



# Yukon Prospectors' Association

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## GEORGE WASHINGTON CARMACK: CO-DISCOVERER OF BONANZA CREEK GOLD by Jane Gaffin

Jane Gaffin is a Whitehorse-based freelance writer who specializes in mining.

George Washington Carmack (1850-1922) wasn't keen for gold. A misfit and former seaman, he had abandoned ship at Juneau, Alaska, and crossed the Chilkoot in 1887 from Dyea, Alaska, where he had bought trade trinkets for the Tagish Indians. Carmack joined the Indians and created an inseparable relationship with Kate, his wife, and her relatives Skookum Jim Mason and Tagish Charlie, the tribe's chief.

On one of the clan's annual migrations, Carmack had spotted coal above Five Finger Rapids on the Yukon River. Knowing nothing about mining, the party had pressed on in the spring of 1896 to fish the Klondike River.

Upon hearing a tip from prospector Robert Henderson, Skookum Jim persuaded Carmack to check out the gold strike. They ascended a stream parallel to Gold Bottom and found huge quantities of gold on Rabbit Creek, later renamed Bonanza.

The Discovery claim was recorded on August 17, 1896, and Carmack's announcement of gold stirred skeptical prospectors from Fortymile and other risky diggings. The news crackled rapidly through the outside world that potato-size nuggets could be found wherever a shovel dug. By fluke, Carmack and his Indian friends had inadvertently set off a world-class gold rush in the Klondike.

Carmack, along with Skookum Jim Mason (circa 1855-1916), Tagish Charlie (died 1908) and Robert Henderson (1857-1933) were inducted into the Prospectors' Hall of Fame in 1988. Their names are engraved in the base of the prospector statue that watches over downtown Whitehorse from Main Street and Third Avenue.

It is unknown who nominated the quartet for induction into the Canadian Mining Hall of Fame or who accepted the awards during the presentation ceremony on January 20, 1999. The awards dinner at the Royal York Hotel in Toronto marked the eleventh year inductees had been recognized for making significant contributions to various aspects of the Canadian mining industry.

Portraits of the Hall of Fame inductees and a citation outlining their achievements hang in the University of Toronto's mining building.

The four men were given rite of passage into both Halls of Fame for discovering Klondike gold on August 17, 1896, that sparked the world-famous Klondike Gold Rush of 1896-98

and changed the course of Yukon history.

When news of a major strike reached the Outside world, 30,000 stampeder flooded into the boom camp that exploded into Dawson City, a town named after George M. Dawson of the Geological Survey of Canada.

The Yukon District was carved away from the Northwest Territories to create the Yukon Territory as a separate entity on June 13, 1898, so the Canadian government could collect liquor taxes.

As with any major mineral discovery, disagreements still rage as to who should be rightfully credited with the gold discovery on Rabbit Creek, subsequently renamed Bonanza Creek.

It is generally accepted that all four men played a part in setting off the great event. Over a hundred years later, the Klondike was still strong as a vibrant placer mining district. Many Yukon residents are descendants of the original discoverers and of some of the adventurers who came with the Klondike gold rush and never left.

Klondike is a word coined from Thron Duick. A ridge at Quartz Creek's headwaters separated Indian River from the unknown river called Thron Duick, an Indian name meaning "full of fish" or "hammer water", as some say. The word was mispronounced by white men until they coined "Klondike".

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