warrant such an outlay as this.” The town boomed, Daigneau prospered, and he started expanding.



Joseph Daigneau and his delivery car. Athabasca Archives, 00725.

Among other things, Daigneau helped build the Sacred Heart Hospital, the Roman Catholic Church, and the original Daigneau Block on Skinner Street (now 49th Street). In 1915, he opened a dairy, which was attached to his Harbour for Horses (later renamed the Home for Horses). By 1921, he owned a livery and feed mill and, by 1938, he had acquired a service station. He also managed the International Harvester outlet.

In May 1912, Joseph Daigneau married Antoinette Campbell. A year and a half later, on October 3, 1913, the *Northern News* reported that “Mr. J.A. Daigneau has moved the house which he purchased from R.C. Farrell to his lot on Skinner Street, put a concrete foundation under and otherwise improved the property.” The Daigneaus stayed in Athabasca after the First World War. He was active in church work, on town council and the school board. He eventually moved to St. Albert, where he died in 1954 at the age of 86.

Mrs. Lydia Silkie purchased the house and lived there until 1989, when a real estate firm bought the house and converted it into an office. With the completion of new offices for the firm, the building now houses a local business.



## 17 Richard and Hazel Hall House 4803 – 49th Street



This house is significant for its association with Richard and Hazel Hall and other prominent businesspersons in Athabasca. Richard Hall was a former school teacher who moved to Athabasca during the Second World War and went into business with Bill Evans as general merchants, running a Red & White Store. In 1948, he opened the 325-seat Aurora Theatre on Skinner Street (49th Street). He became a town councillor in 1944 and Mayor the following year. It was a position he held for six years. He later sat in the Alberta Legislature for the riding of Athabasca, and in the late 1950s, he made a bid for the leadership of the Liberal party of Alberta.

The Halls had this house built in 1945. The low-sloped, gabled-roof one-storey residence is a good example of the bungalow style that became popular in Athabasca during the 1940s and 1950s. The Halls lived in this house until 1955, when they moved to the first of two homes they built on what is now commonly called High School Hill. The Halls left Athabasca in 1968 and Richard died in Victoria, B.C. in 1977.

Pharmacist Glen Osment and his wife Eleanor then moved into the house. They lived there until 1963, when George and Marion Gould moved in. George Gould was a veterinarian with the Federal Department of Agriculture. In 1967, Mary and Hugo Coli moved into the house. They were part operators of a furniture store, and Hugo also assisted at Athabasca Funeral Home. Mary was a receptionist at Dr. Brown's medical centre. They resided in this house until 1984.

## 18 Charles Nancekivell House 4718 – 49th Street



This property was originally owned by Charles Nancekivell, an incredibly industrious young man who held a variety of positions during his short life in Athabasca, including notary public, public conveyances manager, manager of the Athabasca Funeral Supply Company and secretary of the Board of Trade.

In 1912, he married Edna Cull, who was Harvey Cull's sister (see entries 6 and 28). They lived south of town in an area known as Coronation Park. In 1915, this house was built and the family moved into town. The building is said to have served as an office in the front, with a shed in the back serving as the town mortuary.

In 1918, the Spanish Influenza pandemic struck Athabasca and Charles Nancekivell died. He was just thirty-four years old. Edna Nancekivell remained in the home to raise her four young children. She became a town secretary and, in 1946, the first town librarian, a position she held until 1970. Edna Nancekivell continued to live here with her daughter and son-in-law, Marion and Bob Montgomery until 1960, when the house was sold to Clifford and Margaret Craig (Edna eventually moved to Vancouver, BC, where she died in 1975 at the age of eighty-six). The Craigs lived here until the early 1970s, when they sold the home to Mr. and Mrs. Sturgess Sr. He, too, was an undertaker.

The basement of the home is made from native boulder and mortar on three walls; the fourth is a timber retaining wall



similar to that of a log cabin.

The upper floor underwent renovations during the 1930s and, in the late 1950s, the family added a dining room and bedroom. In 1978, Rodney and Maxine Winder acquired the property. Mr. Winder completed extensive renovations to the home, including new windows and an overhaul of the kitchen. The basement was also expanded to house a cold room. The house was sold again in 1982.

## 19 First Public School 4706 – 49th Street



The First Public School. Athabasca Archives, 01264.

In 1884, the Northwest Territories School Ordinances granted permission to establish a school district in the Athabasca region. A decade later, the Hudson's Bay Company donated a site in Athabasca Landing for an Anglican Mission School. A small log school was built but soon proved inadequate to meet the growing demand for education.

During the winter of 1903-04, a wood-framed building was erected on the property where the Athabasca Post Office now stands. That building was the first public school in town. The first teachers were Miss Eaton and Alex McLeod. In 1908, forty-three children divided into eight grades were attending school. In 1909, enrollment climbed to forty-nine. By 1912, the school had grown to three rooms and the student population

was still expanding. The school boundaries were reorganized in 1913 and a new and larger school was built (see entry 21).

