

A Chronological Outline of the Evolution of the Various
Fur Trade and Colonial Establishments near the Forks of
the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, 1810-1836.

The North West and Hudson's Bay Companies first began in earnest to permanently occupy the Red River country during the last decade of the 18th Century. Fur Trade posts belonging to both companies sprang up near the forks of the Pembina and Red River and likewise near the junction of the Assiniboine and Souris, and the Assiniboine and Qu'appelle Rivers. The abundance and availability of 'country provisions' principally pemican, drew both companies to the Red River. The 'Forks' of the Red and Assiniboine was an important meeting place frequented by the brigades of both companies.¹ Neither the North West or Hudson's Bay Companies established a permanent post at the Forks before 1810.

The first to re-occupy the Forks (the French had built Fort Rouge at the Forks in 1738) was John Wills for the North West Company in 1810-1811.² Prior to 1810, the North West Company's Red River Department was centred at Pembina (Alex. Henry 1800-08 and Daniel McKenzie 1808-09). The threat of a confrontation with the hostile Dakota Sioux forced McKenzie's successor, John Wills, northward to the Forks in 1810.³ Wills positioned his post at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine, on that point of land formed by the west bank of the Red and the north bank of the Assiniboine.

The Earl of Selkirk's plan to establish an agricultural colony in the western interior of British North America began to take shape in 1811. In that year he dispatched

Captain Milec Macdonell and a small contingent of settlers to Nort America via Hudson's Bay. A late start from Stromness, Orkney prevented Macdonell and his followers, from proceeding to Red River in the fall of 1811. They wintered on the shores of Hudson's Bay. It was not until the 30th of August 1812,⁴ taht Macdonell reached the Red River. After a quick inspection of the country,⁴ Macdonell chose the first expanse of prairie on the west bank of the Red, a mile below the Nort West Company's Fort Gibraltar. The lateness of the season forced Macdonell and his contingent to Pembina where provisions were mre readily available.

Arriving at Pembina in October of 1812, Captain Macdonell much to the chagrin of Hugh Heney, master of the H.B.C. post at Pembina, commenced to associate and socialize with the Nor'Westers⁵. Heney believed that this was a very imprudent move on Macdonnell's part, and future events would prove him correct.

On May 16, 1813, Heney wrote in his Pembina Journal that:

Messrs Dartenois & McLeod with a party went off this day for the purpose of building a house at the Forks of Red River, at which place Mr. Haney intends leaving the remains of this year, and a party during the summer. 6.

Macdonnell left Pembina a day or so later and when he reached the Forks at 7 p.m. on May 18th he discovered that, "Mr. McLeod & Bostanais (sic) are building here for the H.B. Coy. order of Mr. Heney."⁷ Mr. Heney arrived at the Forks on the 24th of May and soon began to assist his men with the building operations. The site of this first Hudson's Bay Post, was undoubtedly on the east bank of the Red, as Macdonnell

noted on "ay 22nd that he"crossed the River to where the
H.B.Co. men are at work." This H.B.C. trading post did
not last long at its original site on the east bank"...
nearly opposite the Canadian House at the forks...."

Increased friction between the colony and the Nor'Westers
made the defence of this small post impractical and
consequently it was rafted^{to} ~~ever~~ ~~ever~~ near Fort Douglas.¹⁰
The new site of the H.B.C. post was on the west bank of
the Red River"... at the junction of the creek and the
river..!"¹¹just south of the colonial establishment, Fort
Douglas.

The site of Fort Douglas had been chosen in August
of 1812, by Macdonnell immediately after his first arrival
at Red River. It was not until May of 1813 that a concerted
start was made on the fort. Macdonnell actively partook
in the supervision of the building operations at Fort
Douglas from May of 1813 to July 18, 1813, at which time
he departed for York Factory to meet the next group of
settlers. The ensuing winter 1813-1814, was again spent at
Pembina. The party returned to the Forks in May 1814, and
continued at building Fort Douglas and preparing the land
for seed. On July 25, 1814, Macdonnell once again departed
for York Factory, and left Peter Fidler in charge of the
settlement. Fidler continued in earnest the building of
Fort Douglas.

