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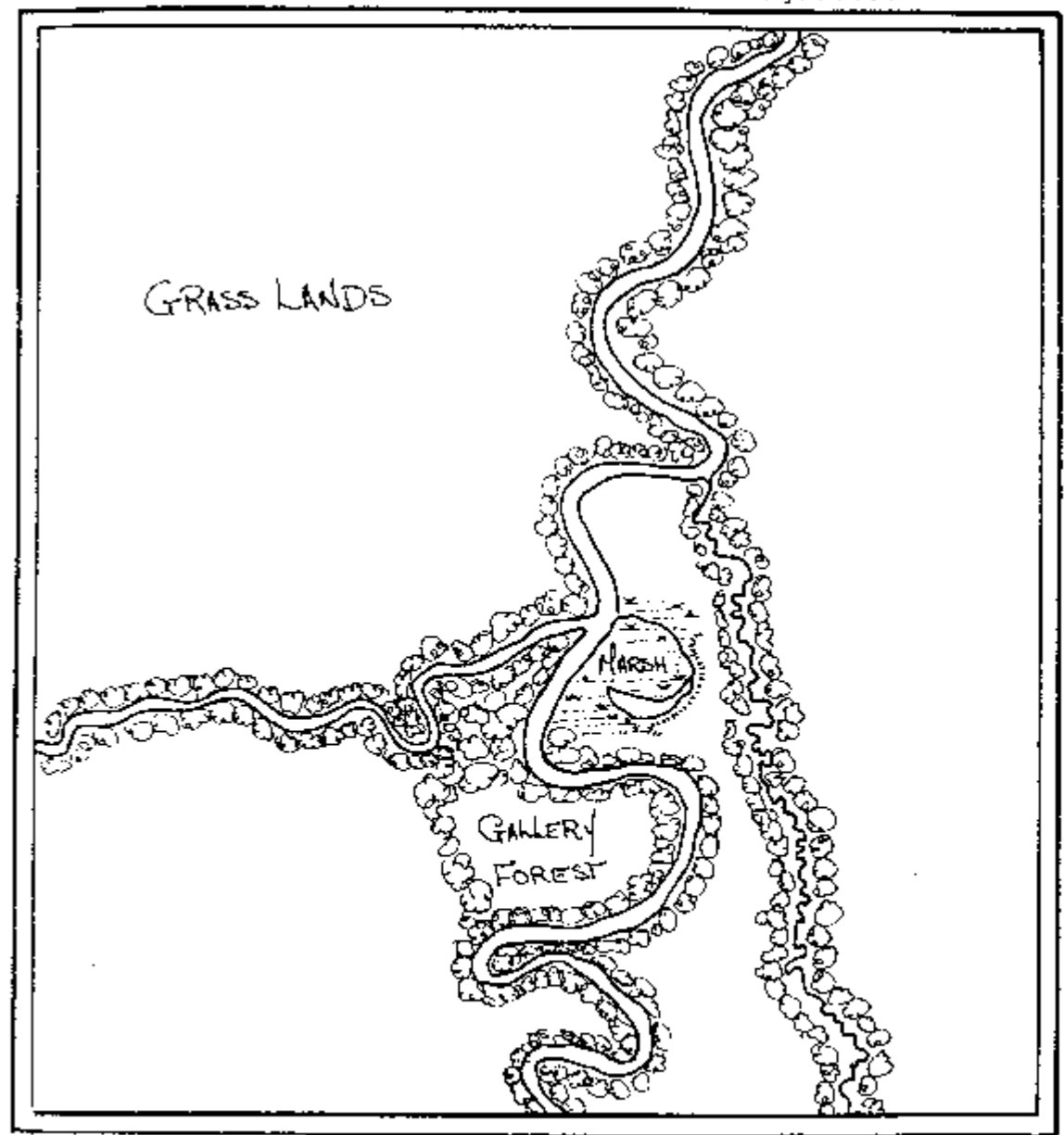
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Reports

TOWARDS A MODEL OF ABORIGINAL LAND USE IN THE RED - ASSINIBOINE RIVERS JUNCTION

by
Michael E. Kelly

Introduction

While there are numerous "land use studies" available, they tend to deal with plans, schemes, existing patterns, control, regulation, or the effects of economic or energy policy. Once all the applied studies are weeded out there remains only a scant amount of discussion as to what constitutes land use: that is its definition and associated concepts.