The old school served as the town hall and, in 1946, as the public library under the direction of Edna Nancekivell. The building was moved to its present site in 1954 and has since been used as a private residence. An interesting feature of the property is that the former school cloak room serves as the back porch of the residence.



## 20 West Athabasca School 4704 – 48 Street

The West Athabasca School was constructed in 1914 to meet the growing demand for education in the area around Baptiste



West Athabasca School. Athabasca Archives, 03113.



lake. It was originally located about seven kilometres west of town on land owned by H.P. Jacobson. Although most of the construction was handled by an Edmonton-based contracting firm, the lumber was purchased locally from the Crown Lumber Co. of Athabasca. Jacobson and C.A. Darius did the cement work and Colin Johnston supervised much of the volunteer labour. The building cost the West Athabasca School District \$738.<sup>00</sup>. The school was officially established on March 14 and, so far as can be determined, the first teacher was Miss Cross. The first board was made up of three men: Percy Spence, Amon Tjenvold and M. W. Hitchins. How many children attended the school on a regular basis is not known.

The West Athabasca School operated until the end of the 1944 school year, when it closed owing to a lack of funds. In 1948, the building was moved to Athabasca and was used as the “new” school building for Grade 9 students. The school was closed in 1951. The Missionary Church Society used the building for a number of years. Then, in 1999, Aspen View Regional Division No. 19 acquired the building and used it as a storage facility. In September 2004, the Province of Alberta designated the West Athabasca School as a provincially registered historic resource, and the building has since been in the process of a full restoration.

The original school was a very plain 20-by-30-foot building that had one large room. In 1924, local residents added a porch. The school was initially heated by a wood stove which was eventually replaced by an oil furnace and later gas. The windows

along the north side of the building are the original windows.

The West Athabasca School is a rare example of a one-room country schoolhouse of a bygone era. This particular building is an outstanding example of traditional utilitarian architectural design.

## 20 The Brick School 4720 – 48th Street



Athabasca Public School (the Brick School). Athabasca Archives, 00043.

By 1912, it was clear that Athabasca needed a larger school. The population had increased from 450 to 1,110 in just one year alone from 1911 to 1912, and the expectation was that it would double again before long. The old school built in 1903/04 was literally bursting at the seams and, by the beginning of 1912, the town and the School Board faced a real crisis.

The problem was where to build and how to finance a larger school during a land boom. The School Board managed to work out a deal with the Hudson's Bay Company to purchase five lots for \$3250.<sup>00</sup>. The terms were a one-quarter down payment and the remainder to be paid in instalments over the next three years. Raising the rest of the funds was more difficult. The School Board turned to Justice R. Boyle, the local Member of the Alberta Legislature, who also happened to be the Minister of Education. There was little in the way of direct government funding but Boyle did secure a loan guarantee and, on November 16, 1912, the Ministry of

Education authorized some \$40,000 in debentures.

The School Board subsequently pored over architectural drawings for the proposed school, and researched and debated the merits of different building materials. It soon became clear that the new school was to be much more than a mere school. Marian Gill, the first principal of the school, who later married Reverend Robert Little, later recalled the Board declaring that “What is needed up here is a symbol of British institutions.” Calgary brick and, perhaps ironically, Indiana bathstone were to be some of the materials to provide that symbol of British greatness. The contract for the school—rumoured to be worth \$30,000—was awarded to H.A. Barrow, formerly of the contracting partnership of Barrow and Tarrant, the firm that had built the Methodist (United) Church (see entry 25). On September 26, 1913, local pharmacist and Chair of the School Board, Harvey Cull, laid the cornerstone with a sterling silver trowel. That trowel was inscribed and now resides in the Athabasca Archives.



Laying the Brick School cornerstone. Provincial Archives of Alberta, Aca 42.

The Brick School was built during the winter of 1913–1914. It opened on Monday, February 23, 1914, with the local paper reporting at the end of the week that “The new Public School of Athabasca was taken possession of on Monday by Miss Gill and her army of pupils.” The choice of words perhaps underscored the need for more space. When the school year began in September 1914, 118 students were enrolled. The new building was a marked improvement over the old one-room affair that had served the town for a decade. The new school contained two classrooms on the ground floor, each measuring

34 by 37 feet, with a 4-by-11-foot vestibule or “cloak room.” The upper floor also had two classrooms, each measuring 24 by 37 feet, and an 11-by-16-foot staff room. All the rooms had 12 foot 6 inch ceilings. The basement, constructed with 18-inch-thick cement walls, contained the heating plant and two 24-by-37-foot playrooms, one for the boys and one for the girls. The massive boiler is still housed in the basement of the building. The school was floored throughout with maple.

Over the years, the Brick School underwent a number of changes and additions. The basement was eventually converted into classrooms. During the Second World War, immediately south of the Brick school, the “Stucco” school was built. By the early 1950s there were fourteen rooms and a gymnasium trying to accommodate more than 450 students. Postwar growth and prosperity prompted the construction of Edwin Parr Composite School in 1954. A new elementary school was built in 1966, and the old Brick School, which had served the town for more than half a century, closed its doors.

