HISTORIC SITES

Cumberland House

On Saturday, September 3, 1774, Samuel Hearne, servant of the Honourable Hudson's Bay Company, chose the site of the Company's first inland post, Cumberland House, which became the first permanent settlement in Saskatchewan.[1] The post was built to meet the competition of the Pedlars (free traders) from Montreal, who had been cutting off the Indian trade with the Bay. The significance of the building of Cumberland House was that the Company had adopted the Pedlars' policy of going to the Indians with trade goods. The outcome was the bitter trade rivalry between the men from Hudson Bay and the men from Montreal, which was to last until the union of 1821. Within a few years after the building of Cumberland, the Hudson's Bay Company was meeting aggression with aggression, building post beside post, and advancing further inland each season with its rivals to new unworked beaver districts. Cumberland House was too closely beleagured by rival posts to become an important trading centre, but it did become a distributing and administrative centre.

The reason given by Hearne for the choice of the site was its convenient location near three bands of Indians.[2] However, he must have been aware of the strategic advantages of Cumberland Lake at the junction of three canoe routes. The Saskatchewan river led to the west and southwest; the Sturgeon-Weir system led to the Churchill and Athabaska regions to the northwest; while the Grass river flowed northeastward toward York Factory. Year after year this post was to see the fur brigades travelling westward with trade goods in the autumn and eastward with furs in the spring. The voyageurs—singing, and dressed in their best costumes—would paddle up to the post with a dash to create an effect[3]. Here factors from Athabaska or the other side of the Rockies stopped

[1] There is some doubt concerning the origin of the name. Prince Rupert (1619-1682), first governor of the Company, numbered among his titles that of Duke of Cumberland. Isaac Cowie was probably repeating a tradition in the fur trade when he said that it was named after William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland (1712-1765), who had suppressed the Jacobite rising in Scotland in 1744-46. The Montreal fur trade was dominated by Scots, and some of them were Highlanders or sons of Highlanders who had been active in 1745. No matter which Duke of Cumberland the post was named after, Hearne could not have chosen a name more obnoxious to the Scottish Pedlars.

[2] *Journals of Samuel Hearne and Philip Turnor*, J. B. Tyrrell, ed., (Toronto, 1934), cited hereafter as *Journals*. The site was on Cumberland lake, known to the Indians as Min-nis-tec-ko-min-na-hik-oo-ska-we-sah-ka-he-kun. See J. Hines, *Red Indians*, (London, 1915), p. 231. The fur traders generally called it Pine Island Lake, and sometimes Sturgeon lake. (Note that the name Pine Island Lake was a misnomer as the trees native to the region are spruce.) The post was built on the north side of Pine island, an island approximately two miles wide separating Cumberland lake from the Saskatchewan river. Channels at either end of the island, drained the lake into the Saskatchewan: Bigstone river at the west end, and a longer channel called Tearing river at the eastern. About the spring of 1875 ice jams blocked the old passage of the Saskatchewan, forcing the water to cut a new channel through the low, marshy country to the Sturgeon river, and up that river into the western end of Cumberland lake: the water then drained back into the Saskatchewan by Tearing river. See O. Klotz, "Overland Hudson Bay Expedition," *Canada Sessional Papers*, 1885, No. 13, pt. 2, p. 6.

[3] Captain Back, the Arctic explorer, described his boat crew's preparations to approach the post in style. "The crew had dressed themselves out in all their finery,—silver bands, tassels, and feathers in their hats,—intending to approach the station with some effect; but, unfortunately for the poor fellows, the rain fell in torrents, their feathers drooped, and such was the accumulation of mud, that it was necessary to wade a full mile before we could land at Cumberland House." Sir G. Back, *Narrative of the Arctic Land Expedition*, (London, 1836), p. 64.

to exchange the gossip of half a continent. It was the base from which overland Arctic exploration parties in the 19th century set out to fill in the blank spaces on the map of North America. The list of visitors to Cumberland was a veritable roll call of the fur trade.