I do not intend to present a belaboured treatment of the issue here. Suffice it to accept Clawson's (1965) definition: "man's activity directly related to the land". Related to this notion of human activity in the landscape we can append such attributes as type, intensity, duration, seasonality, dispersion, and so forth as being of interest to archaeologists. It is paramount to note at this point that the key and fundamental method of data presentation and analysis employed in most land use studies is mapping and each of the attributes identified above is a mappable variable.

Within this context it is my ambition now to present some ethno-historical accounts that refer to proto-historic native activities observed to have occurred near the Red-Assiniboine Rivers junction. From the accounts of these activities, and from the consideration of some supplementary data in several instances, we shall attempt to generate some land use maps which may have general applicability to the Late Prehistoric period of the Lower Red River region.

Physiography

It appears the Junction was biologically attractive for aboriginal native peoples despite the harsh climatic conditions resulting from a location along the southern fringe of the continental subarctic zone. The average daily temperature ranges from -20°C in January to +20°C in July.

Precipitation occurs as summer rainfall, the long cold winters accumulate the annual snowfall so that by spring there are commonly drifts a metre or more high, nestled in lees scattered across the frozen landscape.

When Europeans began to journey to the area in 1736, there were three native groups frequenting it: The Cree, Ojibway, and Assiniboine. According to a catalogue compiled by John Tanner (James 1956) the Ojibway of the early period recognized and named over 40 species of edible fish, fowl, and mammals indigenous to the area. With a growing season of less than five months, the number of harvestable food and fiber plants was less than found in more temperate climates, but here again the Ojibway were acquainted with over a hundred plant species of which many had economic value. Given these environmental conditions, it appears the Junction was at its most useable in terms of availability of resources from late spring to early fall, although it was probably inhabitable and inhabited the year round.

Alexander Henry the Younger provided a first-hand description of the Junction as he saw it in 1809:

The S. side of the Assiniboine, particularly near the Forks [Junction], is a woody country, overgrown with poplars so thickly as scarcely to allow a man to pass on foot; this extends some miles W., when the wood is intersected by small meadows. The woody country continue S. up Red River to Riviere la Sale. On the E. side of the Red the land is low overgrown with poplars and willows, frequently intersected by marshes, stagnant ponds, and small rivulets. The banks are covered so thick and close as scarcely to admit going through; adjoining these is commonly a second bank of no great height. This is covered with very large wood such as liard, bois blanc, elm, ash, and oak;... (Coves 1897).

Figure 1 reconstructs the physiography and vegetative cover of the Junction Region as the early explorers might have encountered it. These figures are compiled from maps published by Arrowsmith in 1819 (Warkentin and Ruggles 1970:188-9) and Baudry in 1871 (Public Archives of Canada, National Map Collection, H11/510-Red River-1871).

