RESEARCH BULLETIN

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End of Season Report: York Factory National Historic Site

The 1978 field season marked the first year of archaeological research at one of the most crucial fur trade sites in North America. Parks Canada, Prairie Region, assembled a three person reconnaissance crew to assess the archaeological potential of York Factory, the largest and most important Hudson's Bay Company factory on the bay. The crew's mandate was simply to examine and appraise the various York Factory sites and to test their potential for future excavation.

Historical Background

To be strictly accurate, there were a total of seven York Fort or York Factory construction periods in three different locations, providing almost continuous occupation from 1686. The following is a brief account of these various occupations. York Fort I was constructed by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1686. Although it changed hands with the French several times, it became H.B.C. property in 1713 with the Treaty of Utrecht. Poor maintenance and a spring flood in 1715 caused the governor, James Knight, to have the site relocated "1/2 a Mile below this House" (Morton 1973: 130).

York Factory II quickly became the Company's most prosperous trading centre, acting as a depot for the Severn post. Over the period of its use (1715-1792) there were four sets of building constructed. The 1715 post lasted until 1742 when constant encroachment of a small creek dictated that the fort be rebuilt on the same location, on a slightly smaller scale. The latter structure was used until it was sacked and burned by the Compte de la Perouse in 1782. The fourth construction period centred around a temporary pre-fabricated building that was sent out in 1783 to be used until a new fort could be constructed. Work began on the fifth fort in 1786 right over the burned remains of the previous factory. It progressed up to 1788 when the spring flood caused considerable damage and prompted the factor, Joseph Colen, to relocate about a mile upstream (Wilson 1957: 7).

He started construction that year, using exactly the same plan as before, but work progressed very slowly. Colen was not moved to the new site until 1792 and by 1796 it was still not fully operational. Eventually, the "Old Octagon", as it was called, became the first post at York Factory III and was used up into the 1830s. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, rapid expansion inland by the Company was paralleled by an extensive rebuilding program at York. Defensive construction concepts were completely abandoned and a large complex of structures became a kind of company town. York Factory's influence started declining and by 1879 it had lost most of its depot status. However, it was still used until 1957.

The construction sequence can be summarized as follows:

Location	Construction	Dates
York Fort I	1	1686-1715
York Factory II	2	1715-1742
	3	1742-1782
	4	1783-1792
	5	1786-1788
York Factory III	6	1788-1830s
	7	1830s-1857

York Factory was not the only post in the area. In the early years of conflict, both French and English built several posts around the York Factory area. The following is a summary of the better known sites:

1. Fort Bourbon I - was constructed by Pierre Esprit Radisson in 1682 on the south bank of the Hayes River, 24 km from its mouth. It was destroyed in 1683, rebuilt in 1685 and abandoned the same year.

2. Port Nelson I - was constructed in 1682 by Zachariah Guillam for the Hudson's Bay Company. It was located on the north bank of the Nelson River above Flamborough Head.

3. Guillam's Post - constructed in 1682 by Benjamin Guillam for a New England trading interest. It was located on Gillam Island and was burned the same year.

4. Chouart's Post - was built in 1683 on Rainbow Island by Radisson's nephew. It was burned in 1684, rebuilt and abandoned in the same year.

5. Abraham's Post - built in 1684, it was the H.B.C. post at Walker's Point on the south side of the Nelson River.

6. French Post - was constructed by the French near Radisson's 1682 post in 1685.

7. Fort Philipeaux - was constructed in the early 1700s by the French on the southeast side of the Hayes River above Ten Shilling Creek. It was sacked in 1712.

8. French Creek - was built in 1684 by Pierre la Martinière but was only used one year.

The 1680s were not the only period of construction in the York Factory area. In fact, there is a regular sequence of posts and houses in the area. The following lists some of the better known:

1. Montague House - was the 1746 winter home of the Dobbs expedition. It was constructed near Ten Shilling Creek, slightly inland.
2. Flamborough House - was built by the Hudson's Bay Company on the south shore of the Nelson in 1746. It was built in fear of the French and was used for only a few years.
3. Selkirk Settlers' Camp - in 1811 a group of Selkirk settlers were forced to winter on the north shore of the Nelson River near Gillam Island. They constructed several structures there.
4. Port Nelson II - in the early 1900s there was an attempt to build a second port on the bay. A rail spur, breakwater, pier and community were all built before the project folded.

Archaeological Testing

It was the objective of the archaeological probe to locate the three site areas and test each for excavation potential. It was also hoped that they would look at a French post across the Hayes River on French Creek.

The location of the last factory (1830-1957) was the easiest to find, as the depot was still extant and there were enough surface indications to allow the production of a plane table map. Once this had been produced and the borders of the site defined, a testing program was initiated with a dual purpose. First, it was hoped that a testing grid would give some indication of kinds and quantities of artifacts and, second, probing the dimensions of a known site would provide an excellent test of the site-finding methodology. A recently discussed testing method (Chartkoff 1978: 46) was chosen and results were quite favourable. It proved that a small hole could act as a measure of artifact density and provide boundaries. Most important, it could be used satisfactorily in dense bush.

This method was then used several times in conjunction with historic documents and journals, surface examination and larger test units in an attempt to locate the York Factory II (1715-1792) buildings. All attempts failed and although other answers are possible, it is strongly suggested that these forts have been lost.

Historic documents stated that at the time of original construction, York Factory II was built back from the rapidly eroding bank that had begun to damage the first fort. In 1912, J. B. Tyrrell located what he thought to be York Factory II and suggested that it was partially destroyed and that 167 feet had been eroded since 1745 (Tyrrell 1913:

184). This and other evidence helps confirm the impression that the river has completely eroded away the site of York Factory II and, therefore, has also destroyed York Fort I.

The same testing program was also applied at French Creek and revealed a small cluster of at least two structures of undetermined but pre-20th century age. The artifact density was extremely low and suggestive of a short occupation period. Finally, wrought nails in the test units will not argue against it being the 17th century French site.

That only left one period, 1792-1830, unaccounted for. Using a copy of an 1821 map of York Factory as a guide, a series of eight, one metre square units were dug just southwest of the depot. These revealed several structural remains and a wide variety of 1760-1840 period ceramics, all well below the more recent habitation levels. Together, these indications were enough to suggest that the factory was under the most recent site and that it was in excellent condition.

One last project of the archaeology program was to examine the artifacts that have been gathered in the depot over the past 10 years. About 70 percent of these artifacts were catalogued and representative specimens were photographed. In general, the collection is very good and is especially valuable in the lines of hardware, tools and hunting/trapping equipment. Nearly all the collection postdates the 1830s but a few items appear to be earlier.

Beyond these specific tasks, the small crew spent a considerable amount of time assembling information for future excavations. Problems of erosion, permafrost, heavy brush, water filled pits, poor weather, supply, maintenance, artifact typologies, accommodations, working conditions and conservation were all discussed, examined and re-examined.

Future Work

Analysis throughout 1978-9 will follow several different tacks. The first project will be a complete written assessment of the archaeological resources and the apparently critical erosion problem. This will be supplemented by an estimate of research potential and costs. The second phase will involve a literature review directed toward formulating an overall research design.

There will also be some effort put into cataloguing and coding artifacts into the computer inventory as used by the archaeology project at Batoche National Historic Site. Finally, some rudimentary artifact analyses will be undertaken in an attempt to determine approximate time periods for the six or seven stratigraphic levels found at York Factory III.

The end product of this year's research will be a

comprehensive background package for management and research to better enable the initiation of effective, efficient research programs at this extremely fragile but very important site.

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1 View of depot constructed in the 1830s.

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