

— THE NORTH —
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MACKENZIE FRONTIER
**FORT VERMILION
HISTORICAL GUIDE**

The hamlet of Fort Vermilion is a must see.

Fort Vermilion is one of the oldest settlements in Alberta.

In 1788, Charles Boyer of the North West Company travelled up the Peace River and entered the lands of the Beaver and Cree. In 1792, Alexander Mackenzie stopped at Boyer's Post enroute to the Pacific Ocean. Here, post residents traded for furs from the native trappers and sent the furs by river during the summer to exchange points in the east and ultimately to Montreal. The Hudson's Bay Company competed fiercely with the North West Company for furs and foodstuffs that the native people supplied. In 1821, the two rivals united as the Hudson's Bay Company.

The Mighty Peace River was the original highway, first to and from Fort Chipewyan to the east and later, between Fort Vermilion and Peace River to the south. Explorers, Indians, traders, surveyors, and settlers travelled the river in canoes, York Boats, rafts, and stately river boats such as the S.S. Peace River, and the D.A. Thomas.

The thriving trade and settlement at Fort Vermilion influenced the political decision to strike the northern boundary of Alberta at 60 degrees north latitude. In 1905 the province of Alberta was formed and it included Fort Vermilion. It truly is "Where Alberta Began."

In 1974 the bridge across the Peace River was opened and the region changed forever. Fort Vermilion no longer needed the ferry in summer and ice bridge in winter to link people and services across the river.

Continue reading to discover more about the rich historical sites in and around Fort Vermilion.

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Provincial Archives of Alberta A2245



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THE EXPERIMENTAL FARM

Marcone, Matt

Boyer's Post, a precursor to Fort Vermilion, was established in 1788 to aid trappers in supplying furs to the European market. Alexander Mackenzie documented growing turnips, carrots, parsnips, and potatoes at the Boyer's Post Garden. Over one hundred years later, Fort Vermilion Experimental Farm was established by F. S. Lawrence using seeds and plants from the Experimental Farm in Ottawa.

The Experimental Farm operated on Robert Jones' farm, once located at Stoney Point, just south-west of today's Fort Vermilion Bridge. The 1934 flood forced its relocation to this more representative upland site in 1936.

When the Mackenzie Highway became an all-weather road and the Northern Alberta Railway reached High Level in 1963, farming in the region shifted from subsistence to large scale production.



1934 flooding on the north side of the Peace River at the Lawrence Ranch

Provincial Archive of Alberta A2620

"We climbed the bank to see what could be grown so far north. The display was astonishing. We saw current bushes laden with ripe fruit and nearly every kind of vegetable including asparagus, corn and tomatoes as well as the hardier kinds [...] The cereal and the leguminous plants are the finest I ever saw; in fact anything that can be made to grow at all in the north reaches a greater perfection here than elsewhere. This is true as well of the flowers. The flower garden at the station was a wonderful blaze of colour. The star attraction was a rose bush in full bloom – and this – north of latitude 58!"

*Hulbert Footner (1911 Journey)
Outing Publishing Company, 1912 [first edition]*

Fort Vermilion Experimental Farm has been important for crop variety testing from its start. In particular, Noralta Flax and Peace Alfalfa were created at the farm.

Today, the Mackenzie Applied Research Association (MARA) oversees experiments with various grain, cover, and forage crops, while working to improve and maintain soil health, study weather patterns, host special events, and help farmers access and complete Environmental Farm Plans.



St. Theresa Hospital 1949-1983
FVHC Acc no 990.04.74.37

ST. HENRY'S MISSION

St. Henry's Roman Catholic Church is much more than a religious landmark. It tells stories of human ingenuity, hardship, and determination of Fort Vermilion settlers, OMI's, and the Sisters of Providence as well as Fort Vermilion's early church, medical, and educational history.

The Priests of Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) were responsible for starting the St. Henry's Mission. While early intentions were spreading the gospel and

conversion to Christianity, the need for education and medical services broadened the ministry. The Sisters of Providence arrived in the community July 3, 1900 and offered valuable service in the fields of education and medicine.