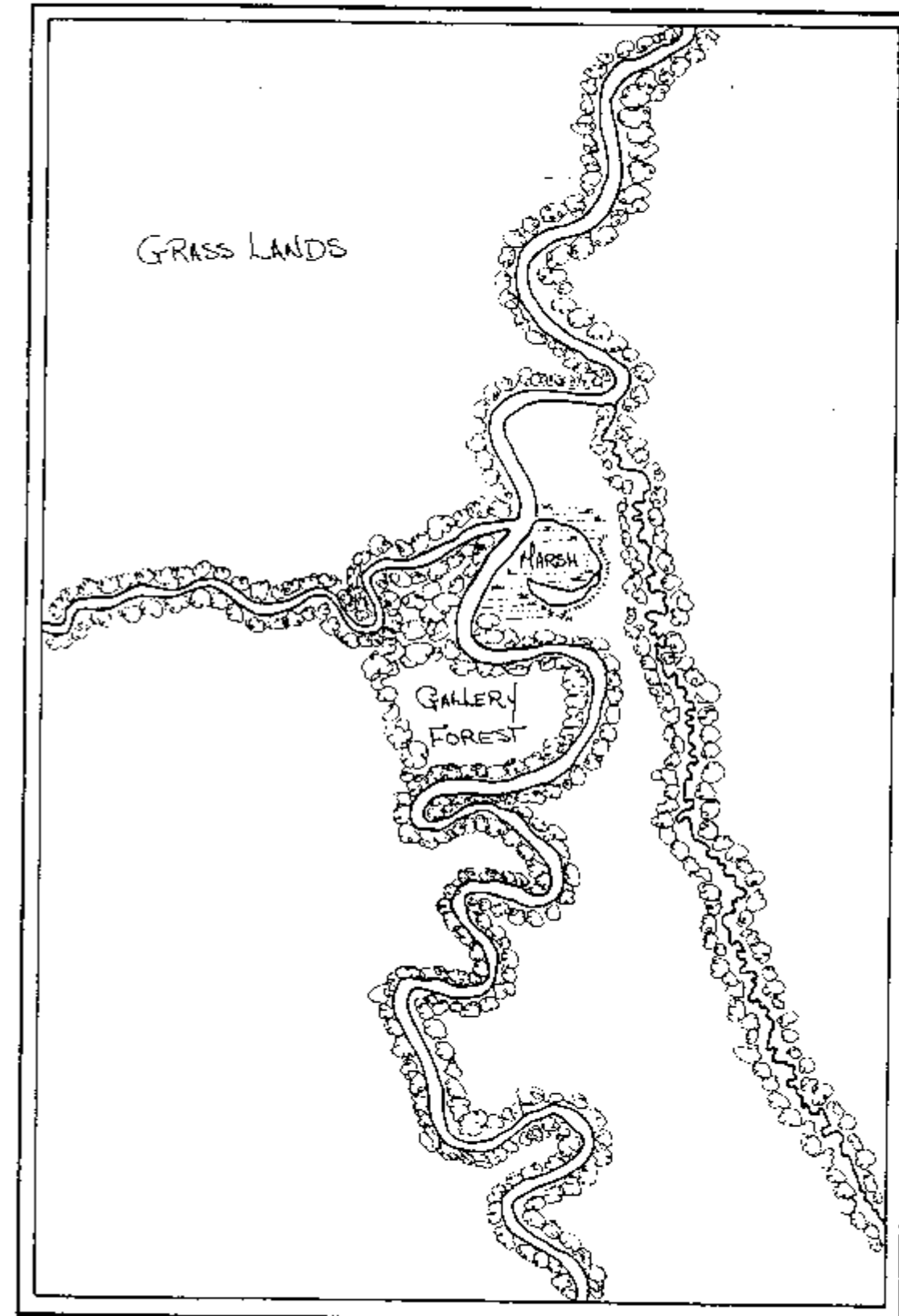


Figure 1. Regional physiography of the Junction area.

Ethno-Historical Accounts

Documents relating to aboriginal residence in the Junction area are best characterized as "almost evidence". Most of the references are of a general rather than a specific nature. In only one case is a camp location pinpointed, but it is evident from the context in which it appears that the identification may have been made from local tradition rather than actual observation.

The first mention of an Indian encampment at the Junction is found in 1736-37 report by La Verendrye. On February 25, 1737, with some Cree Indians, La Verendrye agreed:

upon the fourth of March as the day of the Council, because time was required to notify two villages of the Assiniboine situated at the great fork of the Red River which is the place which I have proposed to transfer Fort Maurepas in order to facilitate navigation and commerce (Burpee 1968:244).

This statement, like many of the ones to follow, unequivocally pointed to the existence of an encampment of Indians, in this case two villages of Assiniboine in the vicinity of the Red and Assiniboine confluence or "Forks" as the Junction was commonly called by fur traders and early explorers. However, the precise location cannot be deduced from this description.

The next reference to an Indian encampment at the Junction appears in the journals of the Northwest Company partner, John McDonnell. The entry is dated 6 September 1793:

Arrived at the forks after coming five leagues from the head of Sault à la Biche (St. Andrews Rapids). At the Forks we found two lodges of Indians who have killed a moose not far off.... At the forks we leave the main Red River that comes from the Sioux country to our left and enter the small branch called the Assinibouan River (cited in Douglas 1944:53-4).

