



Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site of Canada

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The Significance of Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site

Archaeological research and oral history identifies that the confluence of the North Saskatchewan and Clearwater Rivers was occupied and used for thousands of years by Indigenous Peoples. In 1799, the North West and Hudson's Bay Companies set up rival trading posts at this location. During the 76 year history of trade, many different Indigenous nations visited the area. Explorer, fur trader and renowned mapmaker David Thompson and his wife Charlotte Small used the post as a base for discovering a pass through the Rocky Mountains.

In 1926, the site was recommended as a national historic site. The Commemorative Intent of the site is expressed in the following statement: "Rocky Mountain House is of national historic significance because of its role in the historic fur trade; its association with David Thompson and exploration towards the westward; and its relationship with the Blackfoot peoples (Nitsitapi), particularly the Peigan (Piikani). The national historic site encompasses the trading establishments built and occupied between 1799 and 1875 on the west bank of the North Saskatchewan River, including a fur trade era burying ground. The extensive archaeological

sites, the viewsapes and the natural setting along the banks of the North Saskatchewan all contribute to the integrity of the site's heritage value.”

Key Milestones

1799 The North West Company builds Rocky Mountain House and the Hudson's Bay Company builds Action House

1835 The Hudson's Bay Company builds a second Rocky Mountain House

1868 The Hudson's Bay Company completes a final Rocky Mountain House

1875 The fur trade companies leave the area

1922 The Brierley family begins farming the area of the site

1926 Rocky Mountain House is designated as a national historic site

1928 The Brierley family purchases the land from the Hudson's Bay Company

1968 The Historic Sites and Monuments Board recommends the creation of a national historic park

1969 Gas plant construction starts, a fur trade era burial site is discovered during construction

1971 The federal government acquires the land for an expanded site

1979 The National Historic Site officially opens to the public with a new visitor centre

2003-06 The site is redeveloped with a major upgrade to visitor centre, a new washroom and new outdoor interpretive signage

2007 Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site Management Plan is approved

2013 A major flood damages cultural resources and facilities



Location

The site is located 80 km west of Red Deer and seven kilometres from the community of Rocky Mountain House, Development surrounds the site, with oil wells, gravel pits, a rail line, a gas plant located on the site and rural acreages near the boundary.



History

In 1799, at the junction of the Upper North Saskatchewan and Clearwater rivers, the North West Company built Rocky Mountain House in the hopes of attracting trade from the Kutenai Indians who resided across the mountains and to establish a base of exploration for new fur trade territories. In that same year, the competing Hudson's Bay Company established Acton House nearby. Strategically situated in close proximity to their hunting grounds, the Blackfoot (specifically the Piikani and the Kainai), became the principal customers at Rocky.

David Thompson lived at Rocky Mountain House for several years and, determined to fulfill the company's dream of a practical route to the Pacific and China, launched his expeditions across

the Rocky Mountains. In 1807, he went upriver from Rocky Mountain House crossing the mountains through Howse Pass to the Columbia River and again in 1811 when he crossed Athabasca Pass.

The Hudson's Bay Company initiated another period of fort construction in 1835, and again in 1865. By 1875, the last post was abandoned. The only surviving architectural feature at the site is the chimneys from this final trading post.

The site of the last Rocky Mountain House (1868-1875) was declared a site of national historic importance in 1926. It is important to acknowledge that this was one of Canada's early commemorations. In 1931, a Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) plaque was erected near the chimneys marking the start of presenting the site to Canadians. In 1968, the HSMBC further recommended that a national historic park be established. Land purchases were made in the 1970s and in 1978, a 541 acre national historic park opened to the public with a new visitor centre and trails to the four fort sites.

The Brierley family arrived on the site from southern Alberta in 1922 and started their mixed farming operation. After renting for first six years they purchased the land from the Hudson Bay Company in 1928. Their main building site was located on top of the remains of the 1799-1821 North West Company Rocky Mountain House. In 1929, Mrs. Mabel Brierley donated a small parcel of land for the plaque. This marked the first land to be set aside at the site. The family continued to farm until they sold their land to the federal government for establishment of the national historic park. The Brierley family played an important role in the establishment of the Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site through land donation, land acquisition and agreements.