Cumberland House was too far from the buffalo plains to enjoy a bountiful supply of meat. The inhabitants, like those in other posts in the forest region, subsisted almost entirely on fish, and even this monotonous fare could not be depended on. Four months after their first arrival Hearne's men were reduced to two scanty meals a day, and a month later to a small handful of dried meat and four ounces of other meat a day per man. This famine condition was temporarily alleviated in February by some Indians killing five moose. With the coming of spring, wild fowl brought an increase in the food supply.

During the summer of 1775 while Hearne was absent at York Factory, the carpenter and two other men remained at the post to work on more permanent buildings. In October, Matthew Cocking took command of Cumberland House. The Pedlars, passing through on their way to wintering posts, called on the new officer. Alexander Henry, the elder, wrote that though they were unwelcome guests, Cocking treated them with civility. That winter Henry, on his way to the plains from the Henry-Frobishers' post on Beaver Lake, again visited the post.[4]

With the posts of the Pedlars astraddle the canoe routes leading to Cumberland, Cocking adopted the tactics of sending men out to meet the Indians. They tried to persuade the Indians to paddle past the rival posts with their furs, and bring them to Cumberland. Robert Longmoor was sent up the Sturgeon-Weir watercourse in the spring of 1776, but in bringing the Indians past the Frobishers' post, a brawl ensued, and Longmoor returned without furs. Up the Saskatchewan, William Walker was more successful, bringing down 277 beaver skins worth of fur.[5]

Until the union of the two companies in 1821, Cumberland House was at least the nominal administrative centre of the inland posts. William Tomison[6] took charge in 1777, and proceeded to organize the trade in the Saskatchewan valley against the Pedlars. The governor of York Factory had always been superior officer to the "inlanders," but in 1786 Tomison was made governor of York Factory with the proviso that he dwell inland. Although Cumberland House was supposed to be his headquarters, Tomison spent most of his time travelling between the Company's Saskatchewan posts, or stationed at the post where the competition was most acute. Pugnacious Governor Williams[7] made Cumberland

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[4] A. Henry, *Travels and Adventures* (Toronto, 1901), pp. 262, 268.
[5] A. S. Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to* 1870-71 (London, 1939), pp. 317-318.
[6] For a biographical sketch of Tomison see Hearne's *Journals*, Appendix A. Except for an interval of three years, Tomison was in the service of the Company from 1760 to 1811. A disciplinarian and organizer, he played a leading role in the expansion of the Company's trade up the Saskatchewan valley.
[7] William Williams, an ex-captain of the East Indiaman, was ever ready for a fight. His great *coup* was the mounting of cannon at the foot of the Grand Rapids on the Saskatchewan river in the spring of 1819, and the capture of some of the Northwesters.

his capital in 1818 while directing the last rounds of the bitter struggle with the Northwesters.

The foundation of a new Hudson's Bay post was begun on the other side of the tiny bay about 1790; Magnus Twatt completed it in 1793 or 1794.[8] Meanwhile the North West Company had erected a post close by. Previous to its erection in 1793 the Northwesters had each spring on their way eastward cached pemmican on the river bank near The Pas; this was used by the brigades for the return journey to their posts. The loss of a cache led to the establishment of "The Depot" as the Northwesters often called their post. In 1793 "The Depot" had in storage 36 bags of pemmican and 800 pounds of pounded meat and grease. Two years later 300 bags of pemmican were sent down the Saskatchewan from Fort George to "The Depot."[9]

Relations between the rival posts at Cumberland fluctuated according to the temperament of the chief traders who happened to be in charge of the respective posts, and the intensity of the struggle at the moment between the companies throughout the northwest. Thus David Harmon, Northwester, and Peter Fidler, Hudson's Bay man, in the winter of 1806-07 seem to have spent many a pleasant evening together over a game of cards.[10] But the situation in 1817 is described by Ross Cox thus:

> . . . the rival companies had large forts here, which were well fortified; but no breach of the peace had occurred during the winter between the respective traders. Friendly intercourse was out of the question, and a suspicious kind of armed neutrality was preserved on each side.[11]

It was at Cumberland in June, 1819, that Colin Robertson, of the Hudson's Bay Company, escaped from the Northwesters by breaking his parole. At Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabaska he had been taken prisoner the previous October and was being carried down to Montreal by the Northwesters' spring brigade. From within the Hudson's Bay post at Cumberland Robertson wrote, "The gates are shut and every man is armed. Our force is only ten men including the gentlemen—our opponents forty."[12] However, the Northwesters did not attempt to recapture Robertson.