The building housed Family and Community Support Services for a number of years and the old play rooms in the basement became home for the Athabasca Pottery Club. The gymnasium was completely redesigned to become the Nancy Appleby Theatre in the Performing Arts Centre and the Alice B. Donahue Library and Archives are located in the wartime addition.

In 1976, the Brick School was designated an Alberta Registered Historic Resource. It is an outstanding example of the type of Doric architecture found in much of the British Empire when it was at its height.





## 22 Bishop Young Memorial Boys' Hostel 4811 – 48th Street



In the period before the Second World War, rural young men and women had few opportunities to extend their education beyond what was offered in the country schools. It was becoming increasingly apparent that children might not attain the educational level of their parents. A few students attended high school in Athabasca, but they had to pay room and board, an expensive proposition for many families. In 1936, in an effort to rectify the situation, Archdeacon Robert Little and his wife, Marion, started raising money for the construction of a hostel where boys could live while attending high school. They began with a base fund of one hundred and fifty British pounds (about \$750.00) and then pursued other fundraising activities, such as garden parties. An “old boys” reunion at a church boarding school in Quebec donated \$200.00 and one “Miss Clough,” of Torquay, England, made what the records indicate was a “substantial contribution.”

The Anglican Church secured a twenty-year lease on one lot and part of another and construction began on a two-storey building, much of it done by local craftsmen Steve Kaspersky, Ernest Hitz, Horace Bergeron and Otto Walker. An interesting feature of the hostel's side porch are two gothic pointed arch windows. Although not completed, the hostel officially opened on August 29, 1938. It was dedicated

to the memory of Bishop Richard Young, who served in various capacities in Canada from 1875 to 1903 and was the first Anglican bishop to be consecrated in Western Canada.



Bishop Richard Young. Courtesy  
All Saints Anglican Church, Athabasca.

Despite the association with the church, the hostel was non-denominational and non-discriminatory. The only essential criterion, the local newspaper reported, was “good character and reputation.” Five young men lived in residence during the first year. Ms. Rainsford

Hannay, a Cambridge graduate in mathematics, was the matron. The young men paid \$3.50 per month as rent, part of which could be paid in fuel. They had to supply their own food. That first year was an experiment in participatory democracy. The young men made and enforced the rules. Ralph Noddings was elected the “Head Student.” He joined the Air Force during the Second World War and later operated a funeral home in Edmonton.

It took another two years to raise enough money to complete the hostel but, by then, enough young men were attending high school that the town qualified for provincial grants. The completed hostel housed up to twelve young men.

The boys' hostel was such a success that the School Board asked Robert and Marian Little to help raise money for a similar hostel for young women. Initially, they refused, but it turned out that “Miss Clough” of England had left a thousand pound (\$5000.00) legacy for the Littles, a considerable sum to leave in wartime, as it was for Canada after September 10, 1939. Land one block west of the boys' hostel was acquired and, in January 1941, a group of young women moved into a partially completed building that was named St. Mary's Hostel for Girls. The properties were transferred to the Church in July 1941. These hostels remained open until 1966, when the Brick School closed and students were bused to the new Edwin Parr High School in town. In 1986, two hundred and fifty former hostellers gathered in Athabasca for a reunion. The girls' hostel is long gone; the boys' hostel is now used as a private residence.



# 23 Captain Charles D. A. Barber House

4813 – 48th Street



This house is significant for its association with the colourful steamship captain, Charles Dufferin Allison Barber. Born in 1879, Captain Barber came west in the summer of 1904 to build a stern-wheel riverboat to ply the route between Athabasca Landing and the west end of Lesser Slave Lake. The construction feat alone is a story unto itself. Barber had the huge steam boiler and all the required hardware for the boat hauled to Athabasca by horse and wagon over the Landing Trail. The riverboat, christened *Midnight Sun*, was one hundred and twenty feet long and had a 26-foot beam. With staterooms for thirty five, it was the first real luxury Mississippi-style riverboat on the Athabasca.

In 1905, Barber sold part ownership of *Midnight Sun* to the legendary James K. Cornwall, better known as “Peace River Jim” and an associate in the Northern Transportation Company. Within a year, Cornwall sold his interest in *Midnight Sun* to J.H. Wood, a boat builder who would eventually become Mayor of Athabasca. The following year, Captain Barber built *Northern Light*, a smaller riverboat that was driven by two paddle wheels instead of one. That was followed in 1910 by *Northland Call*, the first steamer to sail from Athabasca to the west end of Lesser Slave Lake. The trip was made possible by a series of wing dams that had been



S.S. *Midnight Sun*. Provincial Archives of Alberta, A2590.

constructed on the Lesser Slave River, largely through the efforts of Captain Barber.

In December 1912, Captain Barber, then in his early thirties, married Nellie Young, the nineteen-year-old granddaughter of the famed Methodist missionary, Reverend George McDougall. Surviving records suggest that the Barber house was constructed on the north side of the river and then moved to its present location. By 1915, riverboats were being overtaken by railroads and Captain Barber left Athabasca. He served with the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the First World War. After the war, he moved to Duluth, Minnesota, where he died on March 5, 1918, probably a victim of the Spanish flu. Tragically, Nellie died some two months later of heart failure after delivering twin babies. She was just 27 years old.

