

Monumental Transformation



The Story of
Prince George's
National Historic Monument

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College of New Caledonia History Series

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Printed in Canada

ISBN 978-0-921087-46-5

Document layout by Kent Sedgwick

Additional copies available from:

CNC Press

College of New Caledonia Library

3330 – 22nd Ave.

Prince George, B.C.

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Cover Photo

The National Historic Monument to Alexander Mackenzie
Fort George Park, Prince George

Title Page Photo

Judge Howay at the unveiling of the original
National Historic Monument to Alexander Mackenzie
Prince George
June 13, 1925

Sir Alexander Mackenzie
(c.1762 – 1820)



*First across North America
and
first tourist in Prince George*

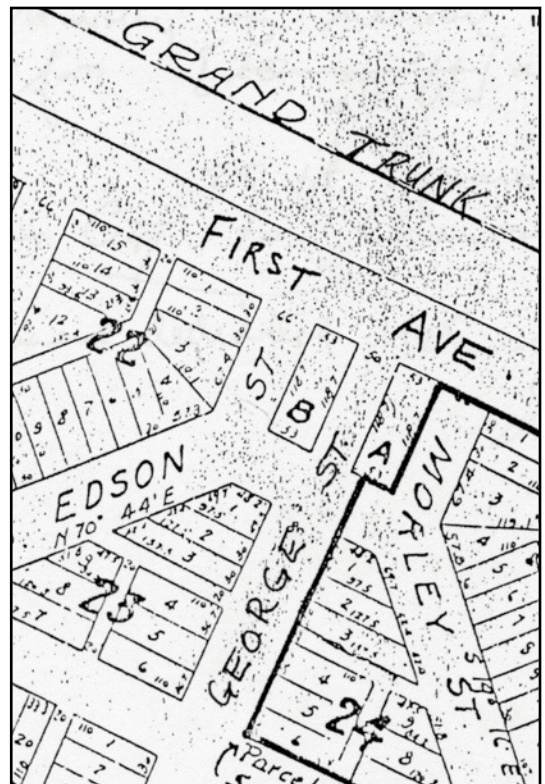
The Original National Historic Monument

The remarkable story of a national historic monument in Prince George, British Columbia began with this newspaper headline from the *Prince George Citizen*, dated the 25th of October, 1923.

Tablet to Mark
Mackenzie's Trip
Will be Erected

According to the newspaper article, three days earlier, City Council discussed a request from the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada to provide a site for a tablet commemorating the voyage of Alexander Mackenzie to the Pacific Ocean in 1793. The request came from Judge Frederick W. Howay, British Columbia's representative on the Board from 1923 to 1944. The Board was created in 1919 and began a program of erecting monuments in the province in 1924. The monument in Prince George was among the five erected that first year.¹

The Board wanted a location as close to the railway station as possible, probably to take advantage of tourist traffic arriving in Prince George. A permanent brick station had only been completed in 1922 and there was no real road into the city; the Cariboo Highway was not extended to the city until late in 1924.² City Council decided to ask the Grand Trunk Pacific Development Co. to donate Block B at the intersection of George St. and First Ave., less than 200 m east of the railway station.³ The development company was the land division of the railway by the same name which was



absorbed, along with several other bankrupt railways, to create a new railway, Canadian National (CN), in 1923. The railway agreed to donate Block B in November 1923.⁴

The donated parcel was set out as a park when the railway townsite plan was designed by Boston architects, Brett & Hall, in 1913. The parcel was surveyed in 1913 as Block B on Plan 1268, District Lot 343 which was the subdivision plan for the GTP townsite. Its surveyed dimensions were 53 x 119 feet. The City leased a small portion of Block B (only 25 feet square) for the monument to the Canadian Ministry of the Interior for 99 years. The lease document (dated 6 May 1924) specified:

...His Majesty [the Government of Canada] shall place a monument on the site as described with a bronze tablet with a suitable inscription as decided by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, to commemorate the exploration and work of Sir Alexander Mackenzie.

Furthermore, the lease required the federal government to maintain the site and it was to be open to the public at all times.

The whole project moved ahead (very expeditiously for a two-government involvement). In February 1924 the Monuments Board asked the City "if it would approve of a foundation of boulders" for the monument.⁵ Council's response was recorded in the local newspaper.

The council was very chary about expressing any opinion on the matter lest it be construed as a willingness to supply the necessary foundation for the monument. It was suggested in the course of the debate that the Nechako river was full of boulders, and that the monument board would be welcome to take all it required for the purpose with the full approval of council, but there was no suggestion of willingness to pay for the cost of hauling them, or setting them in position.

Council inspected the site and it was prepared in November. In December 1924, R.L. Black, an engineer with the federal parks board, completed the

construction of the cairn and installed the bronze tablet facing First Ave.⁶ The monument had a cement base with a pyramid shaped cairn, constructed of stones set in cement, which rose to a height of 10 feet. In April of 1925, the city budgeted \$25 and installed a small wire fence around the monument.⁷



