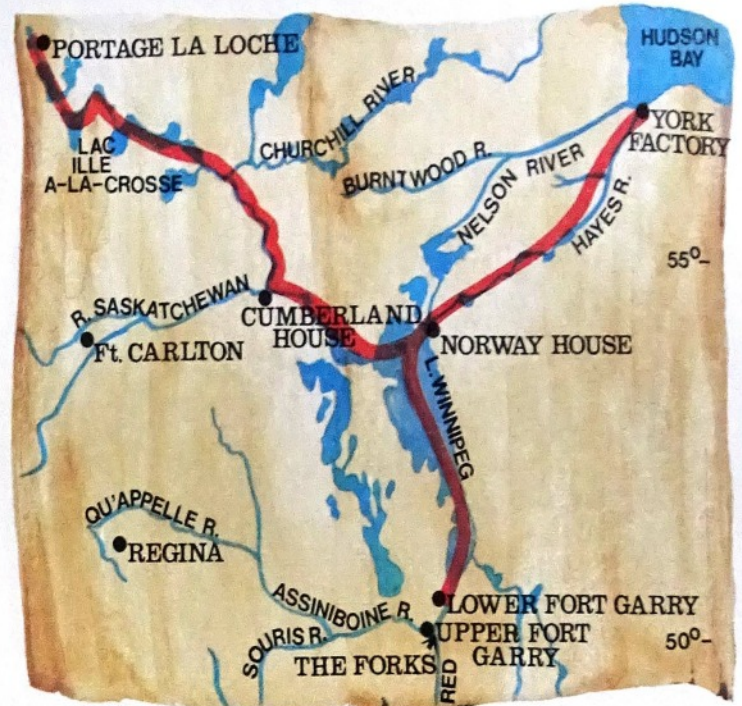


Parks Canada
LOWER FORT GARRY
 National Historic Park
 Manitoba



It was madness but it was done. In 1830 in the windswept heart of North America, the Hudson's Bay Company threw up a magnificent stone fort. It would, the sages of the Company were confident, become the headquarters of the richest fur region in the British Empire, the Northern Department of Rupert's Land. Within five years of construction the enterprise



Map—La Loche Brigade Route

had proved a failure. For two decades, the fort's influence would extend little beyond the lower reaches of the Red River Settlement. Those at the Fort would experience the malnutrition, disease, and river lot shortage that gripped Red River in the 1840's. They would learn to know the Sixth Regiment of Foot, dispatched to discourage the growing free trade movement, and would gossip of an illicit love affair that scandalized the race-conscious community. In 1870 they would see the Lower Settlement become part of the newly established province of Manitoba.

The Red River region first became important to the fur trade after 1783 when the Montreal-based Northwest Company began to intrude upon the rights of the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly granted in 1670. The area surrounding the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers was the gateway to the best fur and pemmican lands in North America. It was here that the Hudson's Bay Company encouraged Lord Selkirk to settle some two hundred dispossessed Scottish crofters. They would, the Company hoped, form the

basis of an agricultural community capable of supplying the trade with its staples. In 1821 the Hudson's Bay and Northwest Companies, forced to near bankruptcy by their struggle for supremacy, united under the name of the older enterprise. In a massive effort at economy, the new company dismissed half of its labour force. These men, their Indian wives, and their mixed-blood children wound their tired and broken way to Red River to eke out their remaining years in poverty on the plots provided by the Company.

By 1830 this strange, isolated settlement numbered some two thousand souls when George Simpson, the dynamic Governor of Rupert's Land, decided to build Lower Fort Garry. At the time the Fort seemed a logical response to the need for an administrative headquarters above the fluctuating waters of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, and north of the treacherous St. Andrew's Rapids. Furthermore, the northern location satisfied Governor Simpson's desire to establish a family refuge removed from the "baser" elements of Red River society centred at the Forks.