In a description of the Red River area about 1797, he wrote:

At the Forks, the remains of several old posts are still to be seen, some of which were built as far back as the time of the French Government. This place as well as

the Rivière aux Morts, is a favorite Indian Encampment (McDonnell 1797: 268).

From this last statement it may be ascertained that the Indians frequented the Junction Area often with the intention of camping for some length of time.

John Tanner's narrative, dating from approximately the same period, also indicated there were Indian camps of various groups in the area of the Junction:

After a few days we started to go up the Red River, and in two days came to the mouth of the Assiniboine where we found great numbers of Ojibbeways and Ottawaws encamped (James 1958:31).

Further on he noted:

The mouth of the Assiniboine is a place much frequented by the Sioux [Dakota] war parties, where they lie concealed and fire upon such as are passing (James 1956: 39).

Tanner wrote this remark in the context of an aside. It may be surmised that the reason Dakota war parties favored this spot is that past ambushes were successful, there being ample concealment and an adequate supply of victims, coup counts and booty to be had.

Henry the Younger, another Northwest Company trader, in his journal entry of August 18, 1800, states:

In a short time we arrived at the Forks, where the Assiniboine joins the Red River, the former coming in from the west, while the latter keeps its direct course from the south. I found about 40 Saulteurs awaiting my arrival.... (Coes 1897, 1:44).

On the following day, after he describes the day's work, and having mentioned the remnants of the French posts, he reports:

We are troubled by swarms of water-snakes ... [which] appear to lurk and breed in the old graves, of which there are many, this spot having been a place of great resort for the natives in 1781-82; and at the time the smallpox made such havoc many hundreds

of men, women, and children were buried here (Coues 1897, 1:46).

Many subsequent historians have referred to this passage and speculated as to the exact location of the graves. C.N. Bell, who came to Winnipeg in 1870 with the Wolseley Red River Expedition, gave the most detailed discussion of their location:

the thickets of willows and brambles which stretched along what is now the east side of Main Street from near the entrance of Graham Street, south to York Street covered the site of an extensive Indian graveyard, and was evidently the locality mentioned by Henry as the resort of the water-snakes (Bell 1888: 4; also Coues 1897, 1:44n).

Edwin Denig, a fur trader with the American Fur Company until the 1850s, also knew of this site:

There is yet a mound near the mouth of the Assiniboine River embracing an area of several hundred yards in circumference and ten to twenty feet high, being the cemetery of nearly an entire camp of 230 lodges who died of the infection [smallpox] (Denig 1961: 115).

It is not known if Denig's knowledge of the graves was dependent on Henry's account, or if it represented another source of primary information. A plan of the Upper Fort Garry Reserve made in 1871 by J.S. Dennis (Hudson's Bay Company Archives [HBCA], A.12/14/fo.89; Selwood and Baril 1977: 105, Fig. 2) clearly marked the location of this burial ground (Figure 2). The site is now vacant land, but until the summer of 1983 it was occupied by a building known as 166 Water Street.

Peter Fidler, a fur trader with the Hudson's Bay Company, also mentioned these graves in a journal entry dated 23 May 1808:

Then easy current and narrow Forks opens S. 1/2 mile about 120 yds. wide. This is by far the easiest river of the two. --formerly 2 houses here, fine spots and graves on E. side by river at mouth (HBCA E.3/3, fo. 113, Peter Fidler Journals).