The house was acquired by A. Coyne. In 1920, he sold it to David Jones, a local real estate agent, insurance broker, theatre operator and town councillor. Jones lived in the house until 1942, when Clifford and Alice Donahue bought it. Clifford was the manager of the creamery, and Alice—after whom the library and archives are named—taught in Athabasca for thirty seven years. She died in 1988.

The home has undergone extensive renovations over the years. A verandah that had been used for dancing and gatherings in Captain Barber’s time was removed. The upper half storey was also removed.

## 24 Athabasca United Church 4817 – 48th Street



The Methodist Church under construction, 1912. Athabasca Archives, 01266.

In 1904, the Methodist Church decided to expand into the Athabasca area and purchased several lots for future consideration. Reverend W.B. Chegwin was nominally in charge but he was stationed in Strathcona, a considerable distance away. Subsequently, in 1907, the Church sent the incredibly energetic and industrious Reverend Charles F. Hopkins to establish a proper foothold. Almost single handedly he built a church hall, a parsonage, a reading room, a stable and most of the furniture to decorate his handiwork. Known as the Methodist Hall, it was located near the Grand Union Hotel (Hopkins wrote letters about the heathen and the sinners drinking and carousing at the Hotel). The congregation gradually grew and in 1912 the Annual Conference sent Reverend A.T. Bole to reside over the ministry. By that time, Athabasca was in the midst of a full economic boom and Bole decided to build a bigger church. Under his direction, the church sold the Methodist Hall Hopkins had built and hired Edmonton architect E.W. Morehouse to design a church to accommodate three hundred worshippers. The sheer scale of the project provides some indication of the buoyant optimism prevalent in Athabasca in the period before the outbreak of the First World War.

Bole and the church trustees received \$14,000.00 for the Methodist Hall, of which \$550.00 went to pay outstanding

debt, \$6500.00 for the purchase of land for the new church and \$1400.00 for a parsonage. That left about \$5500.00 for a building estimated to cost about \$14,000.00. The local contracting firm of Barrow and Tarrant were hired to build the church. Construction began in the winter of 1912 and the building was completed in the spring of 1913. A wonderful example of Gothic Revival architectural, the new church measured 59 by 69 feet, giving the basement and the first floor more than eight thousand square feet of space. The naive could seat 250 people. A Sunday school wing opened onto the naive through the clever use of rolling partitions, thereby placing another fifty people in view of the pulpit. There was a ladies parlour, two classrooms, and a minister's vestry. The choir could accommodate twelve singers. The basement housed a men's club that could seat one hundred and twenty-five, a gymnasium, complete with a shower and a cloak room, and some kitchen facilities. The building was lit by natural gas. Provision had been made for the addition of two balconies in the main sanctuary but they were never completed.

The opening ceremony and religious service took place on Sunday, May 18, 1913, with people of nearly every religious denomination showing up. The Reverend J.E. Hughson, the pastor of the McDougall Methodist Church in Edmonton, travelled to Athabasca for the occasion. The local newspaper noted that "Religious differences seemed to be forgotten in the great common cause and a hearty response was given to an appeal for funds to carry on the heavy undertaking."



Indeed, the church managed to raise more than \$2000.00 in much needed donations to help pay for a mortgage it had considerable trouble trying to secure.

In 1925, the Methodists and the Presbyterians united with members of the Congregational Churches to form the United Church of Canada. By that time, the pre-First World War boom was long over and the church struggled. By the spring of 1985, years of neglect had taken their toll and the building was essentially closed, largely because the structure had actually become twisted. Fortunately, a group of concerned citizens struck a committee to work for the restoration of the building. The first big step came on May 31, 1985, when the Honourable Mary J. LeMessurier, Minister of Culture, designated the church an Alberta Provincial Historic Resource. The building subsequently underwent a complete restoration and was rededicated on May 18, 1986. Subsequent renovations made possible by grant funding and the dedication of volunteers include a remodeled kitchen, new flooring in the lower hall, wheelchair-access ramps and a lift system for further accessibility.

Today, the church stands as one of the oldest and largest wood-framed Gothic Revival structures in Western Canada. It is a magnificent symbol of the aspirations of a bygone era.

## 25 Hudson's Bay Company House 4712 – 49th Avenue

This house was likely constructed by the Hudson's Bay



Company in 1912 as a residence for its store manager. It was used in that capacity until 1924, when the HBC closed its store in Athabasca. Sydney Farquharson, a public accountant and auditor who had served with the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the First World War, purchased the property. His marriage partner, Jean (Haight), ran a music studio in the home. She was an organist who liked playing comic songs.

The Farquharsons left Athabasca and the house served as a rental unit until Dr. W.H. Swift, the inspector of schools, bought it in 1931. The house apparently doubled as an office so a door was installed in the west wall to provide a separate entrance. The house was subsequently rented to Dr. Swift's successor, H.A. Kostash.

