

Municipal Heritage Advisory Committee Submission Background Information – Traffic Bridge Interpretive Signage

Original Inhabitants

The area around what is now called Saskatoon has been inhabited by First Nations people for more than 11,000 years. Archaeological sites here include campsites, bison kill sites, tipi rings, and at Wanuskewin Heritage Park, the most northerly medicine wheel ever found. Over time, this area brought together many indigenous nations, including the Assiniboine, Blackfoot, Cree, Dakota, Métis, and Saulteaux (among many others), each with their own name for the area and reasons for occupation.



Gabriel Dumont
Artwork courtesy of George Gingras

The South Saskatchewan River system was central to sustaining the economies of the original inhabitants of the area, as it acted as a primary travel route for trade and commerce. This vast river system was a highway to hunting and trade territories, including the surrounding plains where bison and other animals and plants provided food, clothing, and other necessities of life.

The South Saskatchewan River system acted as a primary travel route for trade and commerce

For many Indigenous peoples, this area is remembered as a shared gathering place that brought people together. Numerous significant trails came through this area, as people gathered for large bison hunts, for trading, and for ceremonial purposes. Major roads and highways running through the city today were built overtop of these trails, including the Moose Woods-Batoche Trail, a historical trail that ran through the Métis settlement of La Prairie Ronde (Round Prairie) to the modern-day Whitecap Dakota First Nation then to Batoche. The Round Prairie bison-hunting brigade began hunting in the area in the 1850s.



Medicine Wheel at Wanuskewin Heritage Park
LH-5054 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

This area was home to many Cree nations who occupied this place routinely as an important gathering place and camping area on their way to the bison hunt or to trade. Cree people gathered willow in the area to make arrow shafts, one Cree name for this place is “the place where the willows are taken” or Mane-me-sas-kwa-tan.

The Dakota call the area Minnetonka—or “mighty water,” referring to an area that included a camping area and river crossing around the Senator Sid Buckvold Bridge and Victoria Avenue. Forced to settle on-reserve in the late 1870s, the Whitecap Dakota community chose to settle upriver at Moose Woods, one of the best river-crossing sites.

The Métis hunted bison in the area in and around Saskatoon. Saskatoon also had a Métis name: “Bois de flèche” or Arrow Woods. Patrice Fleury, an 1885 Resistance participant, recounts coming West to assist in an organized bison hunt in the spring of 1858. Fleury noted that their destination was the plains east, west and south of where Saskatoon now stands, a famed bison feeding ground where the bunch, or bison grass was plentiful, the river accessible, and where vast bison herds grazed to make these plains a permanent summer pasture.

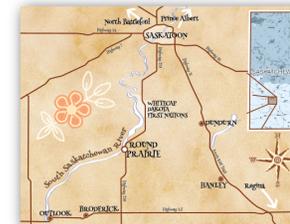


Photo courtesy of Gabriel Dumont Institute

By the 1870s, long before Saskatoon was incorporated as a city, the region was part of a larger Métis community that included the Prairie Ronde Settlement and “Frenchmen’s Flats” to the south as well as Batoche and other Southbranch Settlements—Toround’s Coulee, St. Louis, St. Laurent, and Petite Ville—to the north. Métis Road Allowance communities existed in Saskatoon’s Nutana and Exhibition areas well into the 1950s.

Establishing Saskatoon



B-1724 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

In 1882 John Lake, a land agent with the Ontario-based Temperance Colonization Society (TCS), arrived to determine the location of a "Temperance Colony" — an alcohol-free agricultural community dedicated to the ideals of the temperance movement. The federal government granted the TCS 213,000 acres of land in a block straddling the river and stretching from Clarke's Crossing in the north to the present-day Whitecap First Nation. Métis river lots in the process of being surveyed were cancelled by colonial officials and the land was provided to Temperance Colonists. The Métis had settled permanently in the region since the late 1850s-early '60s, although they had used the region's resources much earlier.

John Lake met with Chief Whitecap and others from the community to determine the best location for the colony. On the advice of Chief Whitecap, Lake chose present-day Nutana as the colony's administrative centre. The chosen area would allow easy access to the river. Lake indicated in his reminiscences that the initial name chosen for the settlement was "Minnetonka." The first settlers arrived the summer of 1883.

Economic relationships between the TCS and the Whitecap Dakota First Nation were established by the mid-1880s. The Dakota brought items such as fish and furs to the local stores to trade and some Dakota women worked as domestics in Saskatoon homes. As the Whitecap community developed a thriving cattle industry into the late 1890s, they brought their hay to local markets in Saskatoon. This continued until the 1950s.