Sheriff
Peters

Judge
Howay

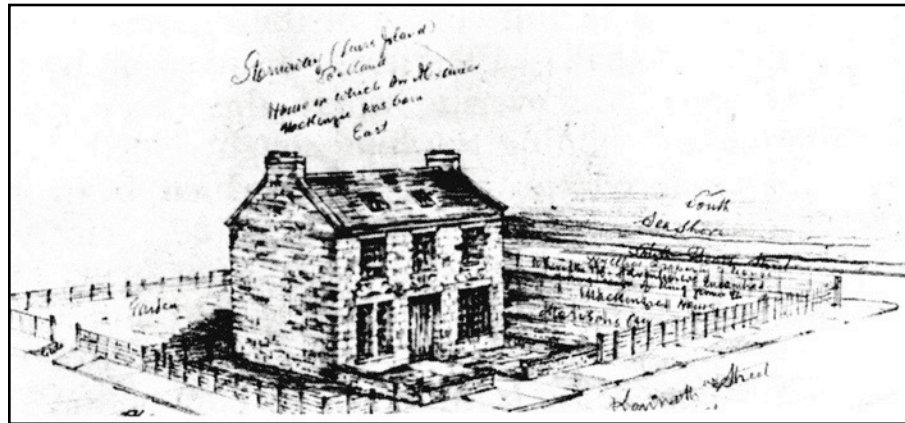
Mayor
Alward

The official unveiling of the bronze plaque⁸ took place on Saturday June 13, 1925 before a substantial crowd. Mayor Roy Alward presided and Judge Howay spoke at length about Mackenzie and his career. Judge Robertson and H.G. Perry, M.L.A. spoke briefly before Sheriff E.S. Peters, a friend of Howay and local history buff, unveiled the tablet. Judge Howay presented Mayor Alward with an etching of the house in Stornaway Scotland where Mackenzie was born and a resolution from the Stornaway Council thanking the Monuments Board for recognizing their famous citizen. The resolution is

cited in full in a book by local historian, Frank Runnalls.⁹

Runnalls said, as of 1946, the etching and resolution "now hang in the Council Chamber of City Hall." They have since disappeared.

The inscription on the tablet read:



Mackenzie's birthplace
as shown in Runnalls

Prince George
Sir Alexander Mackenzie

Sir Alexander Mackenzie, the first white man to cross the Rocky Mountains and reach the Pacific Coast passed this spot westward bound in his canoe with nine companions on the 19th of June, 1793.



The crowd in 1925. Note the wooden sidewalk serving as a bench.

In 1926, another monument commemorating Mackenzie was constructed some 65 km down Dean Channel from Bella Coola. It was built only a few feet above sea level on the famous Rock where Mackenzie terminated his journey on 22 July, 1793.¹⁰

The author at Mackenzie's monument near Bella Coola in 2003.



Three years later, in December 1928, Frank Swannell, the well-known surveyor, presented an illustrated lecture on Mackenzie at the provincial archives in Victoria. The *Prince George Citizen* had a lengthy article on the presentation in which Swannell was quoted as saying:

Mackenzie never saw Prince George so why there is a memorial there I could never see.¹¹

Swannell was correct because Prince George did not exist in 1793 but Mackenzie certainly saw the future site of the city. As for the specific location of the monument on First Ave., Swannell was likely unaware that the Monuments Board requested a location near the railway station and Council sought a convenient site in response to that request. Historical accuracy often gave way to convenient access in the Board's location policy.¹²

Swannell argued the monument should have been placed where Mackenzie crossed the heights of the Coast Mountains (today's Mackenzie Pass) before he descended into the Bella Coola River valley. The *Citizen* article made no mention of the Rock monument, nor of any comments Swannell made about it.



Mackenzie Pass in the Coast Mountains

The local newspaper, defending the decision to put a monument in Prince George, said with some degree of humour:¹³

It is to be hoped that Judge Howay will not feel too bad over the exposure of his action in leading the historical authorities to place their Mackenzie monument at Prince George, rather than in the mountains above the Bella Coola River. While there is no authority for the supposition that Mackenzie lunched on the site of the monument there is reason to believe he camped for one night in the vicinity of South Fort George [an early townsite 1 km south of Prince George].¹⁴ In any event the purpose of the monument will be better served at Prince George where it may be seen, than it would be at a point 6000 feet high, the highest point reached by Mackenzie on his trip, where it might be viewed once in a decade by Mr. Swannell or some other adventurous surveyor.

The monument in Prince George was largely forgotten after 1925 and deteriorated, despite the lease commitment of the federal government to maintain it. A letter to the *Citizen* newspaper in 1950 called attention to it.

The condition of the Memorial is deplorable. The fence is not only unpainted. It has fallen down. So has the gate. Before the snow I noticed that the plot on which the Memorial stands had not been weeded in months.¹⁵

As a result, the city undertook to repair the fence and do some maintenance work on the monument in the summer of 1950, paid for by the federal government.

In 1955, an offer was made to the City to purchase the site of the monument and the surrounding portion of Block B for expansion of a Home Oil service station. The offer was refused by Council.¹⁶

The following year, the location of the monument again became an issue. The Rotary Club formed a committee to establish a historical society in Prince George with the avowed goal of building a replica of Fort George and establishing a museum there. The committee sounded out Dr. Walter Sage, a University of British Columbia history professor who succeeded (1944-1959) Howay on the Monuments Board about the likelihood of getting a monument to commemorate Fort George. Sage was not encouraging so the committee suggested relocating the Mackenzie monument to the fort site. Again, Sage was not supportive. He believed the monument was appropriate because of its location close to the Nechako and Fraser Rivers.¹⁷

But refusing to sell the site did not mean that the City wouldn't encroach on the monument. The area around Block B was reconfigured in 1957 by consolidating lots and some streets and lanes (including Edson St., shown on the plan of Block B, Plan 1268 on page 1). The consolidation Plan 8816 created a somewhat enlarged park area (Parcel E) containing the monument.



Note the Home Oil service station in the background which tried to buy the monument site in 1955.

In 1960, City Council allowed the Board of Trade to locate a new building on Parcel E for an office and tourist bureau.¹⁸ Judging by a photo, Mr. PG, a newly-created symbol of the city, was erected on the monument site and hovered rather threateningly over the historic cairn.