In the course of three months in the summer
of 1814 when Capt. Macdonnell was absent
from Red River Mr, Fidler being left in
charge, performed a good deal of business,
he ~~left~~ built a convenient farm house with
barn stable cow house sheep house & hog stye
and inclosed(sic) the whole within a strong
fence of stockades $3\frac{1}{2}$ $3\frac{1}{2}$ chains squzre.
he built also the walls of a Government house

of two stories 64x22 feet a detached kitchen
23 x 17 feet a neat dwelling house 23 x 16.
He make(sic) two kilns of charcoal 15 tons
of hay broke 2 1/2 acres of land & secured
all the crops-. 12.

By the latter part of 1814, the relationship
between the new colony and the Nor'Westers began to cool.
A proclamation issued by Macdonnell which attempted to
prevent the export of pemican from Assiniboia, annoyed
the Nor'Westers. Their whole trade depended to a large
extent upon the provisions from thei^r posts at Pembina
and the Upper Assiniboine.

Throughout the winter of 1814-15, the Nor'Westers
under Duncan Cameron, began to systematically undermine
the morale of the colonists. A liberal supply of liquor
and hospitality, a promise of a free passage to Canada,
coupled with the threat of violence, convinced many of
the colonists to drift over to the North West fort at the
junction. Upon Fidler's return to the Red River in May
of 1815, after wintering at Brandon House he noted "...
that nearly all the settlers that had come to the country
these last two years had gone over to the Canadian House."¹³
Desertions continued throughout the spring of 1815, and the
odds consequently, continued to mount against the colony.

On the 11th of June 1815, the Nor'westers aided by
many of the metis began to fire upon Fort Douglas and the
H.B.C. trading house. During the skirmish three colonial
personnell and one HBS servant were wounded. On the 13th
of June, Fidler and Macdonnell tried to consolidate their
position, although the end of the colony was imminent, by
concentrating all their forces into one building. They

pulled down the dilapidated block house and part of the dwelling house. It also appears that they dismantled the H.B.Co. trading house. ¹⁴ Ten days later Fidler, and all the remaining colonists were forced to leave the Red River. Macdonnell was placed under arrest and taken to Montreal. Four HBC servants remained behind to look after the Company's affairs and affects. On June 28th 1815, the entire colony, including the Fort Douglas was destroyed.

... thirteen buildings which had been erected at much labour and expence(sic) by the colonists and the servants of the Hudson's Bay Company and which were that morning entire, not one was to be seen but the Blacksmith's shop into which the Despondent put the few goods which he had been able to save. 15.

The remnants of the colony fled north to the bottom of Lake Winnipeg(near present day Norway House). Here they met Colin Robertson who persuaded them to return once again to Red River, and try again. Robertson arrived at the Red River on July 14. ¹⁶ 1815. Upon his arrival he found that Mr, McLeod of the H.B.C. had commenced to build-a-house ¹⁷ "... a house about 100 yards from the old establishment." On the 20th of August 1815, Robertson noted in his diary that he would build alongside McLeod.

It is my intention to build a Fort on this point, as it is well situated for a place of defence, and has a beautiful prospect of the plains and commands two angles of the River. Mr. McLeod has got up the shell of a house, and I have sent off the men to square logs for other buildings. 18.

Building operations, at the second Fort Douglas continued through the summer and fall of 1815, and into the winter of 1816. On January 5th, 1816, Robertson gave orders to

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"...square logs for a Bastionⁿ

The Nor'Westers continued to threaten the re-established colony, as they had the previous year. In March of 1816, Robertson decided that he should take the offensive, rather than wait for the Nor'Westers to duplicate their actions of 1815. On St. Patrick's Day 1816, Robertson led a contingent of colonists and HBC servants to Gibraltar, and caught the Nor'Westers by surprise. Fort Gibraltar was Robertson's within a matter of minutes. Four days later Robertson wrote a description of the captured Fort Gibraltar into his diary.

