

TESLIN WALKING TOUR





Teslin Lake Lookout Platform



TESLIN WALKING TOUR

Welcome to Teslin

Yak'úi ixwsateení.
(Tlingit)

It's good to see you.

A Brief History

The Tlingit have travelled through this area for millenia. They formed complex trading partnerships with inland Indigenous groups like the Tagish. Some Tlingit moved inland to marry into the families of their trading partners. Over time, the number of Tlingit living in the area around Teslin Lake on a year-round basis began to grow. Most Teslin Tlingit today trace their roots to clans that came from Alaska, coastal BC, and southern Yukon.

Long before contact with Europeans, the seasonal fishing camp located here was called Ax'aká. This name means “on the mouth” (of the bay) in reference to its location at the mouth of Nisutlin Bay. Ax'aká was a favoured seasonal fishing location, especially for spawning whitefish. The name “Teslin” has a few possible origins and in Tlingit is spelled “Deisleen”.

Summer fish camps were still a cornerstone of seasonal Tlingit migrations when Tom Smith and George Geddes founded the Nisutlin Trading Post here in 1903. Their post followed the short-lived Hudson's Bay Company's (HBC) Teslin Post at the south end of Teslin Lake. HBC's Teslin Post operated from 1898 to 1901. It capitalized on

the Klondike stampeders passing through Teslin on the Ashcroft and Stikine trails to Dawson City. It closed in 1901 as traffic to the Klondike had all but ended.

A summer community grew up around Geddes and Smith's Nisutlin Trading Post. Taylor & Drury Ltd. bought the business in 1907 and began expanding it. In 1908, the Teslin Tlingit Anglican congregation built a church that also served as a seasonal school. The North-West Mounted Police established a Teslin post in 1919.

The Inland Tlingit from the south end of Teslin Lake, including the Johnston Town area, began relocating to the growing community for the conveniences it offered. Between 1922 and 1928, several frame houses were built or relocated from the south end of the lake to a part of Teslin known as the old village. A Roman Catholic mission was established in 1938, appealing to the many Tlingit who adhered to that faith.

The Alaska Highway was built through the small community in the fall of 1942. In the following years, the population was exposed to eight epidemics of contagious disease. Limited statistics show there were more deaths than births over the next few years. Some families took refuge on their traplines and were spared much of the hardship. Those that stayed in the village suffered through a very cold winter in houses built for summer use. After this, some residents added arctic entrances and makeshift insulation to their homes to make them more comfortable during the colder months.

The village grew from the 1960s to 1980s, with federal government-supported housing built over these decades. The Teslin Tlingit were active in land claims negotiations beginning in 1973. The Teslin Tlingit Council was one of the first four Yukon First Nations to sign a land claim and Self-Government Agreement in 1993. Under the Agreement, Teslin Tlingit Council can enact laws on their own lands, deliver programs and services for their Citizens, and is a strong voice in managing lands and resources within their Traditional Territory. Many of Teslin's modern buildings were built under the authority of the Teslin Tlingit Council.

Teslin today is a vibrant community of over 500 people. You're invited to experience the past and present of Teslin through this tour, and to learn more at the Teslin Tlingit Heritage Centre (stop 20) and the George Johnston Museum (stop 4).



The original Taylor & Drury Trading Post along the Nisutlin Bay waterfront, circa 1910, looking west. Supplies arrived from Whitehorse during high water, when company-owned sternwheelers could safely ascend the Teslin River. (Macbride Museum of Yukon History, Taylor Collection, 2007/1 #329)



Kh'adê (Chief William Johnston) and a young relative on their boat, the Nakina, just below the Taylor & Drury Post, circa 1920s. Water travel was a key part of summer transportation for the Tlingit people, who were skilled boat builders. This beautiful boat was hand-built at Johnston Town by Kh'adê and his brother Ghùchshayàí (Shorty Johnston) around 1918. The 16-horsepower inboard motor was sufficient to make a return resupply trip all the way to Whitehorse via the Teslin and Yukon rivers. (Yukon Archives, Freddie Johnston fonds, 79/119 #6)



Winter scene in the old village in 1964, looking east toward St. Philips Church. Long before snowmachines were common, sled dogs were vital companions for transportation, hunting and survival in the North. Accessing their trapline was often dependent upon the health of a person's dog team. Dog mushing remained popular for many years in Teslin even after snowmachines became the standard. (Yukon Archives, James YC Quong fonds, 2-4-30)



The original war-era trestle bridge alongside the new Nisutlin Bay Bridge in winter of 1956. The new bridge opened on May 2, 1956. (George Johnston Museum Archives, Heather Tobe Collection)

In 1942, the United States Public Road Administration built a 709-metre trestle bridge across Nisutlin Bay. The piles were driven 30 metres into the glacial silt. The bridge was weakened by ice jams and did not last long. In 1946, a truck carrying a caterpillar tractor broke through the deck and fell into the bay, closing the bridge for two weeks for repairs.