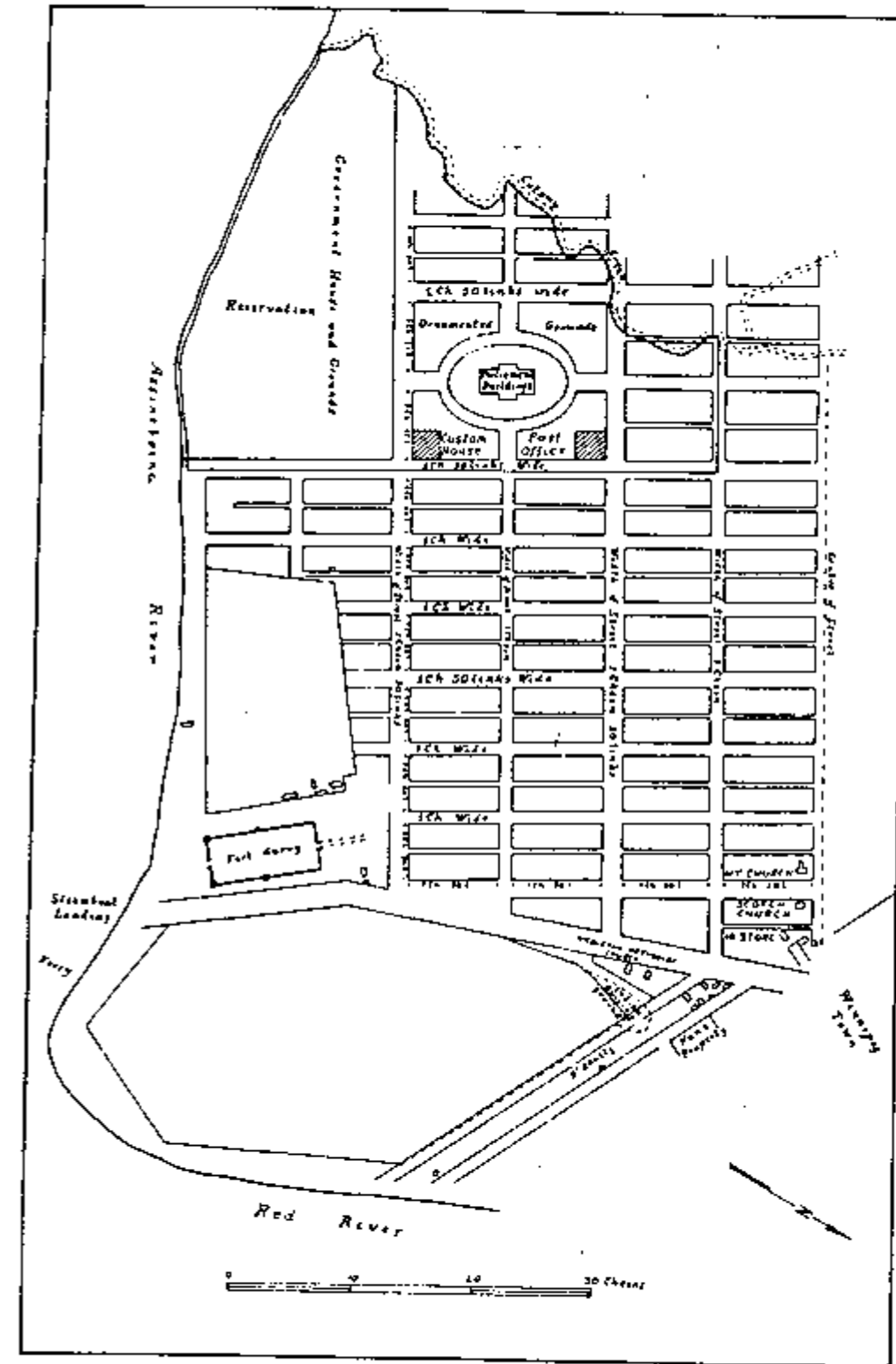


Figure 2: Plan of Upper Fort Garry Reserve.

Henry and his brigade left the Forks on August 20, 1799, and went up the Red as far as the La Salle River. He returned to the Forks on the 21st. During this brief sortie, the Indians accompanying the brigade learned that hostile Sioux might be in the vicinity.

They were certainly in a state of great alarm when we arrived at the Fork, and had even made a sort of entrenchment by digging deep holes in the ground several yards long ... (Coues 1897, 1:55).

Years later, on August 10, 1808, going down the Red River to Lake Winnipeg Henry said:

At sunset we arrived at the Forks where I found a camp of Indians, and Delorme, a freeman (Coues 1897, 1: 447).

While Henry's journals contain numerous references to the Forks, the information on specific camp locations around the Junction continues to be vague.