L4-858 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

Things began to pick up in 1890, when the Qu'Appelle, Long Lake and Saskatchewan Railway arrived in Saskatoon on its way from Regina to Prince Albert. But the train didn't stop in the little east bank community. Instead it crossed the river where the Senator Sid Buckwold Bridge currently stands, stopping at the station located on the west side of First Avenue, facing 20th Street.

In 1906, with a population of 3000, Saskatoon was the fastest growing city in Canada

Saskatoon grew slowly at first, partly due to its isolation. There was no railway and the river was too shallow and unpredictable for steamboat travel. Settlers could only take the train as far as Moose Jaw, after which they faced a daunting, 260 km (160 mile) trek overland in horse-drawn wagons.

Becoming a village meant that Saskatoon could collect taxes, borrow money, and undertake local improvements. Village assets in 1901 consisted of two road scrapers, a combination plow, a spade, a tape measure, a square, and a combined minute book and ledger.

With a population of only 113 settlers, Saskatoon was barely a dot on the map, dwarfed by major centres like Regina and Prince Albert. Communities like Rosthern and Duck Lake were substantially larger. But Saskatoon grew rapidly over the next few years.



L4-3810 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

In 1906, with the promise of a traffic bridge and other civic improvements, Saskatoon, Nutana, and Riversdale amalgamated to become a city with a population of 3,000— the fastest growing city in Canada!

Beyond Wood And Steel - Broadway Bridge

Completed in 1932, the Broadway Bridge was one of many Depression-era public works projects built under the federal Unemployment Relief Acts of 1930 and 1931 in order to help provide short-term jobs for unemployed, married men across Canada.



A-166 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library



A-144 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

Single men and all women were not eligible to work on the bridge

The purpose of the program was not only to provide the maximum amount of work to as many men as possible, but also to end up with public infrastructure that was both necessary and useful. The goal, in the words of one writer, was to build a bridge "not a boondoggle to keep idle men occupied." Indeed, Saskatoon had needed a new bridge for years, and the construction of one was already being discussed when the Depression struck.

Although the \$850,000 cost was shared by all three levels of government, the Broadway Bridge was very much a "made in Saskatoon" project. It was designed by engineers from the University of Saskatchewan and built by a local contractor using only local men, a total of 1,593 of whom worked on the bridge. All material used in the construction was also sourced from local suppliers.



A-174 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

As a relief-work project, the new bridge was to be built by married men on the unemployed register only. In order to spread the work to as many as possible, each man was only given one shift a day for a total of 16 to 22 days, depending on the size of his family. A married man without children was limited to \$25 per month, while a man with a large family could make \$37.50 per month. Single men and all women were not eligible to work on the bridge.

Construction began in mid-December, 1931. To meet the federally imposed completion deadline of December, 1932, the work continued day and night, Sundays and holidays; through wind, rain, snow or shine; all through that bitter winter and the months that followed.

The Broadway Bridge was completed on time and on budget, and opened to traffic before a crowd of several thousand on November 11, 1932, following the Remembrance Day services at the cenotaph.



A-1659 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

First Crossings

Although rivers in Saskatchewan were important highways, they were also barriers to travel. Even the best crossing sites – where the river was narrow, with gently sloping banks – could be dangerous, and wagons were often floated across while horses and cattle had to swim.

One answer to the problem was to establish ferry crossings.

The first ferry in Saskatchewan was started in 1871 by Xavier Letendre, at Batoche, 90 km north of Saskatoon. Soon afterwards, Gabriel Dumont began operating a ferry a few kilometres south of there, where the Gabriel Dumont Bridge now stands.



LH-2014 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

In Saskatoon, the first ferry service began in the fall of 1883. It was simply a large, flat-bottomed boat that could (with considerable effort) be rowed over to the other side. A "swing ferry" was built in 1884, running on cables strung across the river between present-day Victoria Park and the foot of Main Street. In 1890, it was moved to a point near the foot of Victoria Avenue. This type of ferry uses the river's own current as its motive force. Changing the angle of the ferry relative to the current allows it to move in either direction across the river.

People complained about the ferry service from the very beginning. It was slow, awkward and unreliable. It only ran for part of the year and it frequently broke down or became stuck. At an "indignation meeting" in the fall of 1902, it was reported that the ferry "was never run when the water was high, nor when it was low, nor when the wind was blowing, and when these objections did not exist the ferryman was away doing some other job."