Lower Fort Garry's failure stemmed from Simpson's inability to recognize that the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers was the established social and economic centre for the settlement. The inhabitants, on their river lot farms, refused to cart their produce over the twenty miles of rough trails to the Lower Fort when Andrew McDermot's store was nearby. Moreover the Governors of Assiniboia preferred to administer the colony from the Upper Settlement. So, in 1836, Simpson agreed to reconstruct the Upper Fort destroyed by flood a decade earlier. The Simpsons, whose years at the Lower Fort were saddened by the tragic death of their first child in 1833, never moved to the new structure. Despising the social pettiness of the settlement, they decided to make their home in the more cosmopolitan centre of Lachine, Quebec.

With the completion of the Upper Fort in 1837,

Lower Fort Garry, became a subordinate provisioning depot for the Lower Red River settlement, and a country retreat for prominent visitors. Because it was below the turbulent St. Andrew's Rapids, the Lower Fort was also the origin of a considerable amount of water transportation. Each spring a brigade of York boats set out

from Lower Fort Garry on the long, tortuous

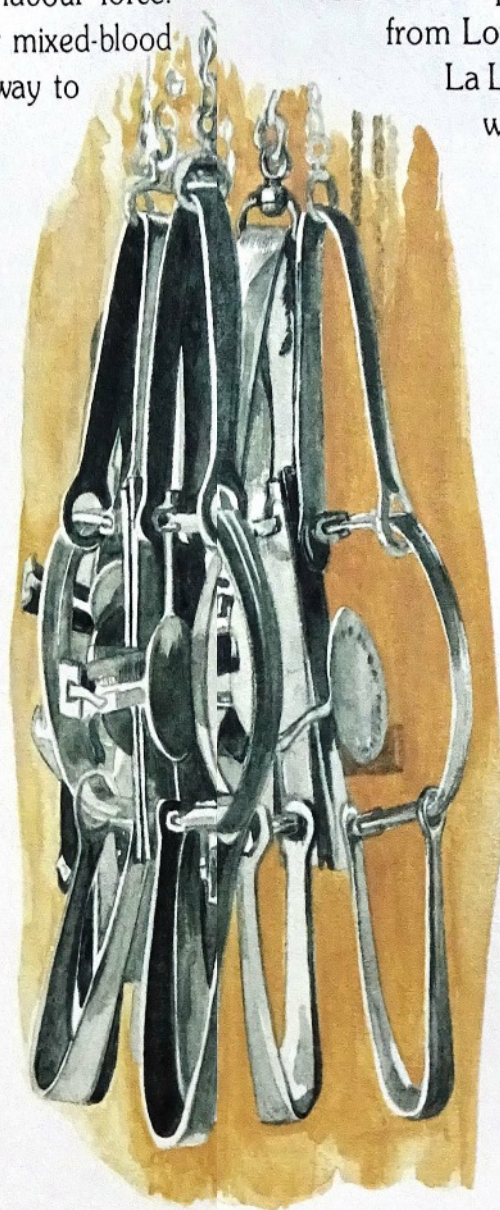
La Loche route. Their ultimate desintation

was Methye Portage, a twelve mile stretch of land at the divide of the Hudson's Bay and Arctic Ocean watersheds. There the brigade met its western counterpart carrying pelts from the rich fur districts of Athabasca and Mackenzie. The crucial rendezvous completed, the Hudson's Bay "trip men" hastened to York Factory in order to obtain the trade goods for the following year. Once these goods were safely deposited at Norway House, the brigade raced to Red River before the winter set in. The transportation cycle was complete.

Lower Fort Garry's supplementary role in the fur trade of the Northern Department was overshadowed by the close relationship between the people of the lower settlement and the Fort. This development was due in a large part to the economic reality of the Company's mono-

poly. If the English speaking mixed-bloods of the lower settlement wanted to buy or trade, the retail sales shop of the Stone Fort was their only alternative. This attempt at economic dictatorship ultimately led to confrontation with mixed-bloods of Red River and a new role for Lower Fort Garry.