Numerous tragedies, struggles and triumphs took place over the next 70 years.

From the first steamer providing round trip service between Fort Vermilion and the Peace River Crossing, multiple fires burning down



Glenbow Archives
NA-4035-114

the convent and hospital, the impressive community efforts in rebuilding them, outbreaks of fever and other diseases with limited medical resources, and floods that forced temporary shutdowns and relocations, this is a location with no shortage of powerful history.

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Indigenous people were promised educational and medical services under Treaty 8, signed in 1899/1900. Because they were a nomadic people, living in bush camps, the chosen method of fulfilling this treaty was to institutionalize them. This responsibility was passed to the Roman Catholic Church.

The act of taking children from their families and culture has had a profound effect on generations to this day.



Present day Catholic Church
Marcone, Matt



Glenbow Archives NA-60-4



Kozij, Jesse

THE OLD BAY HOUSE

Fort Vermilion was booming during the first decade of the 20th century with a dominant fur trading industry and notable agricultural growth.

By this time, Fort Vermilion was home to North America's northernmost flour mill, a sawmill, fur trade post, brick factory, Experimental Farm, steamship, and the highest yields of vegetable and grain crops north of Peace River Crossing.

The Old Bay House, completed in 1908, was a representation of this new modern era. It was built by the Hudson's Bay Company to be the factor's house, originally occupied by

Francis Wilson and his family.

Also known as the "Big House" and "Factor's House," the Old Bay House is the only Hudson's Bay Company factor's house remaining on its original site in Alberta.

One guest in 1910 described the interior of the house as, "a glimpse of civilization," with carpets, rugs, furs, a parlour with a piano, library, screen doors and three brick chimneys surrounded by stunning architecture.

The two and a half story building was built on a stone foundation and cellar, with the spruce siding originally painted a dark mustard gold colour,

described as "Indian yellow." The inside walls were finished with tamarack and spruce wood, complete with eaves troughs, electric lights powered by the HBC mill, and a water closet.

Some well-known visitors to the area were entertained and lodged in the Old Bay House over the years, including James Cornwall, Governor General Lord Byng, Agnes Deans Cameron, Katherine Hughes, Premier Brownlee and famous bush pilots, 'Wop' May and 'Punch' Dickens.

The Old Bay House is a Provincial Historic Resource and is on the National Register of Historic Places in Canada



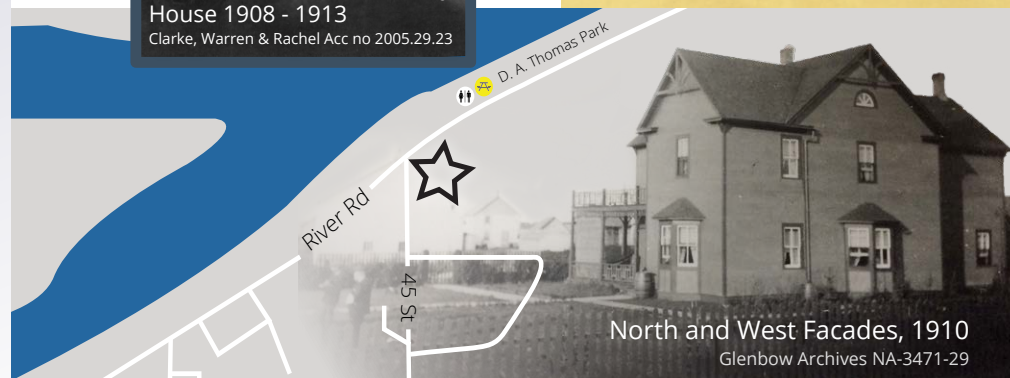
The Francis Wilson family,
first residents of the Old Bay
House 1908 - 1913

Clarke, Warren & Rachel Acc no 2005.29.23



Quist, Wendy

Following the decline of the fur trade posts, The Old Bay House became a private residence owned by various people and at one point was abandoned and gutted. However, in 1988 The Friends of the Old Bay House Society began a project to restore the grand property. Pictured above is the beautiful newly refinished banister.



