



Backgrounder – Iqaluit receives city status

As long as memory can record, Inuit have enjoyed Iqaluit, Inuktitut for “place of many fish,” as a seasonal fishing ground with little interruption. Summer camps appeared around the head of Frobisher Bay and Inuit took advantage of the plentiful fishing in the area.

Explorer Martin Frobisher gave the bay the name “Frobisher Straites” in 1576, in the mistaken belief he had found a way through the Northwest Passage. Between then and the late 1800s, European activity in the area was very limited.

Only after several foreigners applied for mining claims in south Baffin Island did the British government transfer sovereignty of the Arctic Archipelago to the Canadian government by Order of Council on July 31, 1880. However, the area was not much visited by scientists and explorers in the years between 1880 and 1930.

Inuit continued their traditional lifestyle with very limited European contact until the early 1900s. A census taken by a missionary in 1914 showed a widely distributed Inuit population of 537 in the south Baffin region. In the same year, the Hudson’s Bay Company opened a trading post at Ward Inlet, 40 miles from the current site of Iqaluit. In 1931, a federal government census, based on data from a variety of sources, showed 790 Inuit and 23 non-Inuit in the entire south Baffin area.

In 1940, the American government began seeking ways to deliver fighter aircraft to assist the British war effort without using American airspace, which would have contravened their neutral status at the start of the Second World War. German submarines were destroying shiploads of planes before they reached Britain. The Americans needed routes that would allow for refuelling of small aircraft every 500 miles. Using 100 year-old maps, an advance party surveyed the area and selected Koojesse Inlet at the head of Frobisher Bay. At that time the Census of Canada showed 183 people in the immediate vicinity.

By 1943, the American airstrip was operational and the Hudson’s Bay Company had moved their trading post to the site called “Apex,” partly because Inuit had moved further up the bay, and partly to take advantage of the improved transportation and communications links resulting from the establishment of the American airbase. The airbase, however, was never used for the intended purpose because technological improvements to aircraft made them capable of much longer flights.

In 1944, US Army Air Force personnel left. A few Canadian government personnel operated the base for the next six years. In 1951, the Americans returned to use the airport as a trans-shipment point for materials destined for the airbase at Thule, Greenland. From 1955 to 1957, the Americans used the Frobisher Bay airport as a trans-shipment, communications and construction centre for the creation of the Defensive Early Warning (DEW) line. In 1957, the Americans needed to build up in-flight refuelling capacity in this sector and chose Iqaluit as the base for a tanker aircraft group. It was not until 1963 that the American military withdrew from the region.

Inuit were slow to settle permanently in the area, in part because of their traditional nomadic lifestyle and the minimal numbers of jobs offered by the American military. By 1955, however, permanent Inuit residency was on the rise, and has steadily increased ever since. Among the factors contributing to this change were a brisk construction trade and the presence of a rehabilitation centre for Northerners returning from lengthy medical treatment in southern Canada. Inuit from all over the Arctic were drawn to Iqaluit and to the centre.

In the meantime, the Canadian government had turned more attention to the north for a variety of reasons: reports of starvation among the Inuit, American efforts to neutralize the threat posed by the Soviet Union, and the potential for non-renewable resource development. The Canadian public demanded their government do something to assist northern residents.

The federal government first sent Northern Service Officers to administer government programs to Inuit in 1953. In 1959, the Department of Northern Affairs named Frobisher Bay as the regional office for the Eastern Arctic, based on its existing transportation infrastructure and the presence of the rehabilitation centre. By 1963, there were representatives of four federal departments in Frobisher Bay, including the departments of transportation, northern affairs, justice and social services.

In June 1964, with a population of more than 900, the first community council, lead by a chairperson, was formed. The community gained settlement status on March 31, 1970, and village status on October 10, 1974. On January 8, 1979, the position of Mayor was created; on October 1, 1980 the Government of the Northwest Territories designated the community as the Town of Frobisher Bay.

One of the first signs of respect for the long history of Inuit in the North was the official name change to Iqaluit on January 1, 1987. Since then, many Nunavut communities have officially reclaimed their Inuktitut names.

Iqaluit was selected to be the capital of Nunavut by plebiscite on December 11, 1995, and was officially declared as such on April 1, 1999. Iqaluit will officially become a city on April 19, 2001.