By 1846 Red River was sliding into civil disorder. The mixed-bloods and Métis flaunted the Company's monopoly at will. Intent upon preserving their position, the Company used the threat of an American invasion to persuade the Imperial government to dispatch the Sixth Regiment of Foot to Red River. Lodged in the "Big House" and warehouse at the Lower Fort and protected by the newly-completed walls and bastions,



they effectively suppressed the free trade movement. The regiment only stayed two years, and in 1849, one year after their departure the Métis forced the Company to capitulate to their demands. The trade was at last free in the Red River area.

To restore its deteriorating authority in Red River, the Hudson's Bay Company sent Eden Colvile to reside at Lower Fort Garry as the Associate Governor of Rupert's Land. Upon his arrival, Colvile discovered that the controversy surrounding the free trade movement disguised equally significant social tensions. This was quickly illustrated in 1850 when an alleged illicit love affair between a beautiful mixed-blood woman and an English officer divided the Settlement into two groups based on race and social status. The lower orders and mixed-bloods regarded the woman as innocent; the Europeans and upper class held her guilty. In spite of Colvile's attempt to pacify all parties, Red River would not forget the affair. The Europeans became ever more zealous in guarding what they thought was their superiority and the mixed-bloods ever more assertive of their equality.

These social problems were accompanied by economic ones which caused another major change for Lower Fort Garry. Red River's population had grown so rapidly during the 1840's and 1850's that its farmers could no longer supply their own wants, much less those of the northern fur posts. Lower Fort Garry, Simpson decided, would have to be pressed into service as an industrial farm to fill the gap. In 1857 labour was hired from the Lower Settlement and placed under the direction of A. R. Lillie, a Scottish farmer. By 1865 the Lower Fort had become a dominant economic force in the St. Andrew's area. An industrial complex south of

the fort contained a boat-building yard, blacksmith shop, lime kiln, brewery and grist mill. But with the fur trade decline after 1871 and the expansion of the eastern agricultural frontier even those activities at the Lower Fort became less and less significant.

The coming of Canada to the west was not without violence. The French speaking mixed-bloods under Louis Riel, seized the Upper Fort in protest to the transfer of Rupert's Land to Canada. In the Lower Settlement their English counterparts, who supported the Canadian connection, rallied in opposition. Some trained at Lower Fort Garry for a march on the Upper Fort. The affair fizzled for lack of leadership, and in the end they decided to wait for Canadian troops to restore order. These arrived in 1870 and some were quartered at the Lower Fort.

The uses of Lower Fort Garry after 1870 reflect the fact that the Red River period of Manitoba's history was over.

Treaty No. 1 would be signed there in 1871, and it would later be used as a training ground for the Northwest Mounted Police, as a provincial penitentiary, and finally as a temporary lunatic asylum in 1885-86. The Fort continued as a Company residence until 1911, when it was leased to the Manitoba Motor Country Club. This ensured the survival and maintenance of the original buildings. After title passed from the H.B.C. to the Crown in 1951, Parks Canada began the restoration of the site to its historical character as provisioning post and Company residence.



FURTHER READING

The Great Fur Opera — Ronald Searle, Kildare Dobbs.

A tongue in cheek look at the Hudson Bay Company from its inception to the present day.

The Red River Settlement, Its Rise, Progress and Present State — Alexander Ross.

This work, written in 1856 by a resident of the Upper Settlement, is both interesting and provocative.

Hudson's Bay or Everyday Life in the Wilds of North America — Robert Ballantyne.

A personal account of the author's experience in the service of the H.B.Co. in the 1840's.

"Lower Fort Garry" in The Beaver (summer 1970) — Philip Goldring.

An excellent popular overview of Lower Fort Garry's History.

MORE DETAILED WORKS

Canadian Historic Sites: Occasional Papers in Archaeology and History. No. 4.

The most learned analysis of the Settlement in the pre 1850 period remains W. L. Morton's introduction to the Hudson Bay Record Society publication, London Correspondence Inward from Eden Colville 1849-52.

For an extensive academic study of the fur trade consult A. S. Morton's monumental, A History of the Canadian West 1820-71.



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