North and West Facades, 1910

Glenbow Archives NA-3471-29



The Clarke House

The Bourassa/St. Germain House

Toews, Marilee

BOURASSA ST. GERMAIN HOUSE

Johnny Bourassa was born in c. 1851 at Fort Dunvegan, AB to Louis Bourassa and Marguerite Otaikijik Lafleur. In his twenties, Johnny moved to Fort Vermilion and was hired by the Hudson's Bay Company as an interpreter.

He made Fort Vermilion his home for the remainder of his life, dying there at age 90 in 1941. He married Lucia St. Cyr in 1876 and together the couple raised 11 children. The Bourassa's cattle and wheat farm was once considered the heart of Fort Vermilion.

During his lifetime, Johnny built three dovetailed log houses. In 1903, Pierre Lizotte helped him build the first, which was used as a residence by Johnny's son Thomas and his wife Eliza (Lizotte).

Johnny then built the Bourassa/St. Germain House, also known as the Visitor Log House, which he gave to his daughter Marie Anne and her husband John St. Germain. He then completed his final dovetail house, known today as the Trapper's Shack.



The Riverside Cafe in the c. 1960s

Sutherland, Florence Letts



The Trapper's Shack today.

THE TRAPPER'S SHACK

Located on its original River Lot, and relatively unaltered in presentation, the Trapper's Shack is one of the region's earlier and more prominent hand hewn log houses. It is the largest and oldest (c. 1908) two-story log dwelling on its original site in Fort Vermilion.



The Bourassa/St. Germain House (Visitor Log House)

Kozij, Jesse



Toews, Marilee

THE FORT VERMILION BRIDGE

Opening of the Fort Vermilion Bridge on September 19, 1974 began a new era for Fort Vermilion. It was no longer isolated from the south.

Boyer's Post, a precursor to Fort Vermilion, was established in 1788. For nearly 200 years, the Peace River was the only "highway" connecting residents on both sides of the Peace River. Each year, Indigenous and other trappers would trade furs with buyers for shipment via riverboats to eastern exchange points on route to Montreal and the Hudson's Bay Company.

Steamboats helped to lessen the burden for summer transportation beginning with the St. Charles in 1903. A round trip with passenger accommodation between Fort Vermilion to Peace River Crossing cost \$30. It was an astounding 847 km trek and an incredibly challenging journey.

The first ferry was provided in 1916 and served travelers for years, but not always satisfactorily. One story involved the

motor breaking down and a little "kicker" motor being used as a stopgap. It was too small and broke apart when the ferry was in midstream, and the passengers needed to be rescued by a priest using the parish's motorboat.

Over the years, several other boats would be used to haul materials in the summer months, until the Fort Vermilion Bridge opened in 1974. Uncertainty due to ice bridge safety, plus high water and flooding, posed many challenges, particularly during the spring breakup.