The next reference to Indian encampments in the Junction Area appears to have been published by William Keating in 1825. Keating was a member of the Long Expedition of 1823 and compiled a narrative from Long's notes, his own, and those of several others in the party. During the expedition's stay at Fort Garry he noted while sitting on the bluff overlooking the junction of the rivers:

Both the banks of the river displayed occasional groups of Indian lodges and European tents, belonging to the Indians, half breeds, or to our party (Keating 1825, 2:69).

He was more specific as to the location of their own camp:

Our camp is situated on a high bluff, about seventy or eighty feet above the level of the Red River, near Fort Garry, which is at the junction of the two streams. Fort Douglas lies about one mile from this river (Keating 1825, 2:66).

By this time, European settlement had been established for approximately ten years and the beginnings of a permanent village were taking form.

As the settlement grew, it became a regular stopping place for many travellers. In 1861 the noted anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan visited Fort Garry. A picture of a bustling trade community is evoked by his journal entry made in the summer of 1861:

All around the Fort [Garry] there are wigwams of bark and some of canvas filled with Indians, some of whom I presume reside there permanently, and others are temporarily encamped there while trading (White 1959: 127).

The most specific reference to a Indian encampment in the Junction Area is found in a report accompanying the land survey notes of George McPhillips made in 1873-74. He wrote: "Lot 39 was an Old Indian Camp and burial ground" (Provincial Archives of Manitoba, RG 17 #543, p. 5, George McPhillips Fieldbook). McPhillips also identified the adjacent Lot 40 as the site of Fort Rouge, but in the plan that accompanies the report, no details of these features are indicated. Thus, it may be that the identification of these lots as sites reflected as much local tradition as it did physical evidence visible at the time. In any event, Lot 40 is now the site of the Fort Garry Curling Club and portions of both lots have been built up to meet the grade requirements of the railroad bridges across the Assiniboine River.

Analysis

Having reviewed the ethno-historical record and by considering some additional supplementary data, we can now project, or more correctly, hypothesize, distributional maps of aboriginal land use. First, let's consider land use type. The ethno-historical records refer directly to only four human activities that have mappable implications. These are: encampments, war party blinds and defence, disposal of the dead, and hunting.

In Figure 3, areas used for encampments are projected. These areas are indicated as potential as opposed to actual sites. Along the south bank of the Assiniboine River, forest cover may have restricted the amount of land used for encampments. While the argument can be entered that increased wood for fuel and building material might foster more use of this area, I argue that reduced visibility of the river routes would limit the distance away from the river banks that people would set up their camps. Thus a small area may have been more intensely used. In the