In 1956, a new bridge was built. It had a concrete deck, heavy piers, and enough clearance to prevent ice and driftwood jams. A steel grid replaced the concrete deck in 1971. By the late 2010s, the bridge was nearing the end of its serviceable life and the Government of Yukon began planning for its replacement.

The new bridge design, with a flat deck instead of trusses, is better suited for modern traffic. It has a separate lane for pedestrians and cyclists, better lighting, and it incorporates local Tlingit artwork. The new bridge is much quieter without the steel grid deck. Some long-time Teslin residents suspect they will miss one of the most familiar sounds of home. On a quiet day, the tire vibrations through the open steel deck could be heard all the way into the Nisutlin Delta, a sign that home was close at hand.

Construction on the new bridge began in spring of 2022.



The Yukon Motel, near Nisutlin Bay, hosts the Wildlife Gallery. Many species of northern wildlife are displayed in dioramas showing the animals' habitat. Yukon wildlife is often elusive, so this roadside gallery is a great opportunity to view these magnificent animals up close. The exhibits were prepared by the late Carcross taxidermists Chuck and Shane Buchanan. Before their tragic deaths in a float plane crash in 2013, the Buchanans were known for producing exquisite taxidermy (pictured below).





Teslin is located at historic mile 804 of the Alaska Highway. The Alaska Highway was built in 1942 to supply fuel and equipment to Alaska and the airfields along the Northwest Staging Route. The first rough pioneer road was built in just nine months by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. First Nations guides helped surveyors lay out the route, which mostly followed established Indigenous heritage and trade routes. They also contributed, with other civilians, to the building of the road and the adjacent airports.

In 1943, the United States Public Roads Administration contracted several large American and Canadian construction firms to stabilize the road and build more permanent bridges. The Canadian military took over the highway in 1946, and it opened to the general public in 1948. The Canadian Department of Public Works took on maintenance in 1964. These ambitious WWII projects formed the backbone of the Yukon transportation system.

The original highway hugged the lakeshore along what is now Nisutlin Drive. Since it was first built, the highway has been realigned many times. It is now hundreds of kilometers shorter than the original route, putting modern-day Teslin at kilometer 1243 (mile 772).



Ghùchshayàí (Bonar Cooley), K'àshtlâ (George Johnston), and several other community leaders founded the Teslin Historical Society in the early 1970s. The group raised money and built the museum using logs locally milled on Nisutlin Bay. K'àshtlâ and Ghùchshayàí donated artifacts from their private collections. A grand opening was held in July 1975 and the museum celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2025.

The museum is named for K'àshtlâ (George Johnston), an Inland Tlingit entrepreneur and avid photographer who was born along the Nakina River. He opened a general store in his home in the old village. He owned Teslin's first vehicle, a 1928 Chevrolet model AB (pictured below), which he operated on the frozen lake.





K'àshtlâ is the subject of the National Film Board of Canada documentary *Picturing a People*, directed by Teslin filmmaker Shàn Tlèn (Carol Geddes).

He was instrumental in laying the groundwork for the museum. He passed away shortly before the official opening. The mural (pictured above) on the back of the Taylor and Drury display building shows K'àshtlâ alongside his famous vehicle. It was painted by Teslin youth, the mayor, and anyone (locals and tourists alike) who wanted to pick up a brush and chip in. The project was facilitated by Lancelot Burton, Youth of Today Society, Whitehorse.

The museum has exhibits on Teslin's history and the Tlingit way of life (pictured below). See K'àshtlâ's famous vehicle and his photographs of everyday Teslin life from the 1910s to the 1950s.





George Johnston & Bonar Cooley Memorial Garden



The memorial garden features interpretive walking trails and native perennial shrubs. The Teslin Historical and Museum Society beautified this area for the museum's 50th anniversary celebration.