LH-5 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

The ferry approaches were also a major problem. The apron slopes were too steep, and large boulders on the shore made it difficult to load and unload, frequently causing damage to wagons and to the ferry itself. Another problem was the ferry's carrying capacity. During periods of peak travel such as market days or fair days, people, wagons and cattle would crowd the approaches.

Could you imagine waiting up to six hours to cross the river?

People also objected to paying for it. The Temperance Colonization Society had originally operated the ferry as a free service. But it was bought by a private operator in 1893, who charged a fee to take people across. This continued even after the territorial government took over operations in 1898. Free ferry service would not come to Saskatchewan until 1912. But it no longer mattered in Saskatoon, where the ferry made its last run on October 10, 1907, the day the Traffic Bridge officially opened.



The last ferry trip of 1907
LH-1987 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library



LH-1835 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

Many people refused to use the ferry at all. After the railway bridge was built in 1890, it became a popular shortcut into town. It was claimed that in 1902, half the people coming to Saskatoon from the east side of the river tied their horses at the end of the bridge and walked across. There are even stories of people dragging wagons across the bridge to avoid taking the ferry.

Bridging the Gap



PH-90-86 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library



LH-3092 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

From the beginning, Saskatoon was remote and isolated, at the end of a long, arduous, overland trek on a lonely stretch of the nearly un-navigable South Saskatchewan River. But that was about to change. In 1889, the Qu'Appelle, Long Lake and Saskatchewan Railway company commenced construction of a railway line from Regina to Prince Albert.

That line would cross the river here, in Saskatoon.

Saskatoon was chosen for three reasons. The riverbanks were low and relatively equal on both sides (the same factor that had lured the original Temperance Colony surveyors in 1883), making it easier to build a bridge here. Owing to the ferry, it was already the crossing point for the important Regina-to-Battlefords trail, and finally, Saskatoon's Temperance Colonization Society had agreed to provide free land for the railway right-of-way and station.

Work began in August. By the time it wrapped up for the winter, they were half way to Saskatoon. Excitement mounted here as the construction crews got closer the following spring. The tracks finally reached the river on May 19th and the first train crossed a temporary bridge here in late June.

By the end of August, the bridge was complete, along with a train station, section house and water tower, all on what is now the downtown side of the river, opposite the original Temperance Colony settlement. By the end of September, twice-weekly trains were running between Regina and Prince Albert.

The world had finally come to Saskatoon.



LH-698 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

In 1889, the Qu'Appelle, Long Lake and Saskatchewan Railway company started construction of a railway line from Regina to Prince Albert



LH-3871 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

But the decision to place the railway station across the river split the settlement in two and ensured that the new community thus created, not the original Nutana settlement, would become the commercial centre of Saskatoon. Indeed, the railway refused to stop in Nutana at all, not even to unload passengers or freight, so that people there continued to be dependent on the ferry.

The new bridge was a simple, wooden, through-truss consisting of six spans resting on timber piers with a total length of 274 metres. Although there had been talk of building a combined railway and traffic bridge, or even a separate traffic bridge, this didn't happen. The new bridge had no provision for foot or vehicle traffic of any type.

Bridges like this were cheap to build and maintain. But the untreated, wooden piers had a limited lifespan and were susceptible to damage, particularly from the ice break up in spring. The new bridge was severely damaged on several occasions over the next few years, most catastrophically in 1904, when four spans were destroyed by the rising ice. Worse, flooding in the Qu'Appelle Valley that year washed out the bridge at Lumsden and submerged miles of track. With its only railway line cut in two places, Saskatoon was effectively isolated for the next 50 days. Travellers were stranded and an estimated 4,000 settlers, who would otherwise have gotten off the train in Saskatoon, instead spent their money elsewhere.

The bridge was rebuilt, this time with permanent, concrete piers. Again, there had been talk of adding traffic lanes, and again, they failed to materialize. Eventually, the wooden superstructure was replaced with steel, and this bridge stood until it was finally demolished in 1964 as part of the rail line relocation project that cleared the way for the Idylwyld Freeway and the Senator Sid Buckwold Bridge.



LH-872 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

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Beyond Wood And Steel - University Bridge

By 1912, Saskatoon desperately needed a second traffic bridge. The city's population had exploded since 1907, with new neighbourhoods on both sides of the river, a new university and a planned street railway system, all of which would further strain the capacity of the already-overtaxed Traffic Bridge.