FVHC Acc no 990.04.97.146

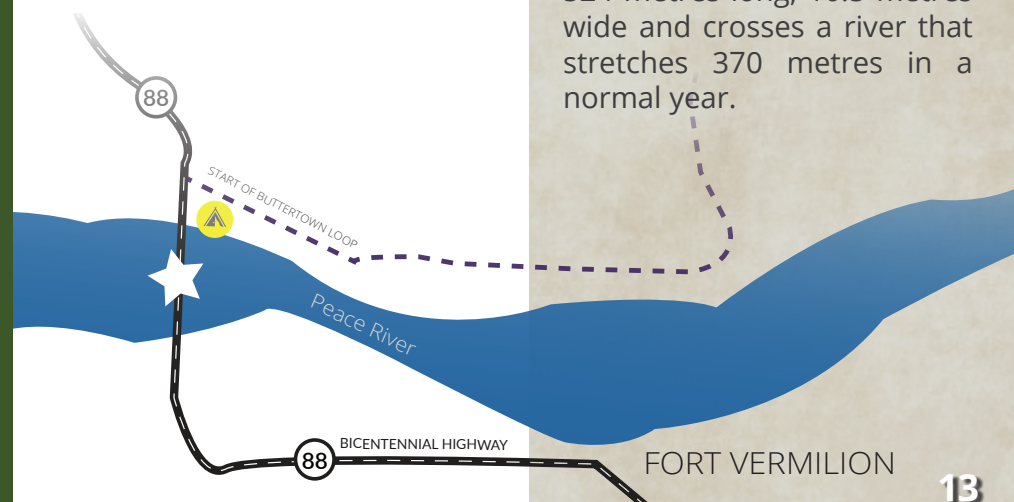


FVHC Acc no 990.04.74.76



FVHC Acc no 990.04.74.68

The Fort Vermilion Bridge is engineered to resist 1,600,000 pounds of extreme ice forces per pier, and cost approximately \$6 million. It is 524 metres long, 10.5 metres wide and crosses a river that stretches 370 metres in a normal year.



BUTTERTOWN

While it may read “North Vermilion” on maps and signs, this settlement is known as “Buttertown” to locals.

Buttertown gets its name from the dairy production of its early residents, who traded butter in great quantities with independent traders and the Hudson’s Bay Company. The butter was then delivered to communities farther north or resold locally.

Participating in this trade was not as easy as it sounds. In order to reach the fur trade centre in Fort Vermilion, Buttertown residents

needed to cross the Peace River, which was sometimes difficult due to poor river conditions.

This struggle continued until 1974 when the Fort Vermilion Bridge was constructed, providing easier access to residents on both sides of the river. Various vessels, including steamers and ferries, were also used to transport goods and services beginning in 1903 with the St. Charles.

Although the ferry no longer operates and butter making is no longer a livelihood for the residents, Buttertown is still

an active community and is recognized as an important part of Fort Vermilion’s past.

Buttertown has historically been a self-contained community with its own stores, church, pool halls, school, saw and flour mills.



River Lot 6
FVHC Acc no 995.57.10



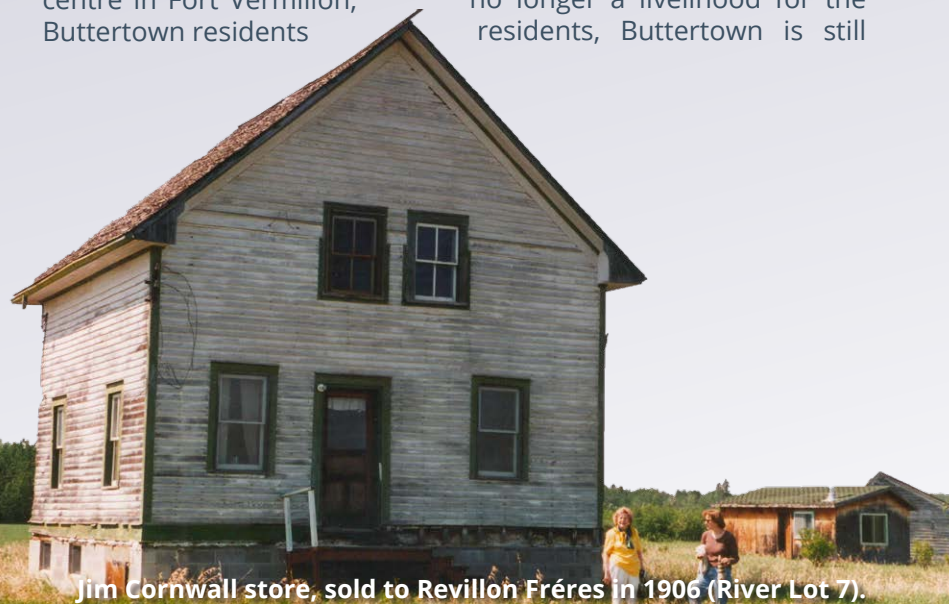
River Lot 8
FVHC Acc no 995.57.33

PEOPLE AND PLACES

The River Lot system of Buttertown – where landowners held one or more lots with river frontage and land for dwelling, pasture and gardens – remains in place to this day and is connected to several key figures in Canadian history.