Members of the Franklin Arctic expedition spent part of the following winter at Cumberland. The posts were described as "log-houses, built without

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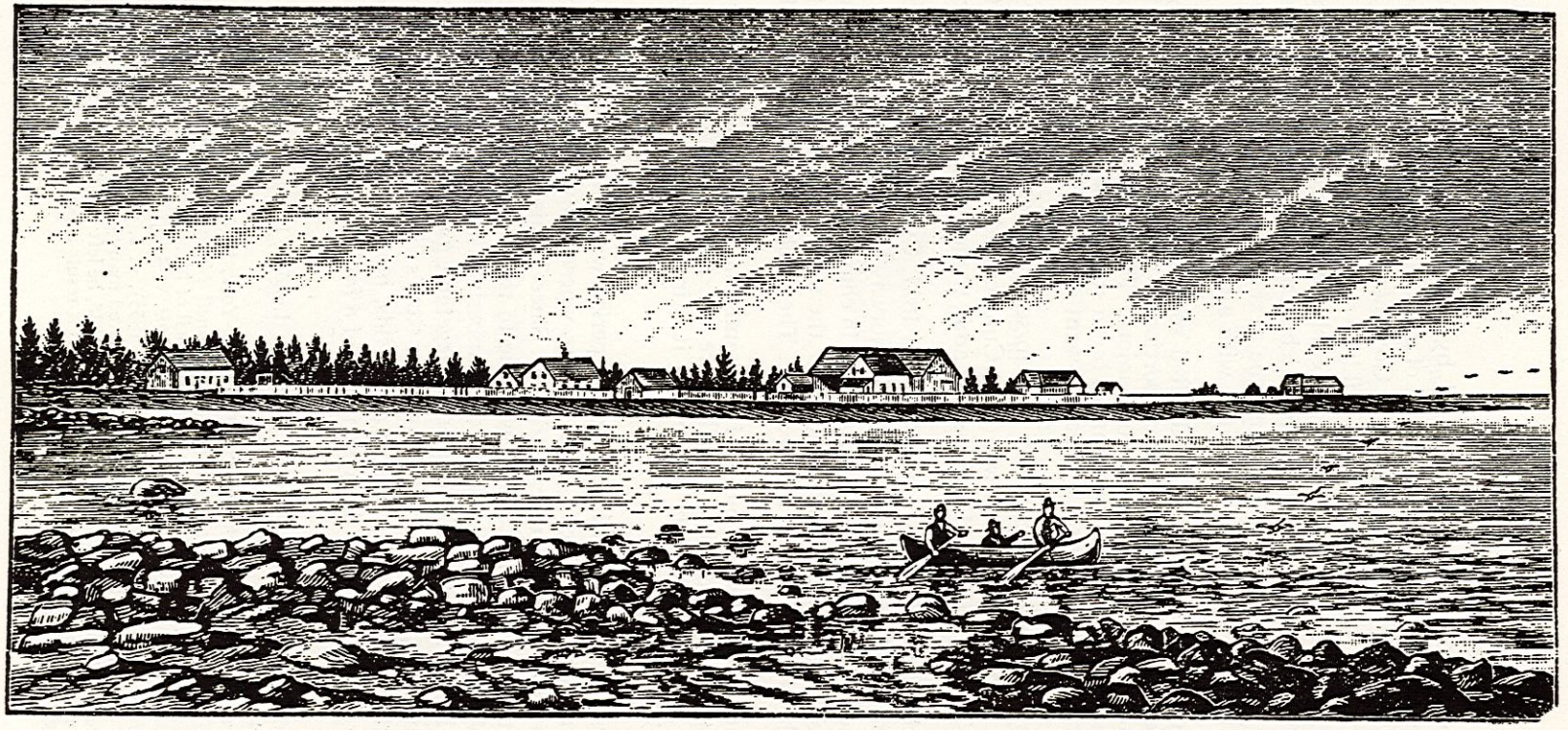
[8] *Journals*, pp. 586, 588.The "tiny bay" is to-day a willow flat as the water has receded. The author is greatly indebted to Mr. J. P. Brady, field officer of the Department of Natural Resources stationed at Cumberland House, for information about location of posts, missions and other data. Mr. Brady also pointed out the numerous references, and quotations from the Cumberland Journals found in M. Giraud's *Le Metis Canadien* (Paris, 1945); unfortunately the limitation of space did not enable the author to utilize these.