Examined Gibraltar this morning, it is certainly in an excellent state of defence; it has two good bastions at the two angles of the square, and the square is formed with oak palisades; eighteen feet in height, and proof against musketry, this is not only a strong place but very comfortable lodgings.... 20.

Shortly after capturing Gibraltar, Robertson intercepted a North West Company mail packet²¹, and upon opening it he discovered that the Nor'Westers and their allies the metis, were planning to attack the colony in the spring of 1816. Robertson and Governor Semple, put aside their differences temporarily, and began to make preparations for the defence of the colony. It was originally planned that both Fort Gibraltar and Fort Douglas be defended²². In the latter part of May 1816, it was decided "... to throw both Forts into one,..."²³ Accordingly on June 11th "...Governor Semple went with a party to bring it (Gibraltar) to the ground; and bring the stockades to be put round Fort Douglas."²⁴ Those portions of Gibraltar that could not be incorporated into Fort Douglas were burned²⁵. The fortifications at Fort Douglas were also

supplemented by the addition of the bastion from Fort Daer
at Pembina.²⁶

The dismantling and burning of Fort Gibraltar was not done any too soon, as an armed group of metis and North West Company servants made their appearance near the colony in the evening of June 19 1816. These men had been recruited from throughout much of the west. They had followed the course of the Assiniboine as far as Sturgeon Creek and then set out across country, in a North easterly direction towards Frog Plain. They were spotted by the sentry at Fort Douglas while they rode across the prairie. Governor Semple rashly and imprudently, decided to leave the relative safety of the fort and proceeded out to the plains to confront the intruders, led by Cuthbert Grant. The result was catastrophic, as 21 men, including Semple²⁷ were killed.

Three days later, the surviving colonists were once again forced to leave Red River, and Fort Douglas was left in the hands of the Nor'Westers. Fort Douglas remained in the hands of the North West Company throughout the remainder of 1816. It served as their base of operations for the Red River Department, as their own fort, Fort Gibraltar lay in ruins.

On December 10th, 1816, the liberated Captain Miles Macdonnell, accompanied by Captain D'Orsonnes and 28 men left Rainy Lake, under orders from Lord Selkirk, en route for Red River. Their first stop, however, was at Pembina which they reached on December 31, 1816.

Battling the intense cold and frostbite, they set off north ~~against~~ across the prairie and reached the Assiniboine River, a few miles upstream from the forks, on June 9, 1817. Early the next morning they took the occupied Fort Douglas by surprise. "Mr. McLellan & most of his men were taken before they had time to put on their trousers." ~~28~~ 28

Fort Douglas remained in the hands of Macdonnell until Lord Selkirk finally arrived in the settlement in the late summer of 1817. He deposed Nor'Westers set up a temporary camp a little way up the Assiniboine. In July of 1817, after the arrival of, and with the permission of the special commissioner William Coltman, they began to reconstruct Fort Gibraltar, near the site of the original one, at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine. ~~28~~ 29

From 1817 to the amalgamation of the H.B.C. and the North West Company, in 1821. building operations continued at the Forks. In 1819 Peter Fidler reported that the whole of the rebuilt Fort Gibraltar had been enclosed:

... with excellent sawn oak piquets 14 feet above the ground set very close together like a continual wall about 100 feet square. Their large large dwelling house is not yet built but to be this summer.... ~~29.~~ 30.

Similarly, construction continued at Fort Douglas. Captain Matthey reported to Selkirk in September 1818 that "3 Carpenters Cochoran at the Head are finishing and temporarily covering a farm house 50 x 25 feet...." ~~30~~ 31.