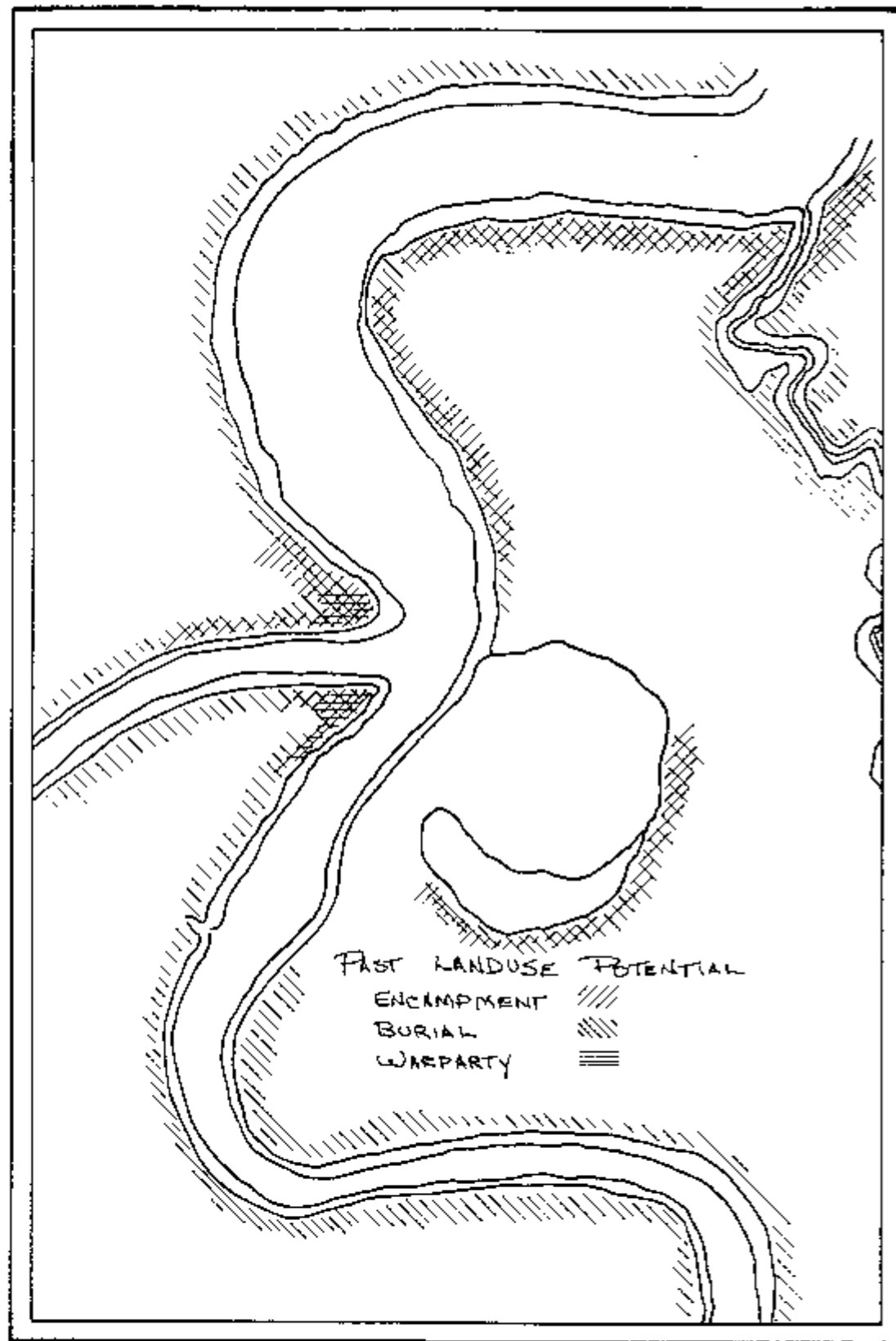


Figure 3. Distribution of three types of past land use potential in the Junction area.

other locations, larger areas may have been less intensely used as the result of a reversal in local physiographic circumstances.

In order to make this hypothesis more inclusive of prehistoric conditions, the distributional mapping indicates the area to the east of the oxbow lake, a meander remnant of the Red River, as potential encampment land use. Vestiges of this feature can still be observed in the area of Enfield Crescent and St. Mary's Road.

Mention was made that the Junction Area was used by Sioux (Dakota) war parties. In Figure 3 this land use is hypothesized to be restricted and to have taken place in areas which afforded good visibility and proximity to the travel routes. To some extent, this overlaps with the encampment pattern.

Of the three references that made note of burials, two located sites within 400 m of the river bank. It may be noted the six mounds recorded near Lockport by Nickerson (Capes 1963) are an average 230 m (750 ft) from the Red River. The Eveline Street burial in Selkirk is also located close to the Red. One exception in the Winnipeg area to this pattern of burials located near the major water courses is the St. James Mound purported to be a 17th century Assiniboine burial site. It is several kilometres from the Red River, but it is only several hundred metres from Sturgeon Creek. The projected pattern as seen in Figure 6 is a gallery effect along the streams.

Hunting is mentioned but once in the accounts. Hunting (Figure 4) and encampment (Figure 3) activities are nearly mutually exclusive and while not random across the landscape as it depends on the habits of prey populations, hunting tends to be a low intensity diffuse activity.

Conclusions

This concludes the present "small" model of aboriginal land use in the Junction area. I have undertaken this exercise for several reasons:

1. First is a desire to make a contribution beyond the merely descriptive to a more systematic and inferential analysis of prehistoric land use of the Junction area. At this point I would be the first to admit there are weaknesses as the model is presented here; it is certainly open to refinement and alteration by others.

