

Klondike Gold Rush

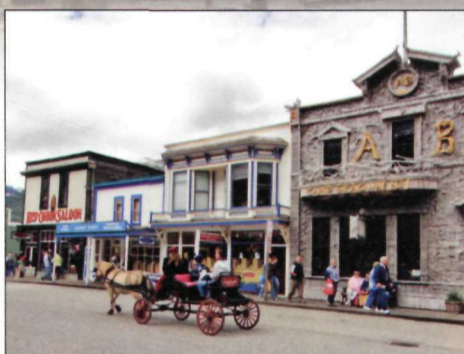
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Historical Park
Skagway, Alaska



Once the major Klondike gateway, Skagway still boasts many historic gold rush buildings. Less evident now is how Dyea, nine miles north by unpaved road, rivaled it as Alaska's then largest town. Abandoned once the White Pass & Yukon Route Railroad was built, Dyea was eventually dismantled. In today's Skagway Historic District, private, city, state, and federal interests have cooperated to preserve or restore the late-1890s atmosphere. In summer, guided walking tours explore the town. Ask about these and other programs at the visitor center in the old railroad depot.



Broadway is the historic main street of Skagway (above). The Mascot Saloon is at the corner of Broadway and 3rd Ave.
© KEN GRAHAM / ACCENT ALASKA

Also on Broadway (left) are the Red Onion Saloon, once a produce store and steamship office, and the Arctic Brotherhood Hall.
© KEN GRAHAM / ACCENT ALASKA

Visit the Skagway Museum and Gold Rush Cemetery, where old Skagway's crime boss Jefferson Randolph ("Soapy") Smith is buried. The 13,191-acre national historical park has National Park Service, city, state, and private lands. In 1998, Canada's Chilkoot Trail National

Historic Site of Canada, Thirty Mile Heritage River (Yukon River), and Dawson Historic Complex National Historic Site, and the United States' Seattle, Skagway, Chilkoot Trail, and White Pass units, were designated as the Klondike Gold Rush International Historical Park.

August 1897



Boomtown Skagway grew by leaps and bounds as this sequence of historic photographs of Broadway shows.
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

December 1897

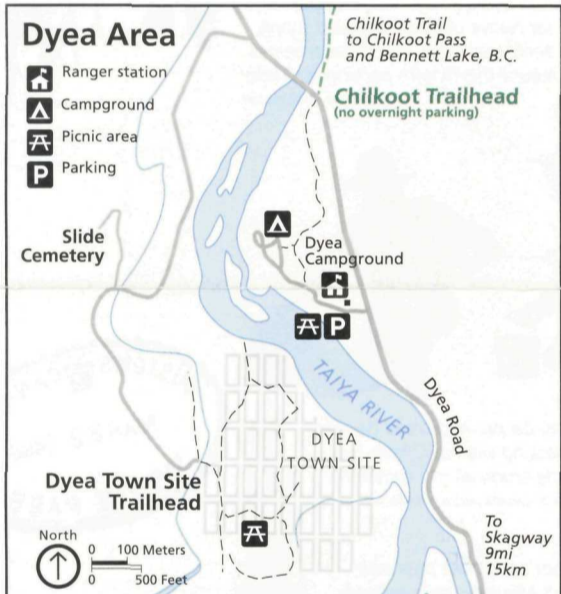


Where only tents had stood in August 1897, by December wooden buildings lined Broadway, and continuous boardwalk lined one side.
NPS

1899



Less than two years later, in 1899, a local ordinance required boardwalks on both sides of Broadway—and brick chimneys. With its railroad tracks and utility poles, Skagway had come of age.
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



From Skagway and Dyea, stampedeers started across the coastal mountains to Yukon River headwaters en route to Dawson City, Canada, and the gold fields. To learn more, visit the park museum, watch a film, and attend ranger led programs at the park visitor center, Broadway and 2nd Ave., Skagway, open daily (summer only). To explore the Dyea town site, obtain a self-guiding brochure at the visitor center. Visitors must provide their own transportation to and from Dyea.

We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. Call or check our website. Service animals welcome. For firearms regulations check our website.

If you travel between Canada and the United States you must report to customs. Contact Canadian customs in Fraser: 867-821-4111, www.cic.gc.ca, and US customs in Skagway: 907-983-2325, www.uscis.gov.

Federal law prohibits removing plants, animals, rocks, or other natural, cultural, or historic features.

More Information
Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park
PO Box 517
Skagway, AK 99840-0517
907-983-9200
www.nps.gov/klgo

Hike the 33-mile Chilkoot Trail (permit required for overnight use) starting in Dyea to realize challenges gold seekers faced (map at right). Visit the park website to plan your hike. Also check at the Trail Center in Skagway; call 907-983-9234 (summer only). Watch the Chilkoot Trail hiking video at the visitor center. **You must be well-prepared.** Get *A Hiker's Guide to the Chilkoot Trail* from Alaska Geographic, 866-AK-PARKS, or 907-274-8440, www.alaskageographic.org.

The White Pass Trail has disappeared in most places. Do not attempt it.

Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks, visit www.nps.gov.

National Park Foundation
Join the park community.
www.nationalparks.org

Historic Gold Rush Trails from Skagway and Dyea



Approaching Chilkoot Pass summit, these reenactors tread the stampedeers' route from Dyea and the Lynn Canal. Do not let this snow fool you—these are the winter conditions goldseekers labored in with their gear.

Snowfall at this elevation can be 200 inches per year, and the temperature can dip to -50°F in winter. Above the tree line you enter the world of the caribou, mountain goat, squirrel, and Arctic ground squirrel.

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Long Trail to the Klondike

GOLD! GOLD! GOLD! GOLD!

screamed headlines that sent over 100,000 people on a quest to pull themselves and the nation out of a three-year depression's economic ruin. But to strike it rich they would struggle against time, each other, and northern wilderness. US gold reserves plummeted in 1893. The stock market crashed. Ensuing panic left millions hungry, depressed, and destitute. Then came hope: on August 16, 1896, gold was discovered in northwestern Canada, near where the Klondike and Yukon rivers join. On July 17, 1897, the SS *Portland* reached Seattle with 68 rich miners and nearly two tons of gold! This promised adventure and quick wealth. For the lure of gold many risked all, even their lives, to be a part of the last grand adventure of its kind.

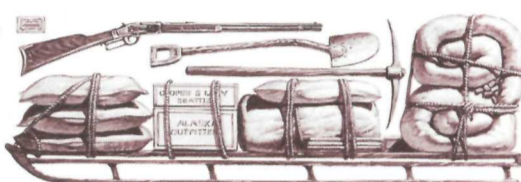
1 SEATTLE & BEYOND

The steamship *Excelsior* offloaded miners heavy with gold at San Francisco on the evening of July 14, 1897. The *Portland* docked at Seattle the morning of July 17, preceded by a reporter on a tugboat touting "more than a ton



The Klondike Gold Rush was well documented. Hopeful stampedeers posed at painted backdrops in Seattle studios. Few realized what hardships awaited in interior Canada's Yukon—or on rugged trails leading to the gold fields.

of solid gold on board." (In fact it was over two tons.) Among these first Klondikers were former Seattle YMCA Secretary Tom Lippy and his wife Salome. They ventured north on Tom's hunch in March 1896 just before the discovery. They brought back \$80,000 and would eventually take nearly \$2 million from the richest Klondike claim of all. The stampede was on, and all possible passage north to Alaska was booked.



Fewer than 3,000 took the all-water "rich man's route" from Seattle to St. Michael in Alaska, then up the Yukon to Dawson. It cost more than most stampedeers could pay. Nearly 2,000 tried a difficult, all-land route from Edmonton. The handful who made it to Dawson took nearly two years, arriving after the rush was over. Numbers (1 to 4) on the map match numbered paragraphs about the major routes taken to Dawson and the gold fields (5). Most stampedeers chose Chilkoot Pass or White Pass, and then floated down the Yukon.

The ton of goods (below) gives a physical sense of a stampede's life and diet. Considered essential were 350 pounds of flour, 150 of bacon, and 100 each of beans and sugar. Outfits cost \$250 to \$500.

NPS / JOHN DAWSON



The Chilkoot Trail's fabled Golden Stairs humbled argonauts intent on the summit. This vivid image—an endless line of prospectors toting enormous loads like worker ants—became the Klondike Gold Rush icon. It took three months and 20 to 40 trips to carry their ton of goods over the pass.

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2 DYEA & THE CHILKOOT TRAIL

Before the gold rush the Tlingit Nation controlled the strategic Chilkoot Pass trade route over the coast mountains to interior First Nation peoples' lands. The 33-mile Chilkoot Trail links tidewater Alaska to the Yukon River's Canadian headwaters—and a navigable route to the Klondike gold fields. Over 30,000 gold seekers toiled up its Golden Stairs, a hellish quarter-mile climb gaining 1,000 vertical feet, the last obstacle of the Chilkoot.

Most scaled the pass 20 to 40 times, shuttling their required ton of goods—a year's supply—north to the border for North West Mounted Police approval to enter Canada. No exact international boundary had been set, but Canada's regulation prevented starvation in the interior and protected its claim to all lands north of the passes. Conservationist John Muir was studying southeast Alaska glaciers when the stampede hit. Gold rush Dyea and Skagway "looked like anthills someone stirred with a stick," Muir wrote.

3 SKAGWAY & WHITE PASS

A better port than Dyea, Skagway was the "Gateway to the Klondike." Wild, it had something for all. Confidence artists and thieves, led by Jefferson Randolph "Soapy" Smith, and greedy merchants lightened the unwary stampede's load. Up-to-date Skagway had electric lights and telephones. It boasted 80 saloons, three breweries, many brothels, and other service or supply businesses.

The White Pass Trail was 10 miles longer—but its summit less steep and 600 feet lower—than the Chilkoot Trail. Two months' overuse destroyed it. Its second life began as British investors started to build the White Pass and Yukon Route Railroad in May 1898. Rails reached the White Pass summit in February 1899, Bennett Lake in July 1899, and Whitehorse in July 1900. With the railroad open, development at Dyea and along the trails ceased. But by then the rush was over.