[9] William M'Gillvray built a post at the narrows of Cumberland lake in the spring of 1793, but the North West Company decided that the post should be beside the post of the English company. See Morton, *op. cit.*, pp. 347, 440, 451 and 460. An interesting reminder of the days when voyageurs carried pemmican across the island from the Saskatchewan to the depot appears on a topographical map issued in 1949. A broken double line indicating "road not well travelled" is called Pemmican Portage.

[10] J. B. Tyrrell, "Peter Fidler, Trader and Surveyor", *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 1913, pt. 2, p. 125.

[11] R. Cox, *Columbia River* (London, 1832), p. 224.

[12] *Colin Robertson's Correspondence Book*, E. E. Rich. ed., (Toronto, 1939), p. 86.



Cumberland House in the 1880's

—*from a sketch in C.R. Tuttle,*
Our North Land (*Toronto,* 1885)

much attention to comfort, surrounded by lofty stockades, and flanked by bastions."[13] Parchment was used instead of glass in the windows. The Hudson's Bay post was then the headquarters of Governor Williams. There were thirty men and nearly as many women and children at the Hudson's Bay post, and a larger number at the North West post. The inhabitants and their activities were described at some length by Franklin and Richardson. The New Year was ushered in with the discharge of musketry, and the next day guests feasted on beaver. In the evening the men were entertained with a dance,

> . . . in which the Canadians exhibited some grace and much agility; and they contrived to infuse some portion of their activity and spirits into the steps of their female companions. The half-breed women are passionately fond of this amusement, but a stranger would imagine the contrary on witnessing their apparent want of animation.[14]

On that festive occasion who would have forseen that twenty-eight years later another Arctic expedition would winter at Cumberland: Richardson's party setting out in search of Sir John Franklin, lost amid the ice packs of the Arctic sea.[15]

After the union of the two companies in 1821, Cumberland House declined in importance, for Governor Simpson made Norway House the main depot. Some winters a clerk, instead of a chief factor, was in charge.[16] Alexander Ross has left us a description of the post four years after the union. It was then in charge of James Leith, a former North West partner. The establishment was described as

> large and tolerably well built, with a handsome dwelling-house, having glass windows, and what is still more uncommon in these parts, a gallery in front—the only instance of its kind I have yet seen in the country.[17]

Visitors at Cumberland House at this period were impressed with the agriculture carried on at the post. Fur traders whose staple fare was pemmican enjoyed the taste of milk, butter, and flour. Since Tomison's day there had been a garden; its expansion into a farm was due to the imagination and industry of Governor Williams. When Ross visited Cumberland there were two milch cows and a bull. He commented on the splendid vegetable garden with a sundial erected by the Franklin expedition. Eight years after Ross's visit, in 1833, John MacLean was cheered by the sight of extensive corn-fields, horned cattle, pigs and poultry, "which gave the place more the appearance of a farm in the civilized world, than

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[13] Sir J. Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey to Polar Seas* (London, 1823), p. 55.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

[15] Sir J. Richardson, *Arctic Searching Expedition* (New York, 1852), pp. 37-38.