It is unclear whether or not the H.B.Co. maintained a separate trading post or house outside the stockades of Fort Douglas during the period 1817-1821. Mr. McLeod of the

H.B.C., had in June 1815 begun to erect a building for the Company, and had made considerable progress on it when Robertson arrived at Red River in July. This building may have formed part of what was later termed the "Company's Post". There is also an indication that James Bird established a store at Red River in 1817.^{32.} Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the Company ^{was} ~~were~~ busy building in 1819.

At present it seems necessary to have a Trading Post at the Forks where 5 or even 4 men are sufficient to winter at after the necessary buildings are erected.

Which are ^{....} now in a fair way of being soon.^{33.}

By 1822, there were clearly three separate entities at Red River. In May of 1822, the recently appointed Governor of Rupert's Land, George Simpson wrote to Andrew Colville in London. Part of his letter included a description of the forts at Red River.

Fort Douglas assumes(a) more respectable appearance than it did when I was last here, there is a good Dwelling House built and the offices are sufficient for any purpose at present* - The Company's place here is of a piece with all other old Establishments, flithy, irregular, and ruinous I am therefore getting the new North West Fort in order so as to ~~move~~ remove into it next fall; here is a good frame of a Dwelling House already up, the situation is preferable to ours, exactly opposite the Forks of the River and in order to commemorate Mr. Garry's visit I have taken the liberty of christening it after him 'Fort Garry'.^{34.}

Simpson's descriptions of the old HBC post were echoed by James Hargrave, who wrote in the Fort Garry Journal on September 11, 1822 that:

* There exists in the Selkirk Papers, m.177, pages 7674 and 7688-7693 a complete building inventory of Fort Douglas, July 1822.

"the buildings in the old Fort of the H.B.Co. are in a decayed and ruinous condition."³⁵ The move to the North West fort, christened by Simpson Fort Garry, was carried out in the fall of 1822.³⁶ For a short period of time in the spring of 1823 the old establishment of the Company served as Rev. John West's residence.³⁷ Those portions of the old establishment which possessed suitable and recyclable building materials were transported to Fort Garry. For example, the timber from one of the old Stores, was used in the construction of a stable at Fort Garry.³⁸ The move to Fort Garry was completed by the winter of 1822-23. The new fort was an improvement on the old establishment, but additional structures were needed to complete the requirements of the Fur Trade. John Clarke in his report of the Lower Red River district, 1822-23 described Fort Garry as having a "...good dwelling House but a Good store is required for Goods &, a Good Stable (and) a Range of dwelling for the men and a Barn;..."³⁹

In November of 1823, Simpson decided that further consolidation was needed at Red River. He wrote to Andrew Colvile, the brother in law of the deceased Lord Selkirk, and the executor of the estate, explaining his reasons and actions concerning the consolidation:

... at Fort Douglas it is unnecessary to have more than one or two clerks and a couple of men servants but on this scale ~~it would not~~
in its

The fort was 132' in front by 155' broad. It contained 7 buildings termed houses, 1 barn, 1 stable, an ice house, a potato house, and two bastions.

present situation it would not be safe either from troublesome Indians or settlers, I have therefore recommended to Gov^r Pelly that it should be removed close to Fort Garry, the East side of our Fort to form the west side of Fort Douglas so as merely to be separated by the stockades with a private entrance between them and thus situated they will always be a protection to each other; the removal will not be attended with much additional expense as Fort Douglas is now in a ruinous state and we have a sufficient number of men to finish the work before the embarkation. 32. 40

In May of 1824, Simpson again wrote to Colvile telling him that the move had been completed.⁴¹ The addition of the colonial buildings to the establishment at Fort Garry was only part of the alterations to that fort that year. Bastions were erected, the picketing repaired,⁴² and a start made on a "large new store".⁴³ Renovation and enlargement plans continued to go forward. New wooden bastions were planned for the east and north angles of the fort.⁴⁴

The site of Fort Douglas, on Point Douglas, was left to the ravages of time and weather.⁴⁵

The winter of 1825-26, was a particularly severe one, accompanied by an unusually large amount of snow. Francis Heron ominously reported in the Fort Garry Journal of February, 1826 that the "... snow round the fort (was) as high as the pickets, and twice as much on the plains as at any time last winter,"⁴⁶ The ensuing spring of 1826, proved disastrous for the settlement at Red River, and for the recently re-vamped Fort Garry. Flood waters of an unprecedented level inundated the Red River Valley. Heron's Journal relays a number of vivid accounts of the flood and its effect on the fort. At or near the peak of the flood waters on "ay 13th and 14th, Heron entered two descriptive

accounts of the flood at the fort.