In 1936, the United Grain Growers Company acquired the property for its elevator operator. In 1950, Frank and Sonia Gleishman purchased the building and renovated the entire interior during their ten-year stay.

In 1972, Max Wiwchar purchased the home and lived there until 1995 when he died. He had removed the verandah from the west wall and built one on the front of the house. The door on the west was removed. The Wiwchar family sold the property in 1997.

## 26 Lessard House 4805 – 47th Street



Local lore has it that Jack Lessard knew he was going to die so he built a big house that his widow could use as a boarding home and stopping point along the Athabasca Landing Trail.



Like most bits of local lore, it contains some truth and a great deal of hearsay.

Born at Cranbourne, Quebec, John “Jack” Lessard moved west in 1901 and was operating Lessard’s Trading Store in Athabasca by 1907. In 1914, he married fellow Quebecker, Katie Juneau. They had two children before Katie succumbed to tuberculosis. In 1925, he married Ethel O’Brien. Two years later, they had one child, Patricia, who was generally known as Patsy. She later married Archie Voaklander.

Lessard was active on town council and he continued to expand his business, trading as far north as Fort Chipewyan. In 1928, he built a new store—the Lessard Department Store—on the east corner of Litchfield and Fleming, what is now 50th Avenue and 48th Street. He also made arrangements for the construction of a new house (not exactly the actions of a dying person).



The Provincial Building in the Lessard store, 1943. Athabasca Archives, 00921.

The new house was to be a large affair. The main floor alone had four bedrooms, two hallways, a large kitchen, a dining room, a large living room with hardwood floors and a fireplace nook at one end. The living area was furnished with a mahogany piano, china cabinet, player piano and built-in bookcases. The upper floor contained a large master bedroom with a walk-in closet, a screened sunroom, a solarium that Ethel Lessard filled with plants, and a balcony under the dormer which offered a splendid view of the river as it began to wind north.

The house was originally white with green trim. There was a large yard with spruce trees and flower beds enclosed by a chain-link fence. A verandah ran along two sides of the house, as it still does.

The house was heated by a coal-fired furnace. When this house was built, it was considered to be outside town limits, and so the Lessards had to install a cistern because they were denied access to town water. Sadly, Jack Lessard died, likely of kidney failure, in 1929 before the family moved into the new home. He was just forty-six years old. Among the mourners was his brother, the Honourable Senator P.E. Lessard.

Ethel Lessard continued to manage the department store. She was also very active in civic affairs, becoming, in 1933, the first woman to sit on Town Council. On the occasion, the local newspaper reported: “When Mrs. Lessard takes her place in the ‘Seats of the Mighty’ we trust she’ll be a soothing influence on the fiery males while defending her woman’s rights. Don’t forget, ye arrogant masculine Councillors that women while claiming the right to change their minds are also entitled to the last word. What can you do about it?”

Lessard’s Store at the corner of Fleming and Litchfield Avenue. It was purchased by the Alberta government for use as the Provincial Building in 1943. The library was housed there from about 1973 to 1979.

She did eventually take on boarders, but she hired someone to manage that part of her business operations. By the early 1940s, however, the newspaper was reporting that the Lessard store was becoming dilapidated. It was perhaps an indication that business was flagging. In any event, in 1943, Ethel Lessard sold her house and moved to Edmonton.

The new owner, Pernie Brundridge, formerly of Colinton, ran a boarding house until 1948, when she sold the home to the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul. The Lessard house became the (Holy) Rosary Academy and served as a girls’ hostel until 1952.

Little is known about how the house was used over the next decade but in 1964, John Muzyka and Anne Lasiuk bought it and rented it as two apartments.

The house has undergone extensive renovation over the years but the essential external character has remained. It is perhaps fitting that Athabasca’s first female Mayor, Colleen Powell, now resides in the house once owned by the first female Councillor.

As for the story about the house’s being a stopping point along the Athabasca Landing Trail: by 1928, that practice had long been abandoned.

## 27 Harvey Frederick Cull House 4702 – 47th Avenue



This home was built in 1912 for Harvey Cull, the owner of Athabasca's first pharmacy and one of the primary movers and shakers in the early development of the town. It is one of the oldest homes in Athabasca.

Harvey Cull was born in Guelph, Ontario in 1882. His father took up a teaching position in Lacombe and moved the family west. The story most often told is that Harvey visited Athabasca in May 1910 and was so convinced of the future prospects of the town that he returned in July with a stock of drugs and stationery and opened Athabasca Pharmacy



Harvey Cull's first pharmacy. Athabasca Archives, 00703.



Harvey Cull inside the brick pharmacy. Athabasca Archives, 00702.

on Litchfield Avenue. He later moved the business into the Methodist Hall on Strathcona Street. Like so many others, he was burned out in the great fire of August 1913 but was open again for business by the following November (see entry 6).