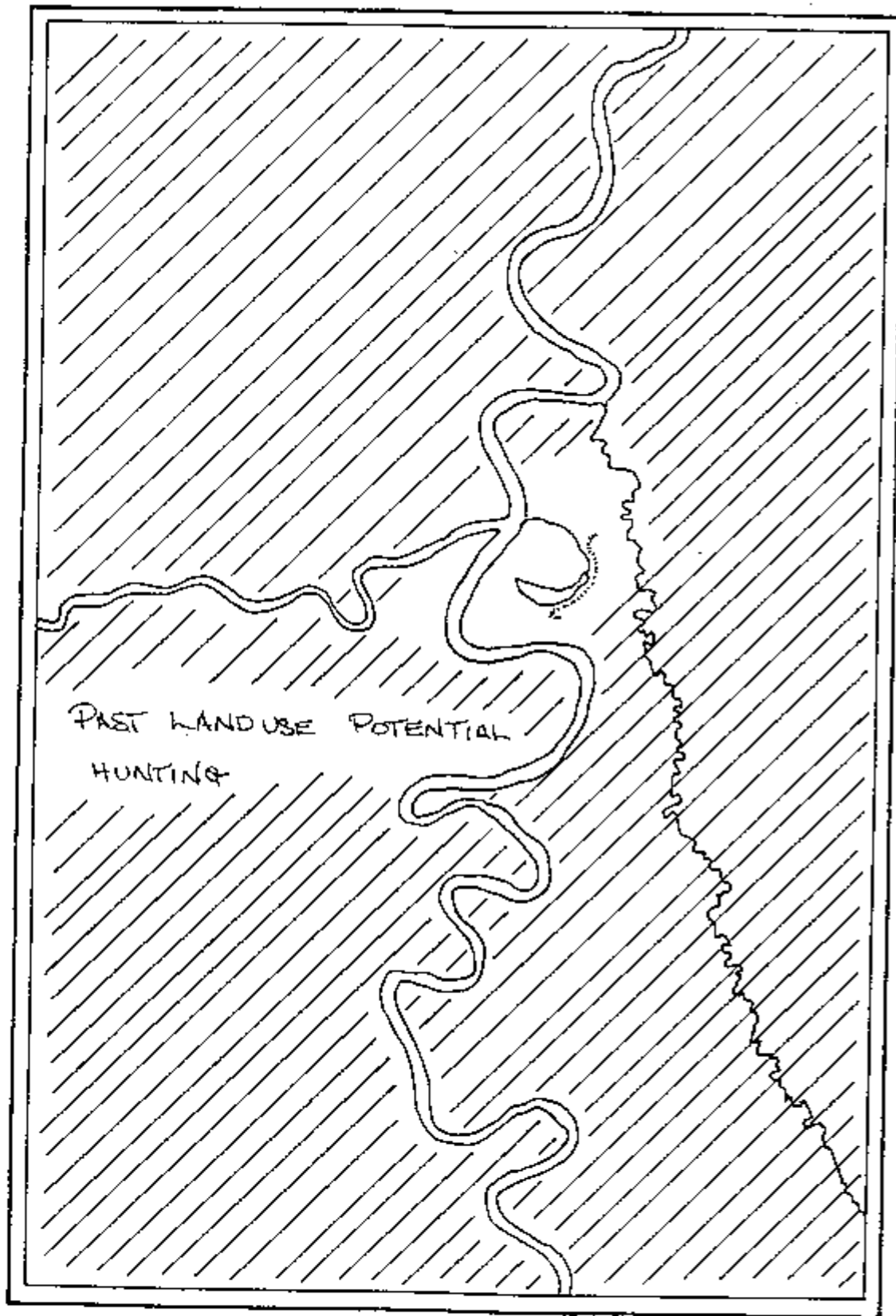


Figure 4. Potential hunting land use.

2. Second I feel it timely to reconsider the way archaeologists in North America make use of distributional maps. Hodder and Orton (1976) have pointed out that archaeologists tend simply to put distribution maps showing site locations in point data form at the beginning of their reports and never refer to them again. Maps such as presented in this study generated from written ethno-historic accounts have initial utility to archaeologists as systematic working hypotheses from which expected site locations can be derived and tested through field research.
3. Maps such as these have immediate use to modern-day city planners who must increasingly accommodate heritage conservation into new land use and urban development plans.

Acknowledgements

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