An interpretive panel honours Ghùchshayà'í (Bonar Cooley) and K'àshtlâ (George Johnston) and their contributions to the community of Teslin. Many of Ghùchshayà'í and K'àshtlâ's closest kin were here for the unveiling during the 50th anniversary celebrations. Ghùchshayà'í's widow Kèyishí (Bessie Cooley (Jackson)) and George's granddaughter Shàn Tlâ (Lorraine Dewhurst (Porter)) both gave emotional speeches during the ceremony. Many of K'àshtlâ's surviving relatives, including nephew Anałahâsh (Sam Johnston), 89 years young, danced with the Teslin Tlingit Dancers to open the memorial garden.

The trails lead to the George Johnston Museum boat shed, which contains two historic Teslin Lake watercraft.

Aeradio Navigation Range Station



This Aeradio Navigation Range Station is the only known surviving structure of a string of buildings constructed to house the Northwest Staging Route (NWSR) electronic and communications equipment. During World War II, equipment in this building supported air travel between the airports and airstrips that paralleled the Alaska Highway. A channel of directional radio signals, emitted from four 42-metre towers, guided pilots. A fifth tower allowed for 2-way voice transmission. The NWSR went from Great Falls, Montana to Fairbanks, Alaska, USA and then on to Russia by way of the Alaska-Siberia air route (ALSIB).

The transmitters and the prefabricated log structure were shipped to Teslin by boat in 1941, before the Alaska Highway was built. The equipment, manufactured by the Canadian Marconi Company, operated at high voltage and gave off considerable heat. The roof vent and two large vents in the side wall kept operations from overheating. The guidance system remained in use for civilian air traffic until the early 1960s when the towers were dismantled.

The building was originally located on a hill about 5 km from the end of the Teslin airport. It was moved to the museum grounds in 2005 and later restored. The building now houses an exhibit on the Alaska Highway and aeradio history. The original high-voltage cables are visible in the floor.



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Tom Smith and George Geddes sold their interests in the Nisutlin Trading Post, including a steamboat, to the Whitehorse-based Taylor and Drury (T&D) retail business in 1907. In the early 1910s, T&D built this simple structure along the waterfront to stockpile supplies.

Before the highway was built, every year T&D brought three shipments of supplies from Whitehorse by sternwheeler to last through the winter. They stored the goods in this warehouse. By the 1930s, the company was the biggest fur buyer in the north, and even had their own coinage minted in Ottawa to make up for the lack of local banks. They gave generous credit to trappers and charged a minimal fee of 10% on furs to cover shipping and losses. T&D expanded their Whitehorse business to include Taylor & Drury Motors in the 1920s and shipped K'áshtlâ (George Johnston)'s car to Teslin on a company boat.

This warehouse was moved closer to the highway in the 1940s, when goods could arrive by road as well as by water. The building housed the Teslin Lake Joint School between 1948 and 1951. At that time, it was the Yukon's only integrated school. It was moved to the museum grounds in 1988.



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Teslin Wood Products Ltd., later known as the Teslin Canoe Factory, was founded in 1973 by Ted Geddes, sponsored by the Yukon Association of Non-Status Indians (YANSI). They built sport and freighter canoes here. The boats were cedar, with fir gunwales and local Teslin birch for braces and reinforcements. The canoes built here became known across Canada for their quality.

The canoe factory closed in 1978, but reopened occasionally over the years since. From 2010-2015, the building hosted a traditional snowshoe making course in the summers. Teachers Wat.sî (Margaret Douville), Tètxúñch (Doug Smarch Sr.) and Chukatìn (Jane Smarch) shared traditional skills for snowshoe making. Students learned birch harvesting, babiche cutting, and hide tanning.

The story of this local business connects to a long history of traditional Tlingit boat-building. In 2017, Tètxúñch (Doug Smarch Sr.), Gha.â (Doug Smarch Jr.), and Jìshkú (John Peters Jr.) built a ch'a_kú_x (skin canoe). It launched during the Dañ Kwanje 'Á-Nààn: Voices Across the Water traditional watercraft festival. Jìshkú remembers watching his father Shgùnàkh (John Peters Sr.) build cedar canoes at the Teslin Canoe Factory.

Teslin Tlingit Council Administration Building



In 1989, four years before signing their Final Agreement to become the Teslin Tlingit Council (TTC), the Teslin Indian Band broke ground for this main administration building. The foreman, a British Columbia man named Ken Davies, assembled a competent crew of local carpenters. The two-story building was completed on schedule in 1990.