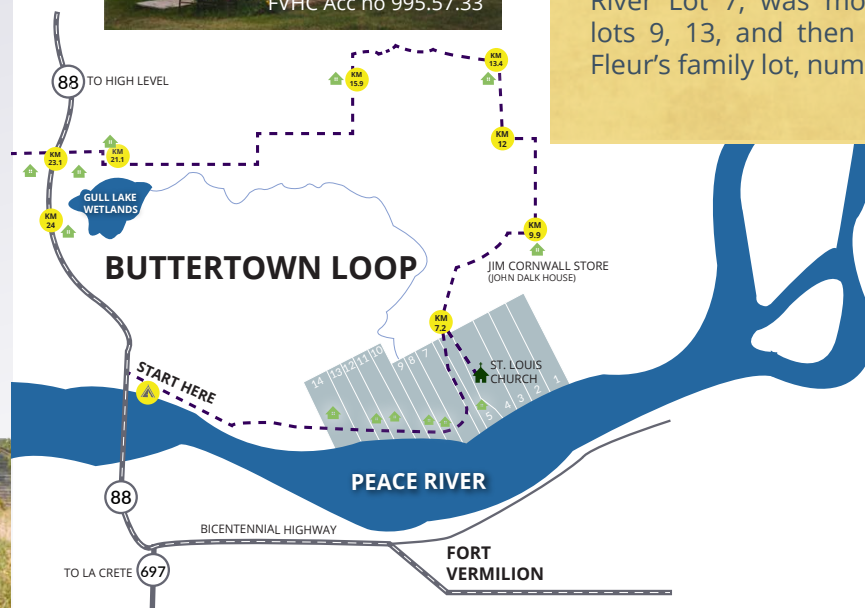
River Lot 7 is the former site of Jim Cornwall’s store and after 1906, part of the holdings of Revillon Frères (pictured bottom left). This French fur and luxury goods company directly competed with the monopolistic Hudson’s Bay Company.

Buttertown’s first pool hall, built by Augustus Lizotte on River Lot 7, was moved to lots 9, 13, and then the La Fleur’s family lot, number 14.



Jim Cornwall store, sold to Revillon Frères in 1906 (River Lot 7).