•The forts now stand like a castle of romance in the midst of an ocean of deep contending currents. The waters extending for at least a mile behind them, and they are thereby only approachable by boats.... Mr. Mckenzie with the few hands he keeps with him in the forts are obliged to live in the highest stories of the highest houses. 46

•••••
Our Block House, on the front side of the fort, the best in Rupert's Land, built last summer, was this morning carried off in an instant with part of the picketing...- The chimneys of all the houses are nearly all fallen and the shattered walls of the buildings also begin to give way to the overpowering force of the current- The houses rock to and fro like a ship at sea, every joint opens, every beam bends- 48

The Red did not return to its banks until late in June 1826, and when the HBC servants returned the fort was a "complete pile of ruins"⁴⁹, not one of the buildings was fit for habitation. "The pickets had been swept away; the stores partly so and the Dwellings undermined, disjointed and falling to pieces."^{49 50.}

Fort Warry continued to deteriorate after 1826. Gov. Simpson became increasingly disenchanted with it and its location, and consequently, in the fall of 1830 he determined to abandon the site altogether. He explained his reasons in a letter to the Governor and Committee:

The Establishment of Fort Warry is in a very dilapidated state, so much so as to be scarcely habitable, and lies so low that we are every successive spring apprehensive that it will be carried away by high water at the breaking up of the ice. It is moreover, very disadvantageously situated, being about 45 miles from the lake and 18 miles above the rapids. I therefore determined last fall on abandoning the Establishment altogether, and instead of wasting time and money in temporary repairs of tottering wooden buildings, to set about erecting a good solid comfortable Establishment of stone & lime. 50 51

Simpson's logic concerning the forts on the Red River were for the most part sound. He did, however, overlook or ignore the fact that the centre of the settlement was at the Forks. By 1835, this fact became increasingly apparent and consequently he instructed Chief Factor Alexander Christie to commence the erection of Upper Fort Garry. The site chosen for this new fort was a few hundred yards up the Assiniboine from the abandoned Fort Garry I.. The actual construction commencement date is difficult to pinpoint, although there is evidence to suggest that it began during the summer of 1835. Work was still progressing in July of 1837, and it was nearing completion by February of 1838.

Endnotes

1. For accounts of these meetings see; John Macdonell "The Red River," in L.R. Masson ed. Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest (Quebec: A Cote et Cie., 1889) Vol. I p.267. also see; The "manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry, Fur Trader of the North West Company and of David Thompson, Official Geographer of the Same Company 1799-1814, ed. Elliott Coues (Minneapolis:1965) and Hudson's Bay Company Archives (H.B.C.A.) B.160/a/2 .
2. William Douglas " New Light on the Old Forts of Winnipeg" Historical and Scientific Society of Winnipeg Manitoba (HSSM) Series III No. 11 (1956) p.41 and George Bryce The Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company, (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1900)p.189. and Peter Fidler's Account of the Red River in the HBCA. B.22/e/1 1819 fo.16.
3. William Douglas, op. cit., p.41.
4. W.L. Morton, Manitoba A History (Toronto:1956) p. 46
5. HBCA B.160/a/4 , Pembina Journal 1812 by Hugh Heney , throughout.
6. Ibid., May 16, 1813. fo. 23d.
7. Selkirk Papers (PAM) M.G. 2. A.1 m.186.p. 16,830. Miles Macdonnell's Journal May 18, 1813.
8. Ibid., p. 16,831
9. Peter Fidler's Journal , 1814-1815, HBCA. B.235/a/3 fo.29. A typescript version is also available in the PAM M.G. 1 D3
10. Ibid.,.
11. Ibid., June 2, 1815.
12. Selkirk Papers op. cit., m.172 p..1434. Thomas Thomas to Lord Selkirk. For a day to day account of these building operations see Fidler's Journal op.cit., July 25, 1814 to November 9, 1814.
13. Fidler 's Journal May 19, 1815.
14. Ibid., June 13 1815.
15. HBCA E.8/6 n.d. fo. 107d. Deposition of John McLeod.
16. HBCA. E.10/1 , Colin Robertson's Diary, Vol.II p.148.
17. Ibid., p.192-
18. Ibid., August 20. 1815, Vol. II p. 192.

