

Executive Summary - Rossdale Flats Aboriginal Oral Histories Project

To properly honor the memory of the people resting in the Rossdale Flats and to provide necessary information that links the past to the present and creates a valuable resource for future generations, the Edmonton Aboriginal Urban Affairs Committee (EAUAC) was firm in its belief that an Aboriginal oral histories project of the Rossdale Flats area should be undertaken in conjunction with the Rossdale Flats Historical Land Use Study currently underway. Originating at the request of members of Edmonton's Aboriginal communities, the Rossdale Flats Aboriginal Oral Histories Project (RFAOHP) research team began collecting and transcribing oral histories related to the traditional burial site/Fort Edmonton Cemetery in the Rossdale Flats area. The project started in June of 2003 and concluded January 2004. By the project end date the research team had contacted 93 individuals, travelled to different parts of the province for presentations, attended city and stakeholder meetings, and hosted two gatherings. By this time, the team had also interviewed 27 participants: Aboriginal elders, community members, descendants of people interred at the Fort Edmonton Cemetery, Rossdale residents, and historians who were willing to participate and share their perspectives, knowledge, and memories of the burial site.

When Ancient Greek philosophers observed that place was first of all things, alluding to this foundational quality of place that makes it fundamental to the existence of societies, cultures, and histories, it is not difficult to see how they could have arrived at this conclusion in view of participants' memories and stories of the Rossdale Flats. Long before the Rossdale Flats contained the Fort Edmonton Cemetery, this area in Edmonton's river valley was a *pehonan*, a "gathering place," for Aboriginal peoples. Participants described how the Flats were the location for sacred ceremonies that included the Goose Dance, Sun Dance, and Pow-Wows. Another participant explained that the Rossdale Flats were part of an ancient migration trail called the Wolf Track, noting that it was the importance of the river ford that made the Flats an ideal location for gathering and crossing the North Saskatchewan for different nations of Aboriginal peoples. This same river ford was also perceived to have later influenced the construction of fur trade forts in the area. According to the interviewees, the Flats were not only the locale for a number of fur trade forts established throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, but also in more recent times, they were a place for social gatherings and celebrations. These gatherings included treaty payments to First Nations along with various parades and events associated with the Exhibition grounds. Many interviewees reflected that with the origins of the city of Edmonton and the inauguration of the province of Alberta connected to the Flats, this place is perhaps the most significant historic site in Alberta, if not western Canada.

Interviewees also provided team researchers with key information about the size and location of the burial grounds contained within the Rossdale Flats. Noting that the area in question incorporates both one or more Aboriginal burial sites as well as the Fort Edmonton Cemetery, the majority of participants described the location of burials as extending north from the riverbank and the Walterdale Bridge, stretching north-east and encompassing EPCOR's Rossdale Generating Station property, the Telus Field ballpark, and possibly including the homes in the Rossdale neighborhood to the east. The northern boundary was believed by many to be the base of the hill at 105th Street, north of present day 97th Avenue. A few participants observed that the western perimeter of the burials could extend westward towards the Legislature grounds and the

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Royal Glenora Club. Although there was some difference of opinion regarding this western boundary, the overall descriptions of the location of the burial area north and east of the Walterdale Bridge were remarkably consistent.

One of the most sensitive issues related to the Rossdale Flats burials is the disturbance of graves. Many participants also shared their knowledge and memories of disturbances of gravesites at the Rossdale Flats. While some participants detailed the legacy of repeated development-precipitated disturbances to burials that have spanned decades starting in the early 1900s, other interviewees related firsthand accounts of discussions with archaeologists while standing graveside and of fighting for the establishment of reburial protocols when remains are uncovered. Other interviewees shared stories of the burial site being used for backfill and of conversations with construction workers who unearthed bones in the Rossdale neighborhood in the 1960s. While these stories are difficult to read, many community members were adamant that these accounts be included.

Finally, many of the participants stressed the need to increase awareness of the significance of the site and the importance of remembrance: remembrance of the people interred there and of the area's histories. A number of interviewees emphasized that the Rossdale Flats are an important part of Edmonton's and Alberta's past and lamented the lack of awareness among the general public about the role of the Flats in the origins of the city and the province. Other individuals who were interviewed conveyed the necessity of continued involvement to counteract the collective forgetting of the community vis-à-vis the Flats. For many of the interviewees this has included conducting years of research, holding public demonstrations and presentations, attending hearings and meetings, and maintaining a presence during any exploration of the area. This sentiment is also apparent in the simple acts of Rossdale community members repairing site crosses that are vandalized or in the willingness of all of these people from different ethnic backgrounds and walks of life to participate in this project. One thing is certain: all of the people the team interviewed wanted the people buried at Rossdale Flats memorialized and remembered in some way. This report is one aspect of that process.