Cultural Resources Management

Safeguarding the site's cultural resources, landscape, viewsapes and authentic setting is a primary goal. Cultural resources at this and other national historic sites reinforce a sense of connection to Canada and to Parks Canada's protected heritage places and the stories they tell. Parks Canada's Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site is a large scale and complex landscape made up of physical features such as the North Saskatchewan River with its broad floodplain and associated river terraces, upon which the fur trade posts, trails and other cultural features have been built over time.



Past to Present

Since approval of the last plan in 2007, the site has experienced steady growth with partners and community collaborators, a significant expansion of the camping offer, increased and diversified engagement with Indigenous Peoples. A number of factors have contributed to this, including strong community support, increased promotions and new and renewed agreements with Indigenous nations and organizations.

Parks Canada operates a popular visitor centre which houses a replica fur trade room, exhibits and a 3D virtual reality experience. Two main interpretive trails take visitors through the archaeological remains of the four forts. Interpretive panels and props are located throughout the site including a York Boat, a children's play fort, a demonstration tipi, a Métis camp and day use picnic areas. Heritage Camping is a relatively new overnight experience on the shores of the North Saskatchewan River with six Métis trapper tents, three tipi accommodations and two trap line cabins for visitors to rent. Front country camping for 24 RV/tent trailers and 12 walk-in tenting sites is also available.

In addition, visitors can discover the site's herd of plains bison. The small herd of 10 – 12 plains bison originate from Elk Island National Park, where most of the world's purebred plains bison are conserved. During the fur trade era, bison would have been a common species in the Rocky Mountain House area. Today this display herd provides opportunities to both learn about bison's link to the past, their connection to the present and the Bison Reintroduction Program that is underway in Banff National Park.

Indigenous relations have grown into being an important element of the national historic site. The Métis Local 845 is a long standing partner delivering cultural programming at the site. The visitor experience opportunities include: the Métis Campfire program; Skills of the Fur Trade activity stations, and the development of the Heritage Camping offer.



In 2016, the Indigenous group Kis Sai Wah Toe Tat Towin Society– meaning “Coming together and taking care of one another in humbleness and wellness” and Parks Canada entered into a Memorandum of Understanding. The MOU supports collaborative activities focused on reconciliation including the Sacred Hoop of 100 Eagle Feathers, the creation of community healing lodges and various initiatives with elders, teachers and youth. In addition, the site is actively working with O’Chiese First Nation to engage youth to develop new programming opportunities. The site will continue to work with Indigenous Peoples to build relationships that demonstrate leadership in reconciliation and contribute to collaborative initiatives and opportunities for strengthening diversity and inclusion.

An important focus of site planning centers on the integration of cultural resource management with the provision of new visitor opportunities in ways that together inspire memorable experiences and protection of the site’s archaeological resources, viewscapes and related natural landscape features.

Oil and Gas Operations at Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site

The national historic site sits in the heart of one of Alberta’s premier oil and gas fields. Oil and gas activity started on the historic site lands in the late 1960s before Parks Canada acquired the property. When Parks Canada purchased the property in the early 1970s, agreements that were in place for operation of the gas plant and pipelines crossing the land to the plant came with the purchase agreement. Since the early 1970s, Parks Canada has worked closely with the various industry representatives to ensure protection of key resources including remains of the fur trade burial ground.

Working with Others

Partnerships have been an essential part of this site since it was first designated as a national historic site in 1926. In the last 10 years the site has continued its work with a number of longstanding and new partners to diversity and enhance the experience, to promote the site through special events and to protect its special features. Since 1984, the Confluence Heritage Society has been an important partner in managing daily operations and offers at the site. Metis 845 is a longstanding partner delivering daily programs and special events. New partnerships such as the one with Kis Sai Wah Toe Tat Towin Society speak to the importance of the site as a gathering place to promote the understanding and sharing of Indigenous cultures.