The situation continued until 1970 when the board and tourist bureau relocated.¹⁹ Thereafter, the monument stood forlornly in a vacant Block E with few people even aware of it or its significance.

A New National Historic Monument (Fort George Park)

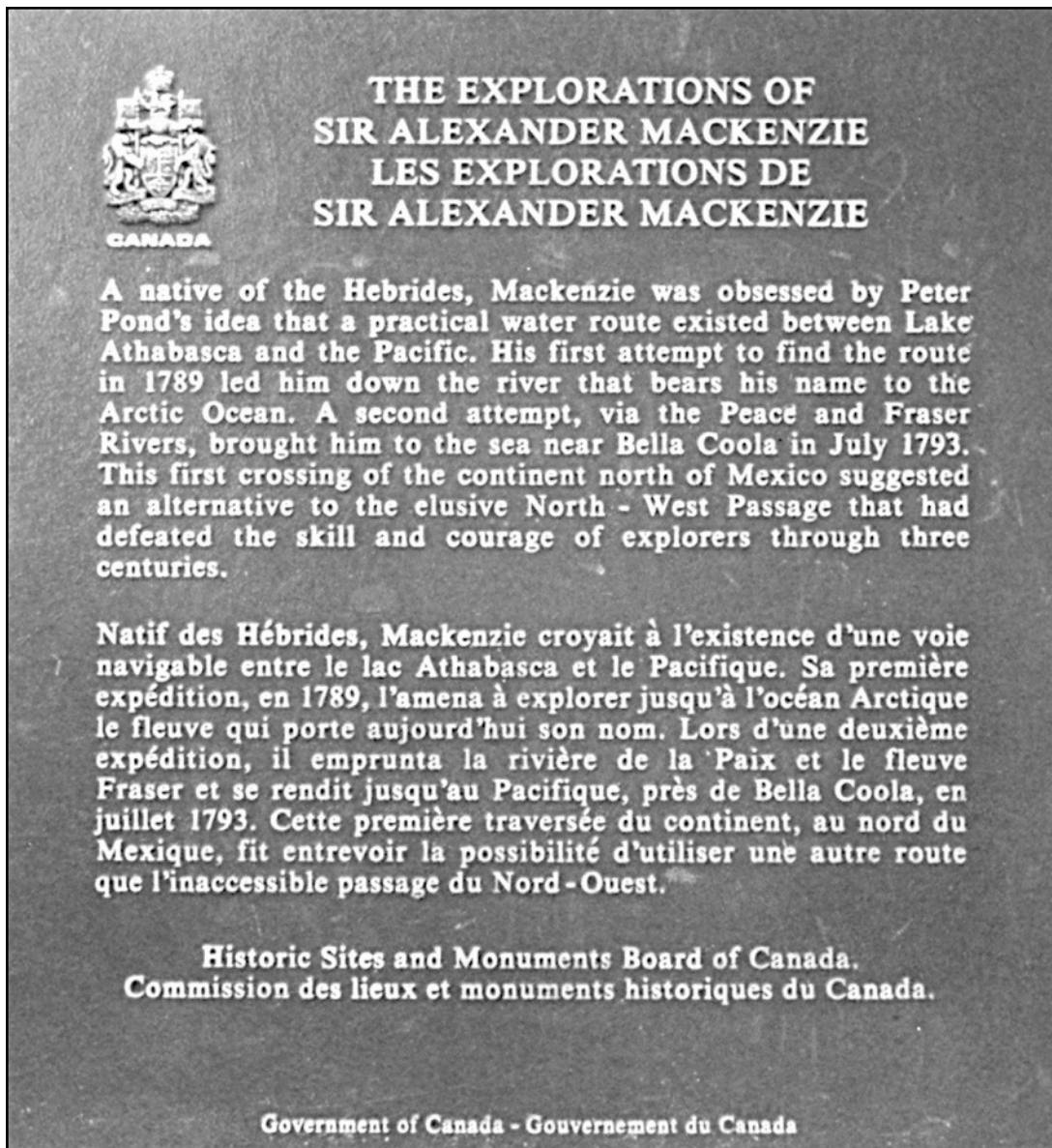
In early 1983, interest in the city's heritage and rivers led the Heritage Advisory Committee to once more raise the issue of the monument's location. In a submission,²⁰ the Committee said the monument

is in an unsightly location and, in fact, is historically inaccurate because the cairn and inscription refer to the Nechako River which Mackenzie not only failed to travel on but failed to even see. This marker, with federal government agreement, should be moved to Fort George Park overlooking the Fraser...

Again, the original request of the Monuments Board for a convenient location near the railway station was not mentioned. Various city committees and City Council concurred, and contact was made with Parks Canada about the proposed relocation. It was not feasible to move the cairn without damaging it, so by February 1984, Parks Canada agreed to pay for the construction of a new, standard-design monument in Fort George Park. It would be located in the northeast corner of the park overlooking the Fraser River where Mackenzie canoed by on his westward journey on 19 June 1793 and his return on the 9th of August.