Chiefs Doniwak (left) and Isaac of the Tlingit were pivotal in transmountain packing and trading as gold prospecting increased in Canada's interior. As the Klondike stampede intensified, demand for Native packers exceeded supply. Pack horses, aerial tramways, and other schemes would soon reduce the Tlingit's packing business.

ALASKA STATE LIBRARY



Diets of beans, bacon, and bread (see big round loaf), lacking vitamin C from fresh produce, made scurvy all too common.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA (ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT)



Women and a few children joined the stampede. Many women who went north were spouses, mining partners, or business owners. Some prostitutes, styled as "actresses," went north to ply their trade.

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Falsely dubbed "all-weather," the White Pass Trail—boulder fields, sharp rocks, and bogs—earned the name Dead Horse Trail. Over the 1897–98 winter 3,000 horses died on it "like mosquitoes in the first frost," Jack London wrote.

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At the Chilkoot and White pass summits, Canada's Mounties gave properly outfitted stampedeers official entry into Canada. "It didn't matter which one you took," said a stampedeer who had traveled both trails, "you'd wished you had taken the other."

GLENBOW ARCHIVES, CALGARY, ALBERTA



4 YUKON VIA BENNETT LAKE

It took three months just to cross the mountains to the interior. Then most of the 30,000 stampedeers sat out the 1897–98 winter in tents by frozen lakes Lindeman, Bennett, or Tagish—still 550 miles from the gold fields. They built 7,124 boats from whipsawn green lumber and waited for lake ice to melt. Finally, on May 29, 1898, the motley flotilla set out. In the next few days five men died, and raging rapids near Whitehorse crushed 150 boats. After the rapids it was a long, relatively easy trip, but bugs and 22-hour sunlit days drove boaters nearly mad. Near Dawson some feuding parties split up—cutting in half even their boats and frypans. Then, finally, Dawson City!

Whipsawing trees into planks, stampedeers built boats or rafts—and then waited for a long Arctic winter to end.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON LIBRARIES (CENTER)

A hundred miles of lakes led into the Yukon River, where canyon rapids soon gave way to smooth water beyond Whitehorse.

NPS PHOTO



5 DAWSON CITY & THE GOLD FIELDS

Before the gold rush a few Han First Nations people camped on the small island where the Yukon and Klondike rivers join. Prospecting in the area George Washington Carmack, Keish ("Skookum Jim" Mason), and Kaa Goox (Dawson Charlie) struck gold on August 16, 1896, on Rabbit (later re-named Bonanza) Creek. On August 17 they filed claims in Fortymile, the nearest town, 50 miles downriver. This sparked the first stampede as prospectors already in the interior got the news via the informal bush communication network. Former Fortymile trader and grubstaker Joseph Ladue shrewdly platted Dawson City and made a fortune selling lots.

Dawson City boomed. Soon it was Canada's largest city west of Winnipeg and north of Vancouver, its population 30,000 to 40,000. It stretched for two miles by the Yukon, bulging with goldseekers. Anything desired could be had—for a price: one fresh egg \$5, one onion \$2, whiskey \$40 a gallon. However, most stampedeers did not reach Dawson City until late June 1898, nearly two years after the big discovery, and prospectors already in the region had long since staked claim to the known gold fields. Many disillusioned stampedeers simply sold their gear and supplies for steamboat fare to the outside, their visions of

wealth washed away. Canadian historian Pierre Berton writes that many stampedeers arrived in Dawson City and simply wandered about, utterly disoriented by its frantic activity, not bothering to prospect at all. Played out over such vast space and time, the adventure itself seems to have been, for many people, the biggest attraction of the Klondike Gold Rush. Mining was another story.

To get through the perennially frozen soil called permafrost, miners built fires to melt a shaft down to where the gold lay. Two men digging like this for a winter used 30 cords of firewood that they had to cut themselves (until the stampede's large labor pool arrived). Miners dug shafts down to the gold just above bedrock, deep below the layers of frozen muck and gravel. At bedrock, they tunneled out, "drifting," as it was called, along the gold-bearing gravels of the old stream course. Dirt and gold-bearing gravel, called "pay gravel," were hoisted out of the hole and piled separately for sluicing (washing away the dirt and gravel) in spring and summer, once sunlight thawed the dumps and streams. Reporting from right on the scene, journalist Tappan Adney wrote that—considering the cost of reaching the country and the cost of working the mines—"The Klondike is not a poor man's country."

In Dawson City and Seattle more fortunes were made off miners than by mining. By 1906 Klondike gold exceeded \$108 million at \$16 per ounce.

CANADIAN MUSEUM OF CIVILIZATION (RIGHT), GOLD PAN NPS PHOTO



Compare real miners in a Klondike drifting tunnel (right) to stampedeers posing in a Seattle studio (shown above). The photos reflect the same gold rush—one as a romantic notion, one as the harsh reality—"the last grand adventure of its kind that the world will ever know."

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