

**THE FORKS OF THE RED AND ASSINIBOINE RIVERS:
An Outline of Historical Significance.**

The confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, commonly referred to as “The Forks” has long been hailed as “The Heart of a Continent,” the heart of a fur trade empire, a veritable junction in the social and commercial intercourse of the North-West. These are sweeping statements, to be sure, but what do they mean? An outline of the historical significance of the Forks appears, on the one hand, to be an attempt to state the obvious. On the other hand, however, it reveals a severe lack of knowledge on the specific development of the Forks. Everyone knows that the Red River Settlers were bound for the Forks; why did they go downriver to another site? How was the site of St. Boniface chosen? Who selected sites for river crossings, buildings, docks? What brought the Manitoba and Northern Pacific to the present site of the “East Yards?” Because, loosely used, the Forks has come to mean all of Winnipeg, little attention has been paid to the actual site of the Red-Assiniboine junction.

The first people known by written record to have controlled the confluence of the rivers were the Assiniboine, who separated from the Sioux to the South, and moved down the Red, probably in the early 17th C. When La Verendrye’s nephew, La Jemeraye, first traveled through the Forks in 1736, these were the Indians he encountered. By that time, however, the Cree had begun moving into the plains from James Bay, and must have controlled the area north and east of the Forks.

La Verendrye’s decision to locate Fort Rouge at the Forks appears to have been based largely upon the invitation of the Assiniboine who had brought him to the spot and pointed out its advantages over the existing Fort Maurepas at the mouth of the Winnipeg River. In a March 4, 1737, council with the two villages of Assiniboine settled at the Forks, and the nearby

Crees, he agreed to relocate the trading post. When this did not take place that year, the Assiniboine reviewed their invitation at a council the following year, offering “all the help in their power” to have a fort “in their own proper territory.”¹ La Verendrye claims that the 10 cabins of Crees who had come for the council were most hospitable, and interpreted this as their desire for him to establish a post there, but if the middleman theory of Cree Trade is accurate, the Cree were probably anxious to keep a surveillance on his every move, and therefore wanted him “to stay with them for awhile so that they might have the pleasure of seeing and entertaining [La Verendrye & Co.].”²

Information on Fort Rouge, the first know trading post as the Forks, is scarce. It was built in 1738 for La Verendrye by Charles Nolan, *Seur de la Marque*, and is thought to have been situated north of the Assiniboine, east of the Red.³ It could not have lasted long, however, because in 1751 Legardeur St. Pierre is recorded as also having erected a small palisaded fort at the Forks. Free traders probably continued to winter at the site throughout the eighteenth century, but only the traders Bruce and Boyer from Fort des Trembles are definitely known to have done so in the winter of 1781-82.⁴

The Forks continued to be a popular meeting place for the Indians of the region. The Assiniboine chief had pointed out its natural advantages to La Verendrye in 1737, telling him that “--- it was easy there to get a living by hunting and fishing, as buffalo and tourtes were attracted there all year round by a saline spring that was close by.”⁵ Traders in the region also remarked that sturgeon, catfish, pike and whitefish abounded at the Forks, and that it was only half a day’s march upriver to the first of the “buffalo fords.”⁶ That there was a large encampment at the Forks during the great small-pox epidemic of 1781-82 is indicated in Alexander Henry’s account of 1800:

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 small-pox made such havoc many hundreds of men, women and children were buried here.⁷

He does not say what groups of Indians there were, but it is probable that by this time the Cree and Saulteaux were the major occupants, moving out as they did to keep ahead of, and therefore in control of the fur trade. When David Thompson arrived at the Forks on March 7, 1798, by way of the Assiniboine or "Stone Indian River," the territory was held by the Cree, with the Chippewa or Saulteaux to the south.⁸

By the end of the eighteenth century, trade traffic had increased in the area. Alexander Henry's journals from 1793 to 1808 indicate that the Forks served as a divisional point for the transfer of men and goods passing up and down the two rivers. Not only the North-West Company, in which Henry was a partner, but the Hudson's Bay Company and some 45 freemen were carrying on a flourishing trade on the Red-Assiniboine axis.⁹ At least one wintering post was built there by Henry, who left a man by the name of Dorion there for the 1803-04 season.¹⁰

Because the forks remained a camping spot for freemen and Indians, the North West Company set up a permanent establishment in 1809-1810. According to the testimony of Jean Baptiste Roi at the trial of Colin Robertson:

I know the forks of Red River and a fort built thereby a man of the name of Wills, he was a bourgeois of the North West Company at the time the said fort was built. It was a wooden picketing, made of oak trees split in two, which formed its enclosure. Within the said enclosure were built the house of the partner, two houses for the men, a store, two hangards(sic) or stoves, a blacksmith's shop and a stable; there was also an icehouse with a watchtower over it; these houses were good log houses, large and inhabited.¹¹

Located on the north side of the Assiniboine, west of the Red, as was Fort Rouge, this fort, known as Gibraltar, was occupied by John Wills for three years until his death, and then by Duncan Cameron, with interpreters, servants and men numbering about twenty.¹²

It was Fort Gibraltar which occupied the Forks when Miles MacDonnell arrived with the first group of Selkirk Settlers in 1812. The group camped on the east side of the Red, opposite Fort Gibraltar, and MacDonnell read the patent granting the land which encompassed the Forks to Lord Selkirk. The struggle which ensued has been well recorded. Since the land immediately adjacent to the Forks was not suitable for agriculture, the Settlers moved downriver to a site opposite Point Douglas and there staked their claims.

The Forks, however, remained a focus for commercial conflict. The Hudson's Bay Company, in the course of the "Pemmican War," seized and destroyed the Nor'Westers fort, but it was rebuilt almost immediately. In 1817 Peter Fidler is thought to have built Fidler's fort to the north of Fort Gibraltar, although it is not clear how long this structure remained in use, because much of the HBC operation at the Forks was concentrated in Fort Douglas, built on Point Douglas in 1812. With amalgamation of the rival companies, the HBC occupied Fort Gibraltar, and named their new headquarters Fort Garry. Later known as Upper Fort Garry to distinguish it from the Lower Fort, it was destroyed in the flood of 1826, but rebuilt in 1835, and continued the seat of Company and later governmental activities until its demolition in 1882. The reasons for Simpson's relocation to the new Lower Fort and subsequent return to the Upper Fort are not clear and would bear further investigating.

In 1818 development began on the east side of the Red, opposite the Forks. That year Selkirk granted to the newly-established Roman Catholic mission a seigneurie, four miles by five miles in area, east of the Seine River from its mouth southward, and a block of 15 chains square

on the east bank of the Red opposite the Forks. This latter section became the site of the cathedral and schools which formed the focal point of the Canadian and Métis society of St. Boniface. The degree to which the river which divided St. Boniface from Winnipeg after 1818 was a barrier or a link has not been investigated. While the detailed development of Winnipeg has been chronicled, little attention has been given to corresponding developments in St. Boniface.

Although settlement was spreading out north and south along both sides of the Red and west along the Assiniboine, transportation, communication and commerce continued to focus on the Forks. The Hudson's Bay Company retained some five hundred acres surrounding Upper Fort Garry, land which provided a camping place for Indians and traders who visited the Fort. Each autumn, even as late as the 1870's, the Indians continued to celebrate their annual Dog Feast on the river bank in the Company's reserve.¹³ The first independent stores to set up at the Forks after the decline of the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly, those of Henry McKenny, Andrew McDermott, A. Bannatyne and William Drever, located at the northern edge of the H.B.C. land, a site undesirable because of its low level and tendency to swampiness in spring, but attractive for its "central situation at the intersection of the great highway of the grain country on the Red River and that of the fur regions to the west, leading along the Assiniboine."¹⁴ Immediately across the river headquartered the enterprising American trader Kittson.¹⁵

The increasing diversity of trade is manifested in an increasingly complex transportation pattern at the Forks. Prior to the 1850's, most of the Settlement's trade had moved on an east-west axis, with the Hudson Bay route and the Canadian route providing access to manufactures and markets for fur harvests. Canoes, York boats, Red River carts, wagons and dog sleds all moved people and goods to and from the Forks along the Assiniboine, and down the Red to Lake

Winnipeg. Gradually, however, the greater efficiency of the American route via St. Paul gained its ascendancy over the Bay and Canadian routes, and a strong transportation system developed on the Red below the Forks. American traders with an interest in the Red River market, and the Red River businessmen who used the American shipping route made possible the first steam transportation to the forks. In 1859 the Hudson's Bay Company and Kittson established a regular steamship service between Upper Fort Garry and Georgetown, to which supplies came overland from St. Paul. At the same time James McKay was awarded a contract for a large fleet of Red River carts to carry freight overland from St. Paul along the Red River to Fort Garry. In 1879, the steamer Marquette made its first run up the Assiniboine to Fort Ellice. This route, too, was supplemented by regular stage coach and Red River cart transportation. As much as ever, all communication lines led to the Forks.