FVHC Acc no 995.57.82

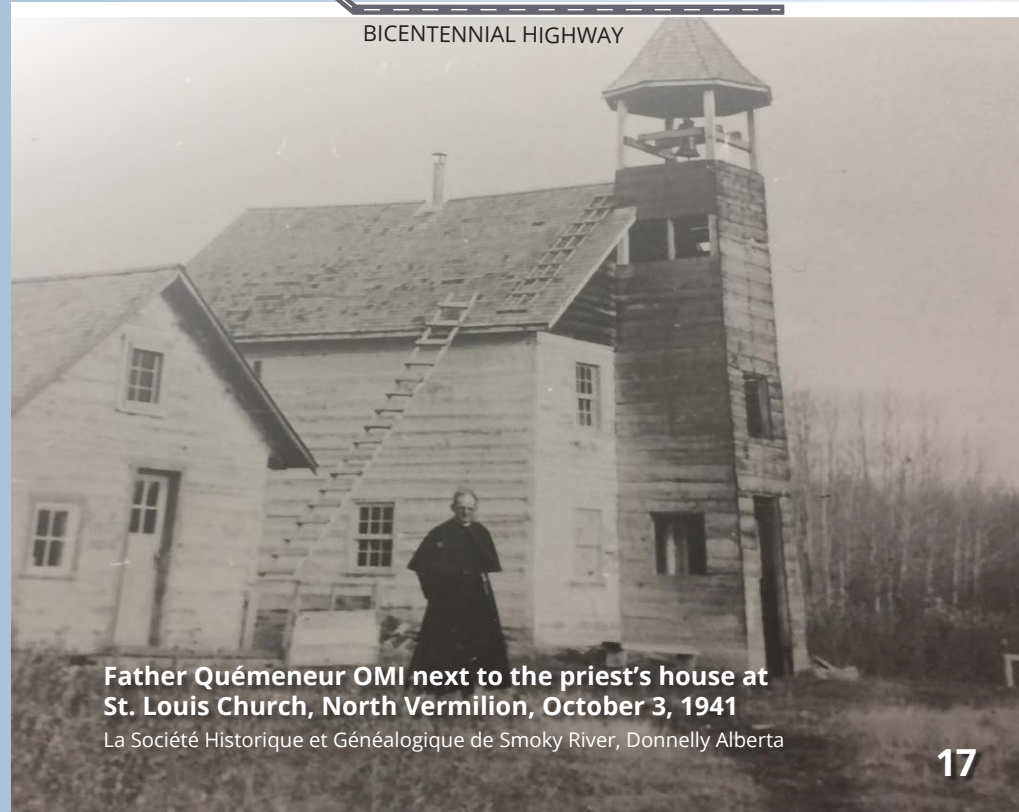


ST. LOUIS CHURCH

Father J  r  my Lavoie (OMI) began construction of the St. Louis Roman Catholic Church with help from the community in 1906. Like many other buildings in Butters town, the St. Louis Church was built using hand-hewn logs and it was officially blessed on March 20, 1909. It was an outreach of St. Henry's Mission in Fort Vermilion, founded July 6, 1866 by Bishop Faraud (OMI).

The small building next to the church served as the priest's residence. Father Jean-Louis Qu  meneur (Grouard-McLennan Roman Catholic Diocese 1924-1965) celebrated mass at the chapel for decades and later tried organizing an Indian residential school in Butters town.

The church is a must see for travellers looking to experience Butters town's heritage, which also encompasses early fur trading and agricultural history.



Father Qu  meneur OMI next to the priest's house at St. Louis Church, North Vermilion, October 3, 1941

La Soci  t   Historique et G  n  alogique de Smoky River, Donnelly Alberta



Kozij, Jesse

Walking and Driving Tour

1. Clarke House I | 1905 | Built of locally sawn timber, this was the middle of three identical houses used as Hudson's Bay clerk quarters. It was moved west of St. Luke's Church in 1943 to be the dwelling of William and Agnes Clarke. In 1944 it was moved to the Fort Vermilion Heritage Centre. Pictured on page 8.

2. The Bourassa/St. Germain House | c.1905 | The St. Germain House, built by Johnny Bourassa, was moved to the Complex in 1983 for use as the Visitor Information Centre. Building bees were often held to construct these hand-hewn, dove-tailed log houses. See page 8 for more information.

3. Old RCMP Detachment | 1959 | Distinctive in its brick construction, this detachment is No. 31 of several built across Canada according to this plan. It included offices, married and single member's quarters and a jail cell.

4. Batts' General Store | Massive logs from the 1897 Hudson's Bay Company store were moved c. 1941 to build this store. Until 1990 it was the oldest business building still in use in the Fort. In recent years, it was remodelled and has seen use as a workshop, gift shop, cafe, and bakery.

5. Trappers' Shack | c. 1908 | Johnny Bourassa and others built this prominent 2.5 storey, dove-tailed log house. It is remembered as a house, cafe, outpatient's lodge, and for its room and board cabins. This log building is the largest and oldest on its original site in the Fort, and it is Mackenzie County's first designated Municipal Historic Resource. See page 9 for more information.

6. Board of Trade | This building symbolizes the Fort Vermilion Board of Trade founded in 1914. It was a store manager's house, BOT office, and library. It was moved and renovated in the 1950's for use as a residence.

7. Hudson's Bay Store | 1940 | Since 1972, this store has been used as a pool hall, laundromat, confectionary, liquor store, apartments, and in recent years a hardware/building supplies business.

8. Kratzs' Clinic | 1936 | Etna Rivard and Antoine Beaulieu built this dove-tailed log house for Mr. Edgecombe. Doctors Hannah and Julius Kratz and other physicians used it as a medical clinic and residence. Covered with modern siding in recent years, it has been used for various retail and lodging purposes.

9. Captain Gullion (Clarke II) House | 1907 | Built for the Guillion family, this was the western most of three identical Hudson's Bay clerk quarters and the home of the Chief 'Chilouis' Courtoreille. It was moved here in the early 1940s and Fred and Lola Clarke lived in it.