At the time, it was the most complex building ever to be built in the village. The siding is old growth cedar imported from Bella Coola, British Columbia. The front of the building features the five Teslin Tlingit clan crests. Clan identity is matrilineal (passed down through one's mother), and the crests are at.óow (sacred clan property). There are many Tlingit clans in Alaska, while here in Teslin there are five. Each clan is represented by their crest: Daḡl'aweidí (Eagle), Yanyeidí (Wolf), Ishkeetaan (Frog), Deisheetaan (Beaver), and Kooḡhittaan (Raven). To learn more about the clan system, visit the Teslin Tlingit Heritage Centre (stop 19 on this tour). There, you can also see intricately carved kootéeyaa (totem poles) representing the five Teslin Tlingit clans.

Khàtinas.àxh Community School



The Khàtinas.àxh Community School in Teslin teaches children from pre-kindergarten up to Grade 12. Tlingit language and tradition are woven into the curriculum through place-based learning and experiential activities, including an annual week of cultural activities and on-the-land learning. Local experts and knowledge keepers regularly take part in school activities. Teslin Tlingit Council provides an 'Elders in the School' Program. Elders give staff and students support in learning language and understanding traditional values.

Teslin's school has been at this site since the mid-1960s. Previously, students attended the Teslin Teacherage, which was located at the corner of Jackson Ave. and Craft St. and was torn down in 2020. The school is named for the late Khàtinas.àxh (Billy Fox), who is remembered for his knowledge of the land, his work as an RCMP special constable and his community leadership. He was an advocate for a modern school in the community of Teslin and lived to see it built.

Khàtinas.àxh (Billy Fox) is a member of the Kookhittaana (Raven) Clan, and his name signifies a raven that can be heard a long time after he is gone.



The Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church



The present Catholic Church is the third to be built in Teslin. During a visit in 1937, Teslin people asked Bishop Coudert for a resident priest. Jean-Louis Coudert was the first appointed Bishop of the vicariate (region) of Whitehorse. Father Albert Drean, an Oblate missionary, arrived in 1938. He started a mission and built a small church, completed in 1939. A bigger church was built across from the present site in 1946, and the current church was completed in 1970. The structural drawings for this church were done by Conrad Domes and the students at the Yukon Vocational School in Whitehorse. The church's log form resembles a First Nation summer shelter, but with copper and brass abutments. The three roof peaks represent Tléináx̱ Tawéi (Lone Sheep Mountain), also known locally as The Three Aces or Dawson Peaks, a prominent massif located across the lake from the village. The church bells can still be heard calling the faithful to prayer every Sunday.





Nisutlin Bay Lodge Tourist Cabin



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This cabin, built in the 1930s, was originally located near the Nisutlin Bay Lodge. In 1928, Robert McCleery retired as a corporal with the RCMP in Teslin. He, his wife Suzan and their two daughters stayed in the community after his retirement. The McCleerys ran a trap line and built the new Nisutlin Trading Post in 1926. Anticipating a lively tourism business after the highway was completed, McCleery built the Nisutlin Bay Lodge, with accommodations for twenty people, and erected several small cabins like this one. The family opened a restaurant, and the elegant Suzan McCleery served meals to highway construction workers. The lodge offered all the comfort and amenities of a contemporary lakefront resort. A modern airport was located nearby, and there was a seaplane base on the lake.

The original Nisutlin Bay Lodge and Trading Post are no longer standing. This cabin is all that remains of the delightful northern lodge. It has been used as a store and residence, and was moved several times since it was built. This cabin is located on private property.

Teslin seen from a float plane on Nisutlin Bay, circa early 1940s. The Nisutlin Bay Trading Post is the white building on the left; the lodge is the imposing structure delineated by white fence posts. Many other important historical buildings are visible in this photo, including the old Catholic church and rectory. (George Johnston Museum Archives, Heather Tobe Collection)





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This is one of the oldest structures standing in Teslin, built in 1906 as a church and school. Anglican divinity student J. R. Blythell established the first Teslin school during the summer of 1908. The missionary taught about 40 students, almost all adults in those early years. The seasonal school started receiving federal support in 1911. The school did not open every year, but by the 1930s it was so well attended that a Tlingit youth was hired to assist the teacher.