The monument with the Fraser River
cutbanks in the background



On 31 July 1985, the year of the City's 70th anniversary and Parks Canada's centennial, a new bronze plaque provided by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board was unveiled. The plaque was bilingual with a totally different inscription which avoided the ambiguity of the first plaque. The earlier, unilingual plaque from the 1924 cairn is now an artifact housed at the Fraser-Fort George Regional Museum at Fort George Park, an interesting parallel with the Bella Coola monument.²¹

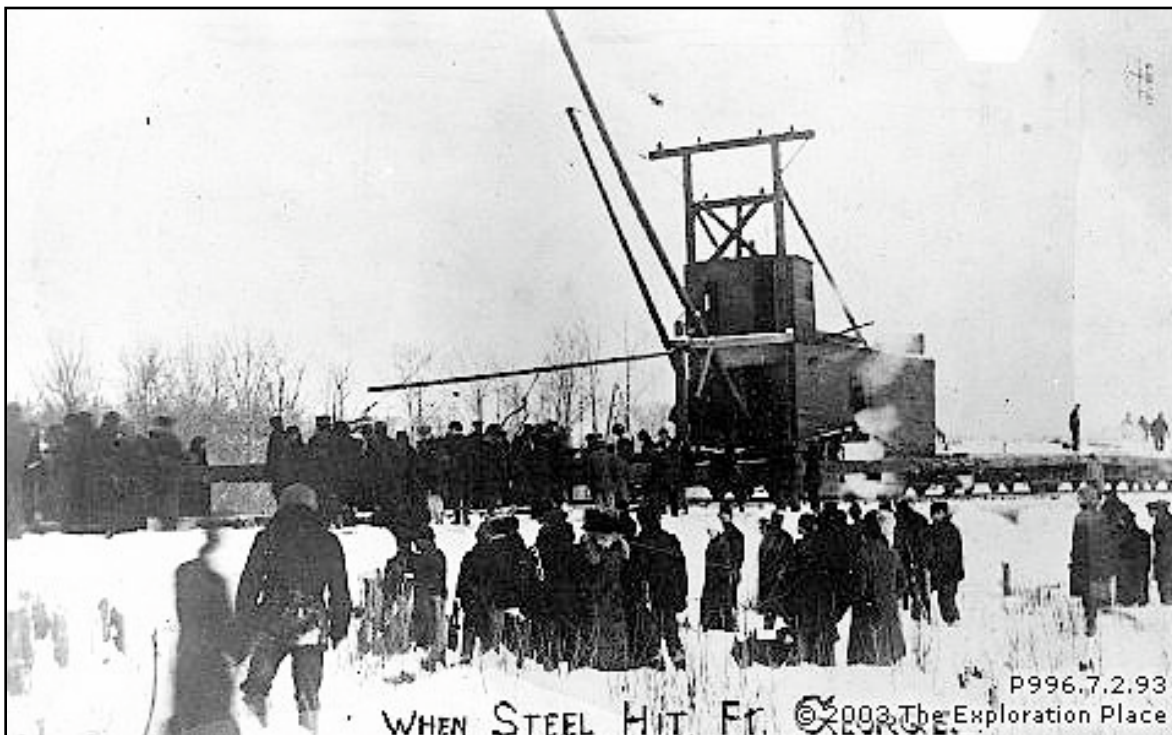
Attending the unveiling were Frank Oberle, M.P.; Monica Becott, City Alderman; Ken Green, Parks Canada and descendants of Sheriff Peters including Peter's daughter Beatrice McChesney who did the unveiling. That evening, voyageur canoes of the B.C. Heritage Brigade landed at Fort George Park on a voyage down the Fraser to Fort Langley to commemorate the Parks Canada centennial.²²



Monica Becott	Frank. Oberle, M.P.	Beatrice McChesney
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A Replacement Plaque for the Original Cairn

In the summer of 1985, after the unveiling, the George Street Revitalization Committee (GSRC) suggested some benches and trees be located on the small park area surrounding the deteriorating cairn which now had a blank space where the unilingual plaque had been removed. However, the city's Park Planning Unit (PPU) and the Civic Properties and Recreation Commission (CPRC) recommended that the property be rezoned and sold for commercial development. Council decided to table the rezoning proposal for a year to allow the GSRC suggestion to be further considered. In October 1986, the Heritage Advisory Committee suggested to the Park Planning Unit that the park be called "Grand Trunk Pacific Park". And further to this idea, in December 1986, the Heritage Advisory Committee recommended to City Council that the cairn be used to support a new plaque commemorating the arrival of the railway in Prince George and that CN Rail be asked to donate the plaque. The Committee's recommendation to Council concluded:



Arrival of Steel

The Heritage Committee ultimately envisages not only the plaque but an interpretive sign explaining the city's townsite plan which was designed by the railway. Another sign could draw attention to the construction feat that resulted in the Grand Trunk Pacific Bridge over the Fraser. This would create a small but meaningful park, focussing on the railway's importance to Prince George, which would be readily visible to tourists coming over the new Yellowhead Bridge. To this end, the Committee has suggested to the Park Planning Unit that the site should be named "Grand Trunk Pacific Park".

Effective 22 January 1987, the federal government surrendered the lease on the George St. and First Ave. monument site, clearing one obstacle to reusing the cairn. Mayor Backhouse officially requested that CN donate the plaque in January 1987 and by August, CN offered to do so. A text for the plaque was approved by the Heritage Committee and City Council by March 1988. By July, CN had approved the manufacture of a large bronze plaque, 26 x 30 inches, which was undertaken by Ornamental Bronze of Richmond, B.C. Cost of the plaque was paid for by CN..