Cull took a keen interest in community affairs for twenty-five years. He served on the original School Board and was a member of the Board of Trade. He played an instrumental role in the formation and success of the Junior Farm Club, the Junior Swine Club and the Old Timers' Association. He was also an optician and ran a circulating library out of his pharmacy.

Harvey Cull married Ida Agnes Paisley, whom he probably met at Lacombe. They moved into this house in November 1912 (it was on King Avenue then). The Culls had two children: a boy, Fred, who was born in 1912 and a girl, Evelyn, who was born in 1929.

By the mid-1930s, Harvey was becoming increasingly ill with the side effects of high blood pressure. He moved to Vancouver and was hospitalized on Christmas day in 1935 for special treatment. The initial prognosis was good but his health continued to decline. In January 1936, he sold his pharmacy and house to Fred Mills of Morinville. Harvey Cull died shortly after on February 7, 1936. Ida Agnes left Athabasca in early June 1936 and moved to Lacombe.

In 1942, George Godel, the District Agriculturalist, purchased the home. He lived there until 1967, when he moved to Edmonton.

This home was then purchased by Tom O'Connor and his sister, Ellen O'Connor.

## 28 Dent House/Alberta Provincial Police/Royal Canadian Mounted Police Barracks 4804 – 52nd Street



This building was constructed in 1912 as a one-storey flat-roofed store that never opened. As a result, William and Elizabeth Dent, owners of Dent's Sawmill, bought the building cheaply and converted it into a home sometime after they arrived in 1916. Old-timer Leo Noddings later recalled that the Dents cut 26-foot-long 2-by-6s for the rafters of the house. Presumably, Elizabeth Dent's father, Alex Mahood, a ship's carpenter, undertook much of the construction.

In 1928, the Dents left Athabasca. They sold the mill to Charles Bissell and the house to the Alberta Provincial Police. The A.P.P. had been created in 1917. As was often the case in small towns in those days, the police had their office, jail, and living quarters in the same building. The first A.P.P. officer to serve in Athabasca was Corporal Ken Heacock. His marriage partner, Rebecca, taught school. The Heacocks served the community from 1917 until 1930, when they left for Vegreville.

Corporal Frederick Moses, who had joined the Royal North West Mounted Police in 1906, took over policing duties. When the A.P.P. was disbanded in 1932, Moses joined the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and retired in 1934. The R.C.M.P. moved in 1947 and Clark Pitman purchased the property. In 1965, his son, Jesse, sold the property to Jake and Iris Burritt.

## 29 The Riverfront

The riverfront is a wide strip of land at the northern edge of the Town of Athabasca. The Athabasca River forms one the of town's natural boundaries. The riverfront is located at a long bend in the Athabasca River, and it is a naturally flat section of land on the south bank of the river. In the 19th century, fur traders and river people often called this place "The Elbow." It provided a natural landing with more than adequate space for the loading and transshipment of cargo, construction of buildings and various types of boats and scows.



Trackers and scows on the Athabasca riverfront. Athabasca Archives, 16722.

One of the most important aspects of this landscape is the meaning it has for the people of Athabasca. The natural landscape and associated historical layers—such as the origins of the Town of Athabasca, the commercial and economic development of the town, the strong connections with the north, and the interactions of people of different cultures and religions—are all meaningful associations with this place. The town has made great efforts to preserve this area for future Athabascans and has recognized the multiple layers of values associated with this property. Each year, the Magnificent River Rats heritage festival is held at the riverfront, commemorating the past and celebrating the present. Historical optimism associated with past and present activities pervades this historic place during the summer festival.

The perception of Athabasca Landing as the Gateway to the North really begins at the riverfront and is encapsulated





From the north shore, the cage crossing the Athabasca River. Athabasca Archives, 00392.

in the Canadian and North American literary history and photography. The literary and graphic images of the Athabasca riverfront as an historical staging point in the journey north is significant for its association with the symbolic and romantic values of Canadian northern exploration and exploitation. This sense of place is best evident in the photographic record depicting the natural setting of the Landing, the activities there between the mid-1870s and the First World War, and the mix of cultures as depicted in the faces of the people.

The visual characteristics of the landscape are a significant aspect of the heritage of Athabasca. The long views



Ferry crossing the Athabasca River, c. 1925. Athabasca Archives 00743.

of the forested landscape on the far side of the river, and the views to the sight-lines of the river as it bends south and then turns north again, are the important visual characteristics of this place. The views of the natural landscape are much as they were when scows traversed the river with furs and supplies and when paddle-wheelers once navigated the river.