10. Ferguson/Bell House | 1960 | Built by the Fergusons and DeVeers, this was the home of Lorna Bell and family until her retirement. Literacy and cultural projects are hallmarks of this clan. The house is currently a private residence.

11. Experimental Farm | Active settlement and the potential for agriculture north of 58° were acknowledged in 1907 when the Dominion Experimental Farm was established by F. S. Lawrence. Robert Jones led the research at Stoney Point until his retirement in 1933. The farm was relocated to the Diamond P Hill in 1936. For more information see page 2.

12. Hallet-Hansley Legion Hall | 1950 | Named in memory of town local servicemen, 'Buddy' Hallet and Ted Hansley, the original wood-frame hall was built by Billy Batt and a crew. Within are military artifacts and paintings by Lily Bell.

13. St. Henry's Church | St. Henry's parish was founded in July 6, 1866; the first registered burial was March 20, 1868 and a permanent mission has operated since 1876. For more information see page 4.

14. Old Bay House | In 1908, the Wilson family moved into the New Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) factor's house. It was built from locally sawn timber. Designated an Alberta Registered Historic Resource in 1978 and Provincial Historic Resource status in 2005, it is on the National Register of Historic Places in Canada. The OBH symbolizes the HBC's fur trade empire, which operated at this site 1830-1940. As the only evidence of the once extensive Bay holdings, the OBH restoration is a tribute to the competitive fur trade interests operating in the area since 1788. For more information see page 6.

15. HBC Cookhouse | c. 1909 | This hand-hewn, dove-tailed log m house used to be located west and south of here. It is now a priv residence with a new exterior.

16. S.S. Peace River Heritage Site | 1905 | The grand and beaut sternwheeler, the S.S. Peace River was built and launched near h and plied the Peace between the Fort and Peace River Crossing fr 1905 to 1915. Lumber for construction was sawn from trees logger Oliver's Island and floated to this site. John Gullion and Burley Man headed the shipbuilding. Pictured Below



Glenbow Archives NA-2974-2

17. National Historic Site Cairn | Gaze downstream toward the of Boyer's Post (1788-1792) and beyond to the Caribou Mounta where a vast wilderness supplied furs and provisions for trade. Bay post, staff quarters, sawmill, flour mill and boat landing were o situated nearby.

18. St. Luke's Church Cemetary and Monument | Site of St. Lu Anglican Church (1885), the monument and fieldstone fence w dedicated in 1988 in memory of those buried there to June 1988.

19. Mission Granary/Root Cellar | This sturdy log building is what remains of the once extensice RC Mission Farm. It is now part of the Fantasy North Golf and Country Club. The remnants of the large root cellar are visible to the southwest.

20. Fort Public Schoolhouse | 1946 | An earlier log schoolhouse was built here c. 1924 by W. Letts. This one was moved here from the current Fort Public School site. The School Division uses it for storage.

21. St. Theresa Hospital Plaques | 1983 | From 1900 to 1972 the Sisters of Providence operated a medical mission. Fire in 1914 and 1925, a diphtheria scare in 1928, and the 1934 flood, were hardships they faced. When this new hospital opened, the restored statue and plaque were moved from the 1949 site. A commemorative story board was added later to further portray the roles played by other locals in the mercy mission of 1928/29.

22. Hilltop Mission | 1958 | The Mission of the Church of God in Christ was founded by Mennonite missionaries at Little Red River Post and was later established here.

23. Community & Cultural Complex | 1983 | The grounds have been used for recreation since 1963. The Complex was officially opened in 1984 to serve community, cultural heritage, recreational, and social interests. In 1994 the Hall was expanded and Museum & Archives added.

24. Everlasting Campfire | 1988 | Despite the -47°C temperature, runners relayed the 1988 Winter Olympic Torch from the airport to Community & Cultural Complex were hundreds gathered to witness the lighting of this campfire. Local artisan, Kevin Randle welded the campfire sculpture as a tribute to the warmth and unity of the region's people.



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Alberta

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