Unveiling of the plaque was set for 27 January, 1989,



Bruce
Anderson

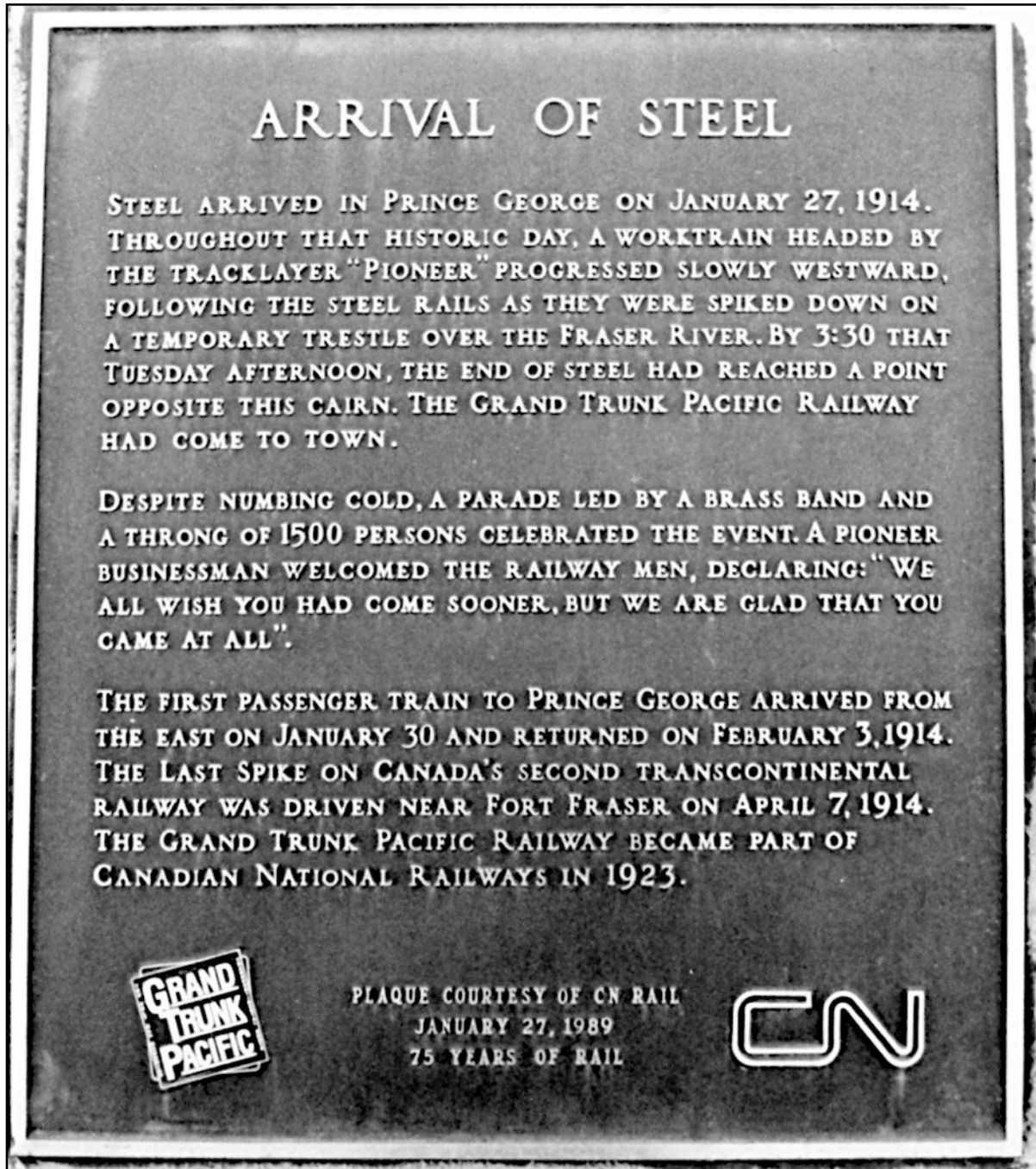
Mayor
Backhouse

Wendy
Fletcher

Brian
Gardiner

75 years to the very day that steel was spiked down into the city.²³ The unveiling was a joint effort of Mayor John Backhouse and Bruce Anderson of CN Rail.

Wendy Fletcher represented Bruce Strachan, M.L.A., and Brian Gardiner, M.P., was present. About 75 persons attended, the crowd on this occasion