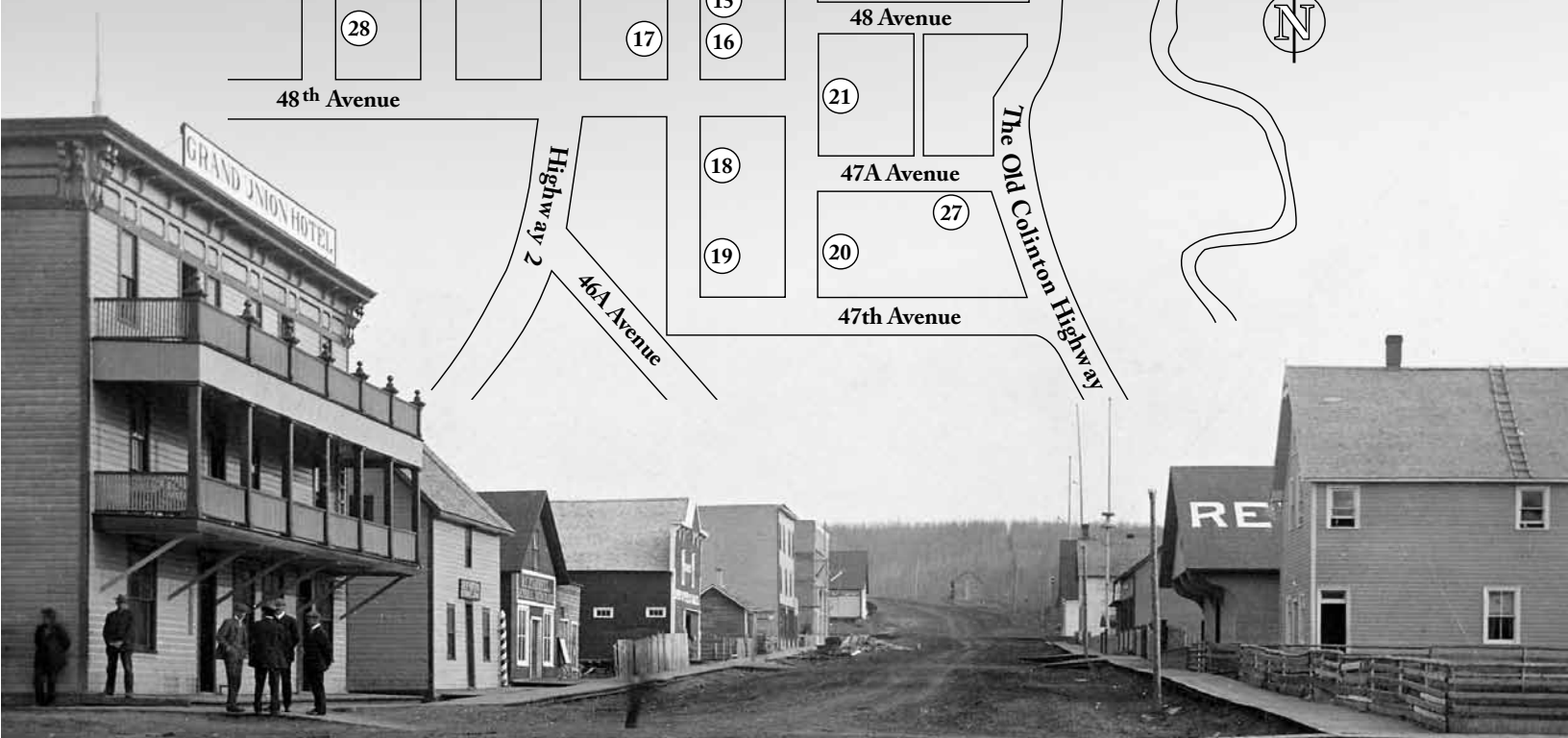
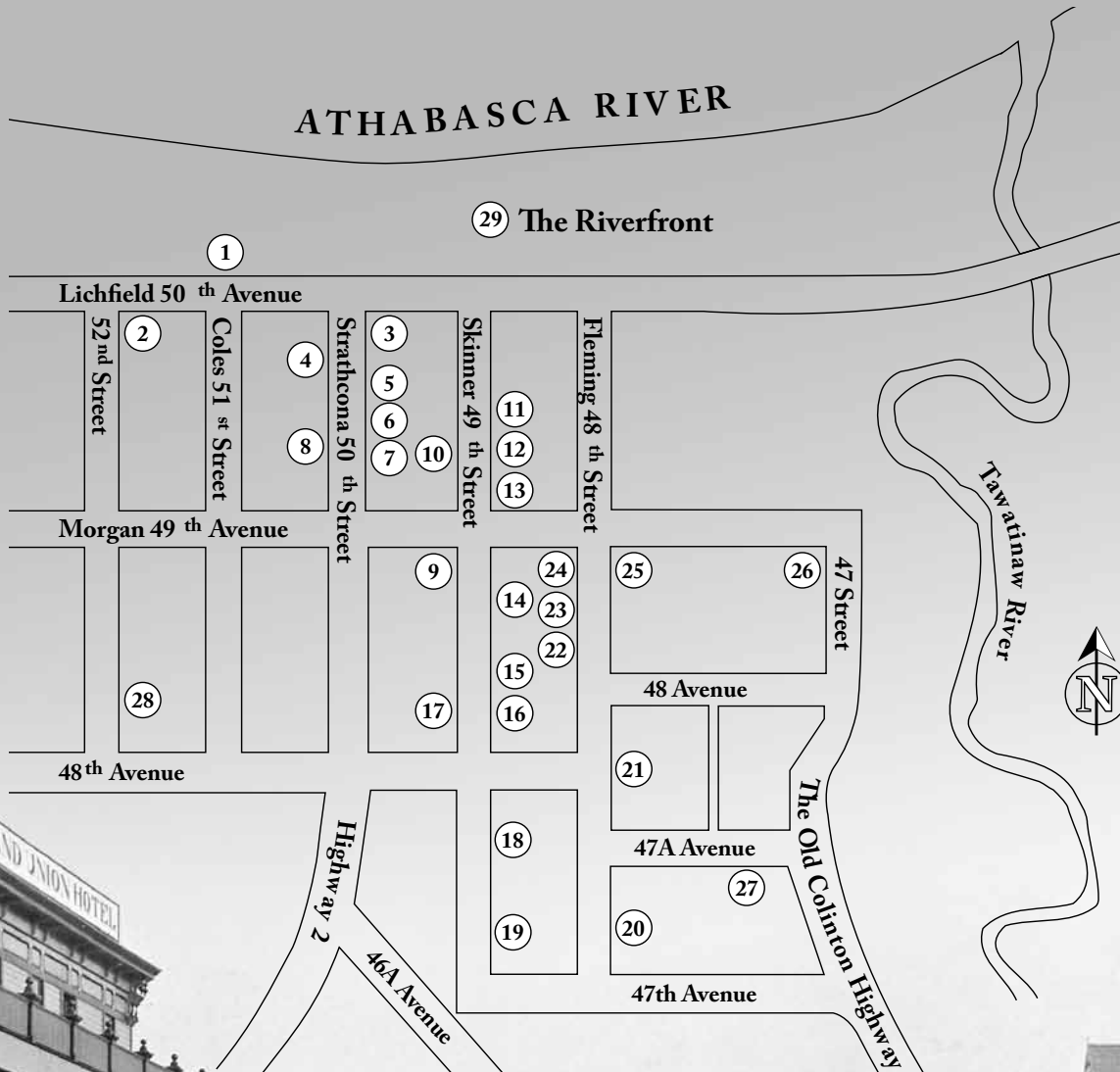
If you are starting from the Train Station you want to walk east toward the Town Common, which is located north of the Grand Union Hotel. Beside the stage, you will find a series of signs introducing Athabasca Landing during its heyday (1890–1920) as a Hudson's Bay Company transportation centre and jumping-off point to the Arctic and northwest Canada.

