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DC WWTF Excavation Findings November 8, 2010 Whitehorse Star

Third coffin unearthed in Dawson City

By [Dan Davidson](#) on November 8, 2010 at 4:23 pm



Photo by Dan Davidson

SITE OF DISCOVERY – The pit (below) where the coffins were unearthed in Dawson City was excavated around the Vertreat (vertical treatment) shafts. Above: excavation crews used tarpaulins to protect some of the excavated dirt in which the bones were discovered.

DAWSON CITY – No one was expecting anything out of the ordinary last Thursday afternoon, when excavation work around the vertical sewage treatment shafts on the new wastewater treatment plant site turned up some wood and some bones.

Stephen Johnson, Corix Water Systems' site manager, halted work on the project as soon as he was aware of what had happened. He then contacted the RCMP, the City of Dawson and the

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Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, as well as the Department of Highways and Public Works, which is in charge of the project.

A couple of the Corix crew members who wandered by on Friday afternoon admitted that unearthing bodies where none had been expected was weird and unsettling, to say the least.

During the rest of Thursday, decisions were made about what to do next.

Suspect piles of dirt were covered with tarpaulins. One truckload, which had already left the property, was examined at the dump site out of town, to see if there were any bones there. It turned out that there were.

Greg Hare, the senior projects archeologist with the Yukon government, arrived from Whitehorse on Friday and began examining the coffins and bones that had been uncovered.

"We have what appear to be two coffins with the remains of two individuals that have been exposed during an excavation ... just off Fifth Avenue in Dawson," Hare said Friday.

"This is a recovery operation rather than a controlled excavation. The backhoe exposed the materials (Thursday). Based on what I've seen, that has already been collected from the site, the majority of the skeletal material has been exposed so we're going to be screening all of the sediments, recovering all of the bones, all the artifacts that may be associated with the burials, the wood from the coffins and basically trying to get everything cleared up here."

The coffins were encountered about three metres from the surface, or about a metre-plus from the bottom of the excavation.

The former highway grader yard was once a slough area at the rear of Fort Herchmer, the NWMP post. The compound has been significantly altered with landfill material, as well as compacted from many years of heavy equipment rolling over it.

As a result, the coffins are no longer full-sized, nor is it likely they are at the original depth when buried.

"They've been squashed flat through many years," Hare said. "They were crushed before the backhoe ever got here.

They were probably 14 to 16 inches high when they were buried and now they're about four inches. The backhoe basically just exposed the material that was already crushed."

This is often the case in such matters, he added.

"We've been involved in a number of historic grave excavations and, in almost every case, over time the coffin collapses and sediments and everything fall in, and everything becomes quite flattened."

Hare said there had been some indications a few years ago that there might be graves in this area, left over from the time executions by hanging were carried out in Dawson.

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Walker Graham, a local nurse, had done some research for a paper he was working on, and had shared his ideas with Hare.

As a result, Hare had intended to use ground-penetrating radar to see if any graves could be located two years ago.

“Walker and I walked the whole area, looking at ... the potential grave areas,” Hare said.

“I brought a shovel and did some surface testing and could see that the whole surface of this compound had been topped with gravel”

Ground-penetrating radar works by measuring changing sub-surface density in a given piece of land. It picks up the areas, like graves, or pits, or burrows, that have been disturbed. Once the soil has been capped with a denser material, that method no longer works.

Whitehorse resident Michael Gates, a former Parks Canada curator based in Dawson, recalls receiving information about graves adjacent to the old NWMP post from a retired Mountie some years back. That information led to the discovery of a cache of discarded rifles which had been buried in the river.

The same individual spoke of gravesites closer to the former fort and Parks did attempt a search, but nothing was found, Gates said.

“We expected that any graves would be closer to the RCMP compound,” said Hare.

Work continued on the site through Friday and Saturday, with screening of the piles of dirt on site, and at the dumpsite and some further, more careful digging, in the pit around the sewage shafts.

On the second day, another coffin and body, in much the same condition as the first two, was exposed and recovered.

Based on the material found along with the bodies, Hare believes the three graves are from the Gold Rush period.

Somewhat to his surprise, the lime thrown in with the bodies seems to have acted to preserve clothing, though there is nothing to identify the individuals.

“I think it’s reasonable to assume that they are of Gold Rush vintage related to executions that took place at Fort Herchmer,” said Hare.

For more to be said about the remains, there will have to be careful examination in Whitehorse, he added.

As a recovery exercise, Hare said, this one was very successful.

“The amount of community support and participation in the project exceeds anything I’ve ever worked on before,” he said.

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“I think that the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, the developers (Corix), the workers who were involved, the City of Dawson, the Yukon government – I’ve seldom seen a project that has been so successful and gone so smoothly with people working together, rowing in the same direction.”

Hare is planning to remain on site for a couple of days as the Corix crew wound down its operations for the season.

While he feels confident that there’s nothing more to be found that close to the others, he’s going to keep an eye on things anyway in this continuing adventure of surprises.