19. Ibid., January 5, 1816, Vol. III p.293
20. Ibid., Vol. III p.338
21. Chester Martin, Lord Selkirk's Work in Canada (Toronto: 1916) p.107.
22. HBCA E.8/6 fo.8
23. Robertson's Diary op. cit., Vol.III p.372.
24. Selkirk Papers, op. cit., m.312 Sept. 13, 1816 , p. 320E.
25. Chester Martin , op. cit., p. 108.
26. Selkirk Papers m.186 op. cit., m.186 . p. 17,176.
Macdonnell's Journal Dec. 31, 1816.
27. For a descriptive account of the battle see, Chester Martin, op. cit., p. 112.
28. Selkirk Papers op. cit., M.179 p. 324-42, Miles Macdonnell to Selkirk March 6 , 1817.
29. HBCA. B.22/e/1 1819, Fidler's Account of Red River and Selkirk Papers op. cit., Sam. Oake to Selkirk August 23, 1817. m.312 p.560.
30. HBCA B.22/e/1 1819 Fidler's Account of Red River.
31. Selkirk Papers op. cit., Capt. Matthey to Selkirk, Sept. 12, 1818 m.175 p. 5370.
32. HBCA. A.6/19 fo.87.
33. B.22/e/1 1819 fo.16.
34. Selkirk Papers Simpson to A. Colvile May 20, 1822. m. 177 p.7617.
35. HBCA B.235.a/5 fo.2 Sept.11 1822.
36. Ibid., fo.5 Sept. 25 1822 "... men employed in carrying the goods to the other Fort."
37. Ibid., April 9, 1823 fo, 52.
38. Ibid., April 10, 1823. fo. 52.
39. B.235/e/1 Lower Red River Report 1822-23. by J. Clarke fo.4
40. Selkirk Papers Simpson to Colvile Nov. 1, 1823 . m. 178, p.8079.
41. Ibid., Simpson to Colvile, May 31 1824. m.312, p.1131.

42. HBCA D.4/8 Simpson to the Gov. & Committee, June 5 1824, fo 5.
- 43.HBCA B.235/a/6 June 21 1824, fo. 3
44. Ibid., Feb.21, 1825 fo.24d. and April 25, 1825, fo.30
Also: HBCA B.235/a/7 July 30 1825 fo.10.
45. HBCA. D.4/5 Simpson to Pelly June 22, 1825 fo.79.
46. B.235/a/7 Feb. 11, 1826 fo.41.
- 47.HBCA. 235/a/7 May 13 1826 fo.67.
48. Ibid., May 14, fo. 68.
49. Ibid., June 25, 1826. fo.85.
- 50.B.235/e/3 Lower Red River Report, 1826-27 fo. 14.
51. HBCA. A.12/1 Simpson to London, July 18, 1831.fo. 377.
- 52.HBCA. D.5/4 Gov.&comm. to Simpson. March ? 1836.
53. HBCA. D.4/23 Simpson to Christie July 10, 1837. fo. 112.
- 54.Ibid.,, Simpson to Christie, Feb. 20 1838. fo. 225,