In 1913, the province and the city agreed to build a new bridge between Clarence Avenue and 25th Street, which is today known as the University Bridge, with the city covering one-third of the cost.



PH-2005-10-41 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

*...creating the impression of
"a stone, skipping across
the water."*

Originally, it was to be a steel-truss bridge similar to the railway bridge at 33rd Street. But the difference in heights between the riverbanks meant that a huge embankment would have to be built along 25th Street. Instead, they chose a spandrel-arched, reinforced concrete bridge, which could be built sloping downward from east to west with the arches decreasing in size, creating the impression of "a stone, skipping across the water."



LH-3588 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

It was to have two, 4 metre roadways with 2.4 metre sidewalks cantilevered out from each side and a pair of streetcar tracks running down the middle. When completed, it would be "the longest and probably the finest concrete bridge in all of Canada."

Work began promisingly in August of 1913. But the boom that had been fueling Saskatoon's prosperity was collapsing and the city and province were soon in the throes of recession. The contractor building the bridge was near bankruptcy and there were delays when the concrete of one of the piers settled badly and had to be re-poured. Then on August 4, 1914, Canada went to war and the provincial government froze all public works contracts -- except for the University Bridge. Unfinished, it was in danger of being destroyed by river ice during the spring thaw.



PH-2002-141-5 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

By the spring of 1916, with only the streetcar tracks to be laid and the deck to be paved, the city found itself out of money. The provincial government reluctantly agreed to cover the remaining cost and on November 15, 1916, the University Bridge officially opened. But the planned extension of the street railway system never occurred and the tracks remained unused until they were removed in 1947.

Built For People, Not For Trains

When it officially opened in the fall of 1907, Saskatoon's Traffic Bridge became the very first bridge over the South Saskatchewan River to be built for people, not trains.

Saskatoon had needed a bridge for years. The slow and unreliable ferry service was not only inconvenient, it was a deterrent to commerce that the ambitious settlement could ill afford. In 1904, the territorial government had set aside \$60,000 to build traffic attachments onto the railway bridge that crossed into downtown where the Senator Sid Buckwold Bridge is now. But that idea fell through.



LH-1819 courtesy of Saskatoon Public Library

Designed by the provincial Department of Public Works and built at a cost of \$106,000, the Traffic Bridge was a "camel-backed, Parker through-truss" in which the trusses rise above the level of the roadway. It consisted of five spans with a total length of 275 metres, making it the longest dedicated traffic bridge in all of Saskatchewan or Alberta at the time. The roadway was 6 metres wide, with provision for brackets to be added on either side to carry a walkway and streetcar tracks.



LH-222 courtesy of Saskatoon Public Library



B-1651 courtesy of Saskatoon Public Library

Finally, in 1905, the communities of Saskatoon (the present-day downtown), Riversdale and Nutana began discussing the possibility of amalgamating together to become a city. But Nutana held out for a bridge to replace the ferry, and the following spring, the first budget of the brand-new province of Saskatchewan included money for a stand-alone traffic bridge for Saskatoon.

Saskatoon's Traffic Bridge became the very first bridge over the South Saskatchewan River to be built for people, not trains

Construction began in August, 1906 and the concrete piers were finished late the following January. But the company that was to supply the steel for the rest of the work was behind on its orders, and construction did not resume again until late spring. Finally, on October 10, 1907, the Traffic Bridge opened to the public.



Re-design of Victoria Avenue and Rotary Park development 1960

LH-2004 courtesy of Saskatoon Public Library

Even before it was finished there were complaints that the bridge was too narrow to accommodate the fast-growing city's future needs. The lack of a dedicated pedestrian walkway was also worrisome, as this made it dangerous for anyone crossing on foot. This was a definitely a problem, and a footbridge was added to the downstream side of the bridge in 1908. But there was no way to make it any wider, and, as was pointed out, there was ample room for two wagons to pass each other easily. What more could you want?

The importance of the Traffic Bridge to the newly-incorporated city of Saskatoon cannot be understated. Without it, Nutana would not have joined in amalgamation and Saskatoon would probably not have become a city – with all the advantages that involves – in 1906. As well, the bridge drew trade into Saskatoon from the south and east which would otherwise have gone to places like Dundurn, and so helped ensure the city's role as a regional service centre at a critical time in its history.

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Hills: The Long And Short of It

From the Nutana side of the river there were only two roads down to the Traffic Bridge: the Long Hill, crossing the face of the riverbank from Broadway, and the Short Hill, built a couple years later, which plunged straight down Victoria Avenue.