Follow the interpretive stations along the boardwalk to the east side of the Town Common and pick up the route along the Rotary Trail. Here, another series of interpretive kiosks display photographs about boatbuilding at the Landing, the role of the scow as workhorse on the river, and the history of Métis and First Nations freighters and trackers. Learn about the Athabasca Brigade and characters like Captain Shot and Julien Cardinal, legendary figures who acted as river pilots and leaders of the labour crews who freighted on the river, often travelling all the way to the Arctic.

Venturing downtown or south from the Union Hotel on 50th Street, visitors will encounter another series of signs depicting streetscapes from the early 1900s.

## Athabasca Historical Walking Tour Legend

- 1 The Athabasca Train Station, 5101 – 50th Avenue
- 2 Kaspersky's Lumber, 5102 – 50th Avenue
- 3 The Grand Union Hotel, 4934 – 50th Street
- 4 The Royal Café, 4915 – 50th Street
- 5 Bergeron's, 4918 – 50th Street
- 6 Athabasca Pharmacy, 4915A – 50th Street
- 7 Olivier Block, 4914 – 50th Street
- 8 AGT Building, 4907 – 50th Street
- 9 Dr Brown's House, 4817 – 49 Street
- 10 Post Office, 4909 – 49 Street
- 11 Dr Grant Olsen Dental Office, 4912 – 49 Street
- 12 Hunter Motors, 4908 – 49 Street
- 13 Dr Wright's Medical Centre, 4902 – 49 Street
- 14 Anglican Church Rectory, 4910 – 49 Street
- 15 Frank Robert Falconer House, 4806 – 49 Street
- 16 Joseph Daigneau House, 4804 – 49 Street
- 17 Richard and Hazel Hall House, 4803 – 49 Street
- 18 Charles Nancekvill House, 4718 – 49 Street
- 19 First Public School, 4706 – 49 Street
- 20 West Athabasca School, 4704 – 48 Street
- 21 The Brick School, 4720 – 48 Street
- 22 Bishop Young Memorial Boys' Hostel, 4711 – 48 Street
- 23 Captain Charles Barber House, 4813 – 48 Street
- 24 Athabasca United Church, 4817 – 48 Street
- 25 Hudson's Bay Company House, 4712 – 49 Avenue
- 26 Lessard House, 4805 – 47 Street
- 27 Harvey Cull House, 4702 – 47 Street
- 28 Dent House / Alberta Provincial Police /  
Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 4804 – 52 Street
- 29 The Riverfront



Strathcona (50th) Street looking south, Athabasca, Alberta, 1911. Photograph courtesy of Glenbow Archives, na-2788-5.