By the early 1920s, the building and the roof had fallen into disrepair. In 1923, the church was pulled down and rebuilt using the old logs. The walls were chinked with mud and lime mixed with moose hair, and the sod roof was replaced with galvanized steel. In the mid-1920s, the building was used by the RCMP during the winter while Tlingit families were out of town on their traplines.

Around 1934, after a new frame church was built, the old church was deconsecrated and the bell tower removed. The congregation started using it as a parish hall in the mid-1950s. The parish hall was used for a number of years in the 1970s as a pre-school for the community, and more recently it has served as a thrift shop.



Theology student S. W. Semple was the seasonal minister in 1934 when the Teslin Tlingit congregation built St. Philip's Church. Bob Ward was a theology student in Teslin during the 1930s. He returned to Teslin in 1942 as a priest. Reverend Ward turned the church into a hospital when outbreaks of measles, mumps and meningitis severely affected the First Nations population during the Alaska Highway construction. In 1955, Reverend Fred Lapham and local carpenter Shàná'k'w (Peter Smarch Sr.) added ten feet to the length of St. Philip's Church.





W.J. House.

Three of the buildings at the corner of Tlingit Circle and George Johnston Drive are examples of three different eras of Teslin architecture. The Freddy and Nina Johnston House was built from salvaged materials in the late 1920s when Tlingit families from the southern end of Teslin Lake moved seasonally to the village. The Joe Jackson House, closest to the community garden, was built in the 1960s by local carpenters under a federal housing program. The W.J. House, directly across the street from the Joe Jackson house, dates from another federal housing program in the mid-1980s. The houses pictured here and on the following page are private residences.

Looking northeast along what is now Tlingit Circle, circa 1964. The Freddy and Nina Johnston house is the first one on the left and is the only one of the pictured houses still standing. Many of these homes were built using salvaged material from the south end of Teslin Lake. (Yukon Archives, James YC Quong fonds, 2-4-29)





Joe Jackson House



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You are in the heart of Teslin's old village, the centre of the traditional settlement land of the Teslin Tlingit Council. Non-First Nations people slowly began to occupy this area on a year-round basis after a Teslin trading post was established in 1903. By the 1940s, what is now known as Tlingit Circle was the main drag, dotted with houses, tent frames and caches. Dominion Day and later Sports Day were celebrated here. Structures like Joe Jackson's log house were built many years later around 1965 by the Teslin Tlingit and were part of a federal government inventory. They were called "apple boxes," or "apples," in reference to their red colour. The lands and buildings in this area were transferred to the Teslin Tlingit Council after their Land Claim and Self-Government Agreements were signed in 1993.

Joe Jackson was a respected elder and Kookhittaana (Raven) clan leader. He passed away in 2017.



Freddy and Nina Johnston Heritage House



This was one of the first frame houses built in Teslin and dates from 1928. The lumber was salvage material from a Hudson's Bay Company post at the south end of Teslin lake, across from the Inland Tlingit community of Johnston Town. Around 1922, Yaxhgûs' (Bobby Jackson), Khàxanla.át (John Jackson Sr.), and Alû (Matthew Jackson) salvaged the milled lumber. They brought it to Teslin using Ghùchshayàyí (Shorty Johnston) and Kh'adê (William Johnston)'s boat, the Nakina. They used it to build the walls of this house in about 1928. Several frame houses were built near here by people migrating from the southern end of Teslin Lake between 1922 and 1928. The Teslin Tlingit fished on nearby lakes and rivers during the summer, hunted in the highlands during the fall, and went out on traplines during the winter. The steep slopes of this house help shed snow while the owners were out on the trapline.

Daghê (Freddy Johnston) was K'àshtlâ (George Johnston)'s nephew, and they were both excellent photographers. The Teslin Tlingit Council is undertaking restoration work on the Daghe (Freddy) and Jinkhusêyi (Nina) Johnston Heritage House. When restored, they plan to exhibit early photographs and artifacts from the old village. The building may also be used as a meeting space or a place to interview traditional knowledge holders.



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The multi-use trails around Hermit Lake pass by fishing spots, places to pick medicinal plants, and birch trees harvested for snowshoe-making. An important and extensive stand of culturally modified pine trees are found in this area. The trees, like the one pictured above, show scars from harvesting the cambium, or inner bark. Cambium contains carbohydrates, dietary fibre, vitamin C and minerals. These were complements to a protein-rich diet and were very important in the late winter. Teslin Tlingit Council's Heritage department conducted dendrochronology work (tree aging) and determined that some of these trees date back to the mid-1800s.