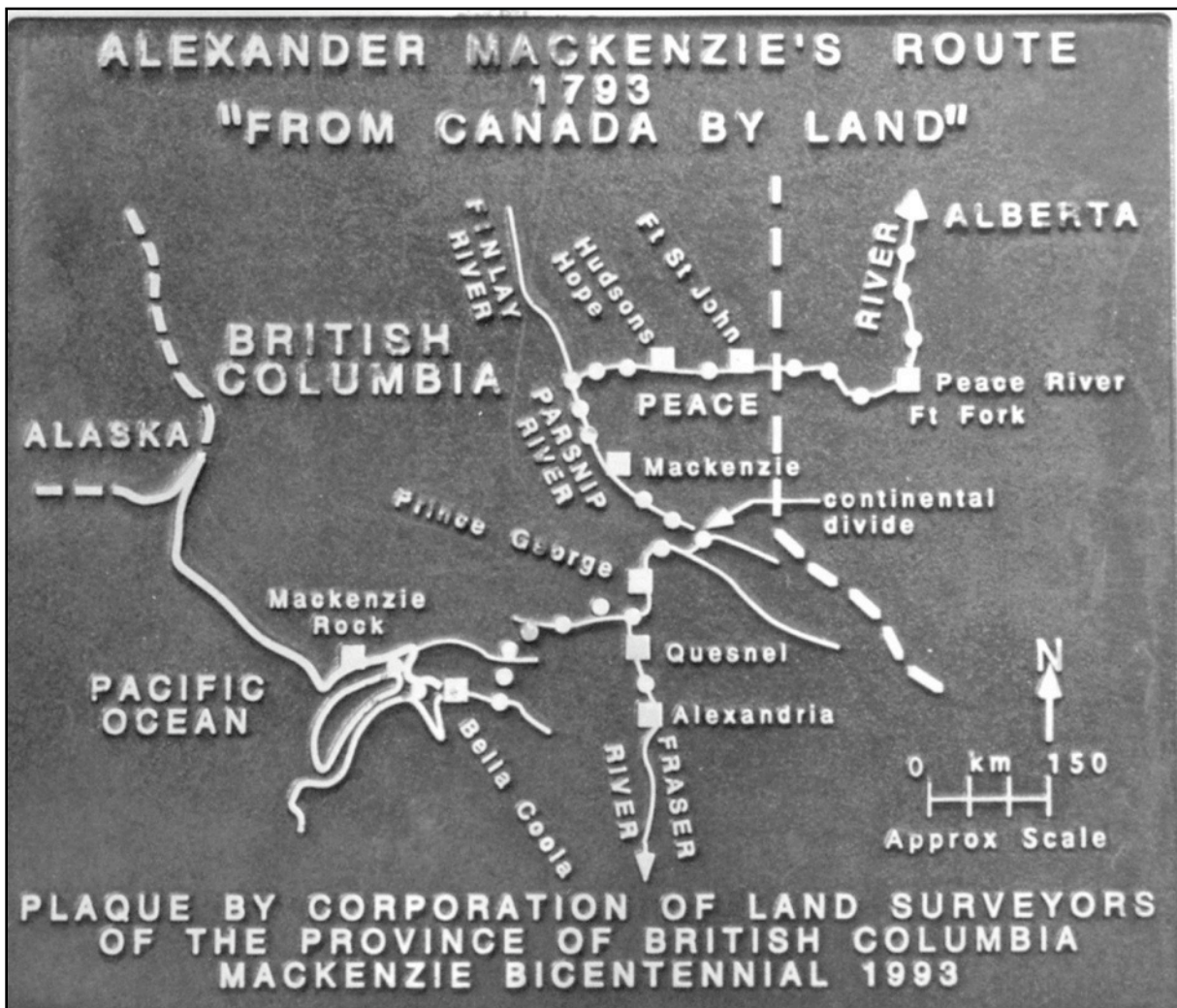
being much smaller than the estimated 1500 persons that gathered in 1914, and the temperature was much milder than -22 C. in 1914. But it was a notable occasion especially for pioneers Isobel Ford who arrived in 1913 and Ted Williams, born here in 1915. So the original cairn from the Mackenzie monument again had a striking bronze plaque to give it historical meaning.



Pioneers Williams and Ford

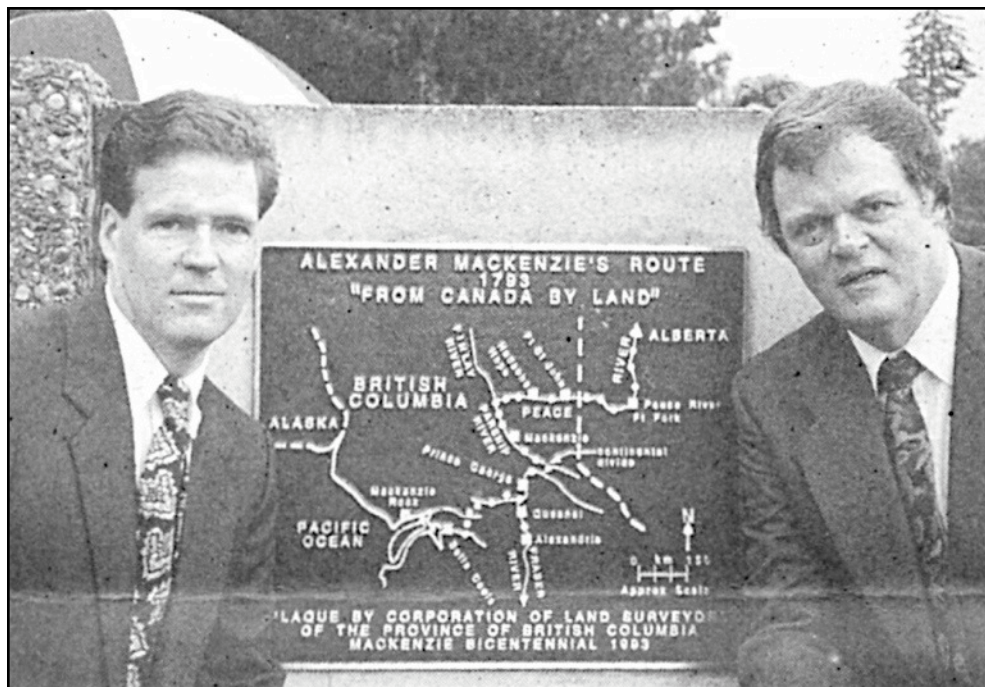
The Reverse Plaque on the New National Historic Monument

The new national historic monument in Fort George Park had a plain concrete face on the reverse side to the plaque. A year after the unveiling of the plaque, the city's Heritage Advisory Committee began the search for a suitable plaque to place on the reverse side of the monument. It was readily agreed by the city and other consulted bodies in the provincial and federal governments that a map showing Mackenzie's route would be an appropriate theme. But finding financial support for such a plaque proved difficult.



Eventually, the bicentennial commemoration in 1993 for Mackenzie's voyage provided the impetus to add a plaque showing his route.²⁴ The Corporation of Land Surveyors of British Columbia agreed to finance the plaque to recognize Mackenzie's skills as a surveyor in mapping his routes across Canada. The plaque, approximately 24 x 18 inches, was a map of Mackenzie's route to the Pacific which was shown by raised dots.²⁵ It required an intricate casting process, excellently done by Ornamental Bronze of Richmond, B.C.