With an 11 percent grade, the Short Hill was too steep for most traffic. But the Long Hill road had its own hazards, in particular the sharp turn at the top onto Broadway Avenue, and the even sharper one onto the bridge at the bottom.

In 1912, both roads were paved with sandstone blocks to provide better footing for horses. Even so, loaded wagons and most motor cars found the Short Hill too steep. So did the streetcars of the Saskatoon Municipal Railway, which commenced operations in 1913.



LH-2581 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library



LH-1043 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

Crash on Long Hill sends streetcar onto riverbank!

The sharp turns on Long Hill were a real problem for streetcars. The city had to use its smaller cars on the run into Nutana, not only for fear the larger ones would be too heavy for the bridge, but also because they were too long to make the turn at the foot of the bridge without scraping.



PH-2014-302 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

In winter months, ice could make the tracks on Long Hill slippery, and a watchman had to be stationed there to keep them sanded. Even so, there were several derailments over the years. On March 3, 1922, a streetcar jumped the tracks when its brakes failed to hold as it came down the hill. Skidding out of control, it left the road, struck a pole and bounced off, plunging down the riverbank.

Amazingly, no one was killed. Of the twenty-eight passengers, only six were sent to hospital. But there were so many spectators crowding the Traffic Bridge that the chief of police ordered them removed for fear the bridge would collapse.

On several occasions, the road down the Long Hill was damaged by riverbank slumping. In 1914, slumping caused a 1.2 metre crack in the roadway. A temporary bridge had to be built to carry the streetcar lines and other traffic over the crack until it could be fixed.



LH-996 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library



LH-693 courtesy of the Saskatoon Public Library

In the early 1960s, the south end of the bridge was raised and a new interchange built, reducing the grade on both the Short and Long Hills slightly. The area around the bridge was substantially changed a few years later when that part of the river was filled in to make Rotary Park. The approaches were completely rebuilt when the new Traffic Bridge was completed in 2018.

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Spanning Our History



Completed in 1907, Saskatoon's original Traffic Bridge played a critical part in joining the communities of Nutana, Saskatoon and Riversdale. It became part of the fabric of Saskatoon, a favourite subject for local photographers and a daunting rite of passage for generations of new drivers, forced to dare its narrow lanes for the first time. It served faithfully in this role for more than a hundred years before closing permanently in the fall of 2012.

The bridge had been closed at various times before that for repairs and maintenance. As it got older, concern was expressed that it might be approaching the end of its effective lifespan. Several major inspections were undertaken between 1986 and 2005 to monitor its condition. In the fall of 2005, it was announced that the bridge had rusted so badly it was in danger of collapsing under its own weight. It was closed to vehicle traffic but remained open to pedestrians and cyclists until repair work began the following summer.



Image courtesy of the Saskatoon StarPhoenix

When the bridge re-opened in the fall of 2006 it was expected to last another twenty years. But an inspection in the summer of 2010 uncovered major structural problems and the city moved quickly to close the bridge permanently.

After extensive public consultations, Saskatoon's city council voted on December 6, 2010 to demolish the Traffic Bridge and replace it with a modern steel truss bridge similar in style to the original.

The pedestrian access ramp on the Nutana side of the bridge was dismantled in May of 2012. That fall, the first span of the bridge on that side was also removed so that Saskatchewan Crescent – which it had crossed over – could be re-opened.



Image courtesy of the Saskatoon StarPhoenix

Saskatoon's Traffic Bridge played a critical part in joining the communities of Nutana, Saskatoon and Riversdale

At the same time, archaeological research into the fate of the paddle wheeler S.S. City of Medicine Hat, which had crashed into the bridge and sank in 1908, was conducted at the base of the southernmost pier, where the accident occurred. Drilling there recovered various artifacts identified as being from the doomed steamer.

The design for the new Traffic Bridge was approved late in 2015. Work began immediately. On January 10, 2016, thousands watched as explosive charges were set off on the bridge, dropping the two remaining southern spans down onto a berm that had been constructed below. In February, the northernmost span was similarly removed. This time, however, explosives were set on the south side of the span only, severing it from the pier and letting it tip down onto the berm in order to protect the retaining wall and walkway on River Landing.



For the next few months, a single span of the historic Traffic Bridge stood alone in the middle of the river. In November, it was lowered to the berm below, cut into smaller pieces and removed, making way for construction of the new bridge.

The new Traffic Bridge officially opened to the public on October 2, 2018.

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Traffic Bridge Sign Locations