To access the main parking area, take Sawmill Road from the Alaska Highway and turn left on Cranberry Lane.



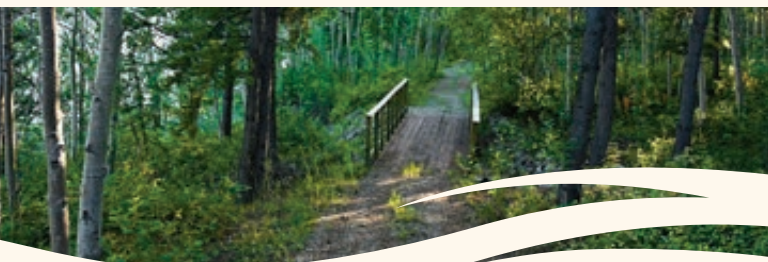


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The 3-kilometre George Johnston Trail is a year-round multi-use trail. It runs parallel to the lake and the highway between the Village of Teslin and the Teslin Tlingit Heritage Centre at Fox Point.

K'àshtlâ (George Johnston) brought the first car to Teslin in 1928 and drove it on a widened foot path around the village. Over three years he hired men to construct a six-kilometre road, complete with culverts and a short-span pole bridge, from the village to Fox Point. On the local July 1 Sports Days, he dressed in a white shirt and tie and offered a taxi service. He charged \$1 for the round trip. K'àshtlâ's road to Fox Point became the route for the Alaska Highway in this area. This trail generally follows the same path, and sections of K'àshtlâ's original road can still be spotted along the eastern section of the trail.

Trailheads are located across the Alaska Highway from Dewhurst Crescent and at the southern entrance to the Teslin Tlingit Heritage Centre (TTHC). A small trail from the signpost at the western end takes you along the lakeshore to the TTHC and adds approximately 0.5 km of distance.





Teslin Tlingit Heritage Centre



The Teslin Tlingit Heritage Centre sits at a beautiful location on the shore of Teslin Lake. Come here to learn about Teslin Tlingit culture and traditional ways of life. The permanent collection includes dozens of masks, expertly carved by local artists. The masks bring to life the stories of the Teslin Tlingit people. There are films, temporary exhibits and a gift shop stocked with local and other crafts.

The five clan posts outside the Centre were carved in a project directed by master carvers Dempsey Bob, Shàkûn (Keith Wolfe Smarch) and Stan Bevan. At outside exhibits, learn about big game outfitting, tanning hides, and salmon fishing and processing. The beautiful dug-out canoes on display are used in races at the Haa K̓usteeýí biennial Inland Tlingit Gathering celebrations.

Access the Teslin Tlingit Heritage Centre from the Alaska Highway at kilometre 1248.





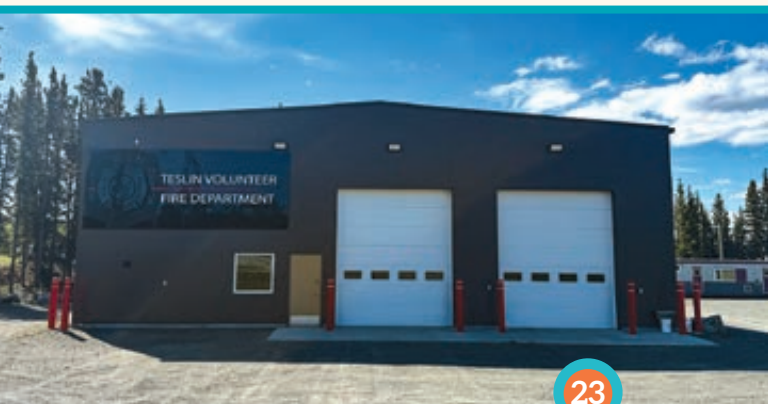
Emergency Services



RCMP Detachment



Health Centre



Fire Department



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**Kukhdlâ (Tom Dewhurst)
Recreation Complex**



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**Village of Teslin
Administration Building**