The plaque was unveiled on 27 June 1993 just before the bicentennial events in Fort George Park. Corporation President Gordon Kilbride, BCLS and Ron Johns, BCLS and member of the city's bicentennial events committee, unveiled the plaque. Kent Sedgwick as president of the Alexander Mackenzie Trail Association, was in attendance. A message from Stornaway Council in Scotland was read at the ceremony, similar to the message presented at the 1925 unveiling of the first monument. So finally the national historic monument to Mackenzie was complete with markers on both sides.



Ron Johns

Gordon Kilbride

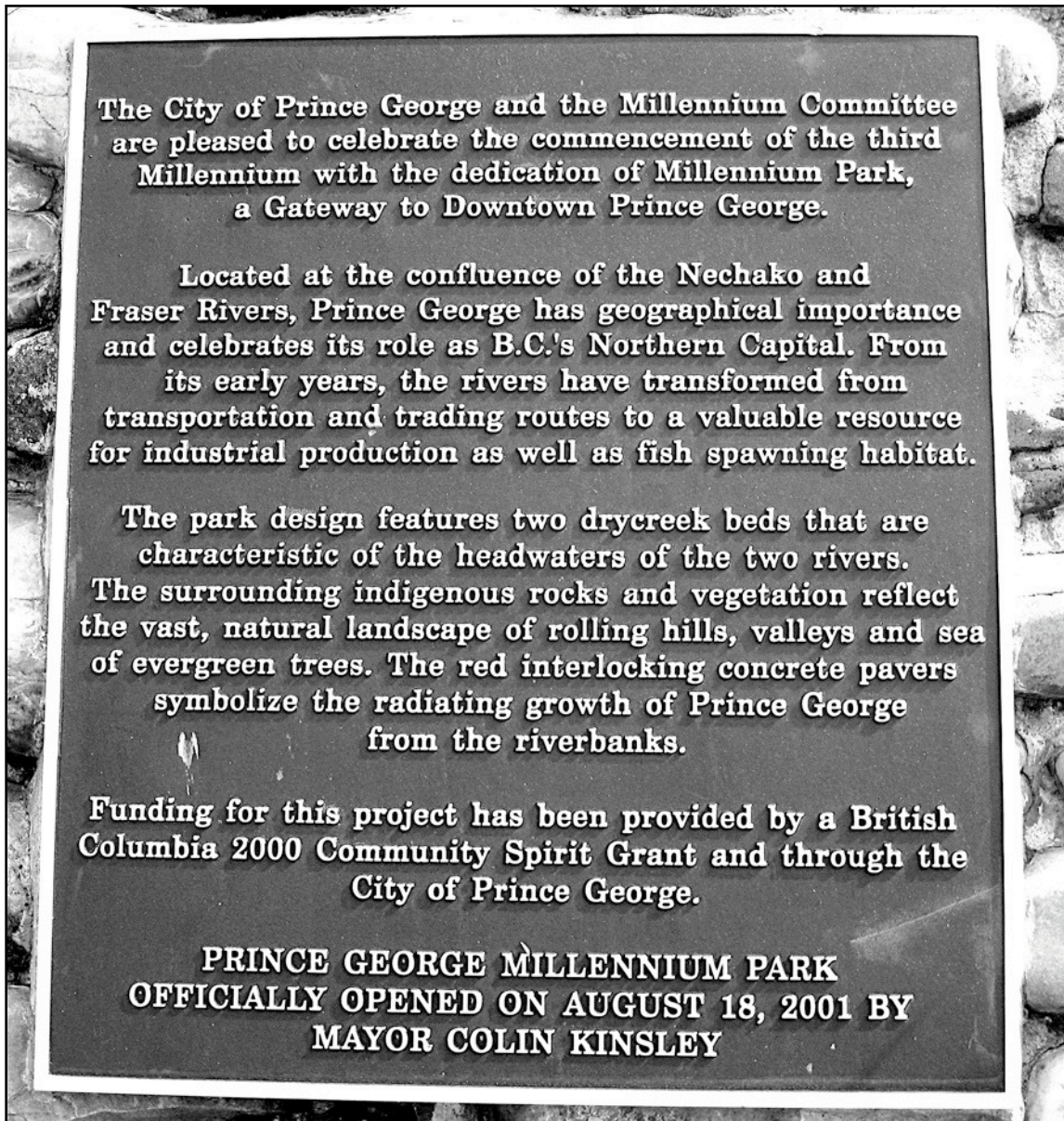
A Park for the Millennium

All of which brings us back to the proposed Grand Trunk Pacific Park at First Ave. and George St. After the unveiling of the "Arrival of Steel" plaque in 1989, nothing took place on the proposed "Grand Trunk Pacific Park" beyond the occasional mowing of the grass. But about 1999 the idea of a park again surfaced, this time to recognize the approaching millennium year.

A new approach for the design of such a park was undertaken. There was a public consultation process with identified stakeholders consulted in March 2000. A landscape architect, Jay Lazzarin of Prince George, drew up a concept plan in May 1999 to a budget of \$199,000 with \$79,000 contributed from the province.



The park landscaping scheme emphasized boulders and cobble rocks as a raised backdrop for the wooden sign identifying the park. A pebbled surface was symbolic of landscape features around Prince George as described in a bronze plaque installed on the side of the cairn opposite the railway plaque.



A circular area of paver bricks, centred by a buried time capsule, was surrounded by lawn with several benches. Although the park was originally intended to be finished for August 2000, construction delayed the opening

until the following year (which certain pedants claim is the correct millennium year).