[16] For names of officers in charge see *Minutes of Council Northern Department*, 1821-31, R. H. Fleming, ed., (Toronto, 1940), and "Minutes of Council of Northern Department, 1830 to 1843, in State Historical Society of North Dakota, *Collections*, v. 4, pp. 644-865.

[17] A. Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West* (London, 1855), v. 2, p. 217. Ross found that Leith (in charge of Cumberland House from 1822-1829) shared many of his own views on the need of improving the lot of the Indians. When Leith died in 1838, he left his estate for the propagation of Christianity among the Indians of Rupert's Land. As a result a permanent Church of England mission was established at The Pas.

of a trading post.[18] Chief Factor Lewis's weather records of 1839-1840 contain passing references to the crops: on August 1, 1839, he commenced harvesting barley; on May 17, 1840, the wheat appeared above ground, though ice still lay on the lake.[19] The scientist Sir Henry Lefroy, who saw a field of wheat being harvested in August, 1843, writing years later, said that nobody then thought that the Saskatchewan region was an agricultural country, the summer frosts being given as the reason; however, Lefroy suspected that at the bottom of that belief lay a fear that agriculture would be ruinous to the fur trade.[20] After reading references by earlier travellers to the agricultural endeavours of the traders, one is a little disappointed to be informed by H. Y. Hind that in 1858 only ten acres were cultivated.[21]

Missionary activity at Cumberland House began about 1840 when it became the outpost of the Church of England mission at The Pas,[22] but the date of the building of a church at Cumberland is not known. In 1884 there was a chapel standing near the site of Hearne's post.[23] The veteran missionary, Rev. John Hines, built a new church in 1901.[24] Roman Catholic missionaries from Red river visited Cumberland as early as the 1850's but a mission was not established until 1880 by Father Bonnald.[25] Father Charlebois—later Bishop Charlebois—served this mission from 1887 to 1899.

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[18] J. MacLean, *Notes of a Twenty-five Years' Service* (London, 1849), p. 224. At variance with MacLean's description is that of Richard King, who as a member of Back's Arctic expedition visited Cumberland House the same summer. "The house a few years ago was in most excellent repair, and exhibited a very productive farm the effect of the continued care and attention of Governor Williams, who had a great partiality for agricultural pursuits. A vast change, however, had taken place at the time of our arrival; the house was all but falling to pieces; the implements of tillage, and the capacious barns, were silent monuments of waste; the horses were becoming wild, the oxen occasional truants; the cows, although they went "to the milk-pail twice a day," gave by no means a Virgilian quantity of that sober and nutritious beverage; and a solitary hog stood every chance of dying without issue." R. King, *Narrative of a Journey*, (London, 1836), v. 1. p. 54.

[19] Sir J. Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 390-91.

[20] W. S. Wallace, ed., "Sir Henry Lefroy's Journey to the North-West," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 1938, pt. 2, p. 78.

[21] H. Y. Hind, *Narrative of Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition, etc.* (London, 1860), v. 1, p. 449. Contains a sketch of the post looking toward the lake.

[22] As The Pas was called Cumberland, in early missionary records, it must not be mistaken for Cumberland House. Jane Ross, the second wife of an early incumbent at the Pas, Archdeacon Hunter, rendered great assistance to her husband in his work of translating the Bible and other religious works into Cree. Mrs. Hunter was born at Cumberland House about 1822. Cumberland House was also the birthplace of Alexander Kennedy Isbister (1822-1883). Of some prominence in Britain as an educationalist, he advocated the termination of the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly, and vigorously championed the cause of the Métis.

[23] C. R. Tuttle, *Our North Land* (Toronto, 1885), p. 330.

[24] J. Hines, *op. cit.*, pp. 301-02.

[25] A. G. Morice, *Histoire de l'Eglise Catholique dans L'ouest Canadien*, (St. Boniface, 1921-23), v. 3, p. 7.