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Friendship Park



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Pine Needle Park



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Nana's Park



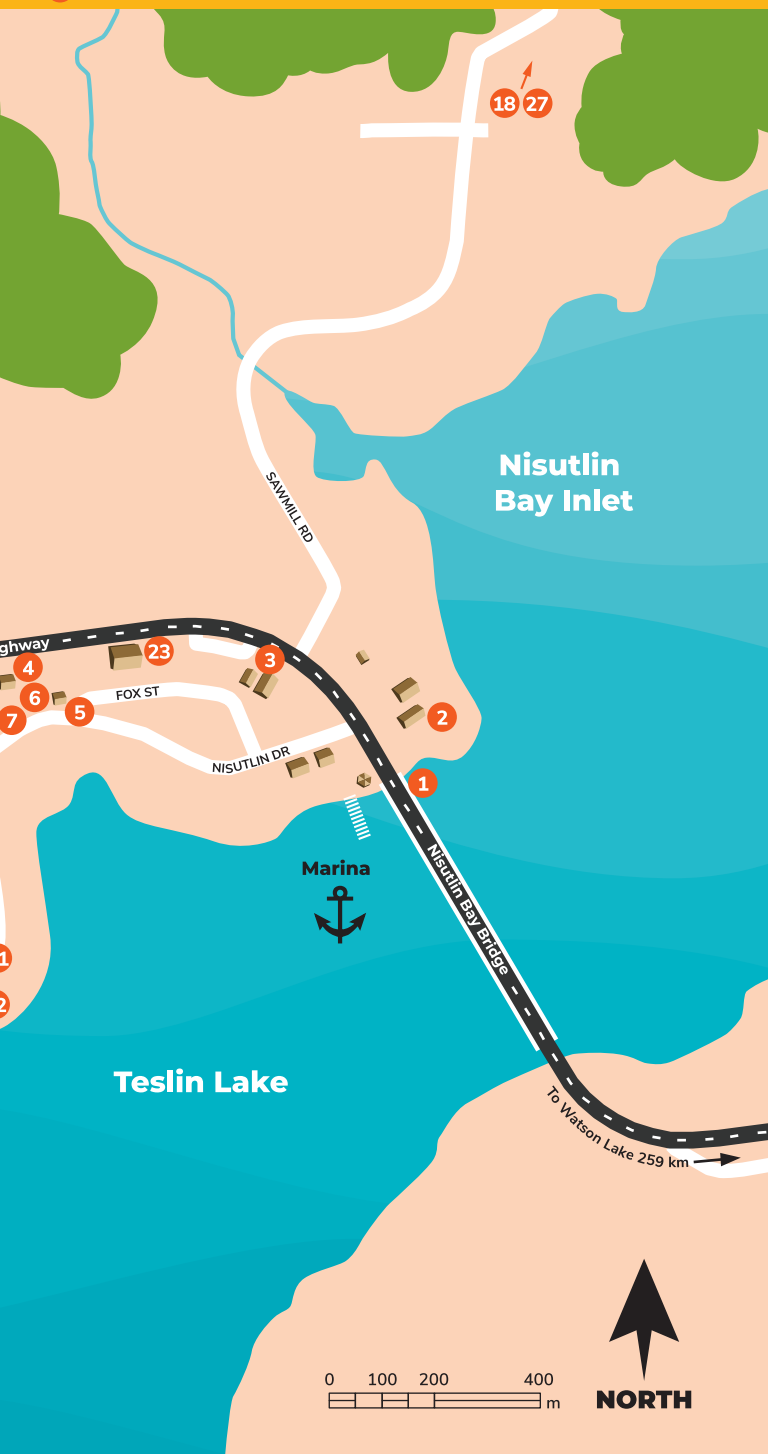
Historic Sites



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- 25 Village of Teslin Administration Building
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- 27 Pine Needle Park
- 28 Nana's park





Teslin Tlingit Council



Haa Kusteeyí Inland Tlingit celebration in 2017, Teslin, Yukon. This Inland Tlingit celebration is hosted every two years by one of the Inland Tlingit Nations: Teslin Tlingit Council, Carcross/Tagish First Nation, and Taku River Tlingit First Nation. (Photos: Teslin Tlingit Council/Alistair Maitland Photography)



NOTES

George Johnston Trail



Use at your own risk.

You are on Teslin Tlingit Council Traditional Territory.
Please respect our land and heritage resources.





Gunalchéesh haat yeen.aadí.
Thank you all for coming.

Thanks to Teslin Tlingit Council, George Johnston Museum and the Village of Teslin. Special thanks to the individuals who provided great detail in clarifying the historical record. If you have additional information, please contact the Government of Yukon Cultural Services Branch at 867-667-3458.

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Photos: Government of Yukon unless otherwise noted.