Millennium Park's "grand opening ceremony" was held on 18 August 2001 with the unveiling of the park sign and plaque, and the ceremonial burying of a time capsule. The ceremony was held in conjunction with the downtown Summerfest event which attracted significant crowds to George St. near city hall but not to Millennium Park. Mayor Colin Kinsley and Tom Dielissen, chairperson of the Fraser-Fort George Regional Museum presided over the event. The mayor and George Phillips, director of Exploration Place at the Museum, screwed down the top of the time capsule.²⁶



Mayor Kinsley

George Phillips



So the original site of the Mackenzie national historic monument has come full circle. The small park which contained the monument was designed as part of the railway townsite plan in 1913. The monument is now located in a more appropriate place in Fort George park overlooking the Fraser River, and there is an official Millennium Park on the townsite parcel. The railway's townsite's designers would be pleased that their original vision of a park eventually came to fruition. It was in the right place but at the wrong time. The whole process only took 88 years.

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Notes and References

¹ Information about the Historic Sites and Monuments Board is from *The Place of History: Commemorating Canada's Past*. Proceedings of the National Symposium held on the Occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, edited by Thomas H.B. Symons. The Royal Society of Canada, 1997.

There is a brief biography of Howay in "Some Early Historians of British Columbia" by Walter Sage (see also page 7 in this paper). It was published in *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* v.21, nos. 1-4, 1958.

² *Prince George Citizen*, 18 Sep. p.8, 25 Sep. p.8, 1924.

³ *Prince George Citizen*, 25 Oct. 1923, p.7.

⁴ *Prince George Citizen*, 8 Nov. 1923, p.8.

⁵ *Prince George Citizen*, 21 Feb. 1924, p.5.

⁶ *Prince George Citizen*, 11 Dec. 1924, p.1.

⁷ *Prince George Citizen*, 23 Apr. 1925, p.4.

⁸ *Prince George Citizen*, 18 June 1925, p.6.

⁹ *A History of Prince George* by F.E. Runnalls, 1946, reprinted 1984.

¹⁰ The site of the monument on the rock is now in Sir Alexander Mackenzie Provincial Park, a small park of only 5 ha area. The monument was totally refurbished for the Mackenzie bicentennial in 1993 and a bilingual plaque replaced the original one; the original is an artifact housed at the museum in Bella Coola. During the refurbishment, a tin can was found inside with the names of the workers who built the monument in 1926.

¹¹ Swannell is not strictly correct. Mackenzie did canoe past the future site of Prince George. However, Swannell is correct in that the plaque inscription is quite misleading. It reads as though Mackenzie was canoeing westward past the monument which would have placed him on the Nechako River. In fact, judging by his journal, Mackenzie never saw the Nechako on his southbound journey on the Fraser River.

¹² The Fort Fork monument to Mackenzie near Peace River, Alberta is across the Peace River from the correct site to place it on a main highway, an inaccuracy acknowledged in the plaque's wording which refers to "the remains across the river." And the monument to Mackenzie at Alexandria south of Quesnel is also inaccurately located for convenience on the main highway. There are, in fact, three sites of Fort Alexandria in the area despite the plaque's wording which says "the North West Company built a post here."

¹³ *Prince George Citizen*, 27 Dec. 1928, p.1.

¹⁴ A reading of Mackenzie's journal suggests he did not camp near Prince George. The night of the 18th of June was spent near the mouth of the Salmon River and the night of the 19th of June near Naver Creek mouth close to Hixon, 50 km below the site of South Fort George. That day, they had canoed some 80 km down the Fraser, including portaging part of the Fort George Canyon. *The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie*, edited by W.Kaye Lamb, 1970, pp.306-308.

¹⁵ *Prince George Citizen*, 23 Mar. 1950, p.3.

¹⁶ *Prince George Citizen*, 27 Jan. 1955, p.1.

¹⁷ *Prince George Citizen*, 19 Jan. 1956, p.20.

¹⁸ *Prince George Citizen*, 27 Jan. 1960, p.1.

¹⁹ Prince George telephone book, 1970.

²⁰ Submission to Rivers Committee Public Hearings by Heritage Advisory Committee, City of Prince George, J. Kent Sedgwick, Chairman, April 1983.

²¹ The monument near Bella Coola was refurbished with a bilingual plaque before the 1993 Mackenzie Bicentennial commemoration. The original plaque is in the Bella Coola museum. Workers uncovered a time capsule consisting of a rusty cocoa can with the names of the original construction crew in it. It is interesting to speculate whether such a "capsule" might be in the cairn on First Ave.

²² By 1984, the author was employed as a planner for the City and was secretary to the Heritage Advisory Committee (see Endnote 19). As such, he researched information for plaques and proposed suitable inscriptions. The information about the plaques and monuments is from the author's files. The author retired from City service in August 2001 just as Millennium Park was finished.

²³ The "Arrival of Steel" was not commemorating the first train but the arrival of the huge tracklayer machine, which placed ties and rails to be spiked down in front of it so it could proceed. The first work train arrived from the east on January 30, 1914, crossing the Fraser River on a temporary wooden bridge. It took months for the steel bridge to be completed and for proper ballasting of the railbed. An authoritative source (*Canadian Rail* magazine, May-June 2000) says it was June 1914 before quality service was established between Prince George and Edmonton.

²⁴ The author was president of the Alexander Mackenzie Trail Association (now Alexander Mackenzie Voyageur Route Association) for the bicentennial and chaired the city's bicentennial committee. The information on the obverse and reverse plaques on the new monument is from the author's files.

²⁵ The template for the cast map was prepared by the author and it was almost as tricky to prepare the map on paper as it was in bronze.

²⁶ I am indebted to the recreation staff of the Community Services Department of the City for information and the time capsule photo concerning the opening of Millennium Park.