No doubt the waterfront at the Forks must have developed rapidly in the mid-nineteenth century. There is considerable evidence that docks and warehouses multiplied on all banks. The Hudson's Bay Company was by 1875 operating a large grist mill on the waterfront, servicing a large portion of the settlement's grain.¹⁶ Ferry services linked east and west, north and south. Because of the current below the Forks, it was necessary to cross both rivers in order to bet to the west bank of the Red above the Forks, so the crude scows on ropes plied the waters of the Assiniboine at the Fort Garry gate, and the Red just above its junction: I have been able to identify two ferry operators: Duncan McDougall for an indeterminate period before 1861 until after 1817, and Robert Tait from 1878 until the bridging of the rivers in 1881.¹⁷ McDougall, who lived on the south side of the Assiniboine, enjoyed a secure monopoly on service which, according to Hargrave, rendered him intolerable.¹⁸ The entire matter of waterfront business requires considerably more investigation.

For a time the rivers supported a thriving floating commerce. In the summer, flat-boats were brought up from Moorhead, laden with a variety of wares, and the boatmen peddled everything including the lumber from which the boats were constructed, before returning home.¹⁹ This floating levee was a considerable attraction in Winnipeg, and it was partly out of a desire to curtail this competition that Winnipeg merchants were anxious for the incorporation of the city.

The Forks appears to have been a traditional recreational attraction in the young city. J. J. Hargrave, shortly after his arrival at the Upper Fort set out upon the “favorite and much frequented walk [which] leads close along the banks of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers.”²⁰

Politically, of course, the Forks remained a strategic location until 1883. It was the seat of government for the District of Assiniboia which extended by legal definition fifty miles in all directions from the Forks. When Riel and his followers were ready to take action, they came up the west side of the Red River, crossed the Assiniboine by ferry, and took possession of Upper Fort Garry. Thus the drama of the first Riel Rebellion is closely related to its physical location at the heart of communication, commerce and settlement. Following the creation of Manitoba, Upper Fort Garry continued to house the provincial government and the district court until construction of new government buildings “within one mile of the Forks.”²¹ Until its demolition in 1883, it was the site of the official government house and residence of the Lieutenant Governor. When the City of Winnipeg ordered Upper Fort Garry demolished to straighten out the curve in Main Street, it removed one of the most significant historic sites in the Canadian West.

With the land boom of the 1880's, the Forks changed character rather dramatically. The Company sold most of its waterfront land. Bridges were built across the Red at the foot of Broadway, and across the Assiniboine at Main Street. The business community shifted

northward and the area bounded by present day Main, Broadway and Notre Dame Avenues acquired the disreputable connotations of "The Flats," a slum shanty town.

It is uncertain how often the former H.B.C. reserve at the Forks changed hands before it was purchased by the Northern Pacific and Manitoba Railway, an amalgam of the Red River Valley Railway and the Northern Pacific Railway. Probably selected for its central location providing access to both river and land transportation at the City of Winnipeg's commercial core, the land west of the Red, and north of the Assiniboine became the terminus of Manitoba's competition to the C.P.R. The Assiniboine River was bridged near the forks in 1889, and by April 25th of that year, trains of the Northern Pacific and Manitoba were entering the yards from the south. These yards were located closer to the Red River than the present Union Station and second railway bridge, built after the N.P. & M. leased its yards and track to the Manitoba Government who, in turn, leased them to the Canadian Northern Railway, (part of the McKenzie & Mann empire which was bankrupted in 1906 and later became a major portion of the Crown corporation, Canadian National Railways). Thus, from the late 1880's to the present day, riverfront property west of the Red, both north and south of the Forks, has been occupied by one railway or another.

It is evident, therefore, that throughout its history, the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine has been a significant focus for transportation, communication and commerce in the North-West, and that the settlement patterns, economic developments and political structures of the North-West have reflected that geographic fact. Much is yet to be learned about the detailed development of the Forks, however, and its relationship, not only to Winnipeg, but to St. Boniface and to the outlying regions of Manitoba.

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End Notes

¹ L. J. Burpee, ed. Journals and Letters of Pierre Gaultier de Varennes de la Verendrye and His Sons. (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1927), pp. 250-251.

² Ibid. p. 29.

³ William Douglas, "New Lights on the Old Forts of Winnipeg," Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Series III, No. 2 (1956), p. 1.

⁴ William Douglas, "The 'The Forks' Becomes a City," Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Series III, No. 1 (1944-45), p. 53.

⁵ Burpee, ed. Journals ...of La Verendrye, p. 251.

⁶ John McDonnell, "The Red River," in A. R. Masson, Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest (Reprinted, New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960), p. 269.

⁷ Elliot Coues, ed. The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and David Thompson, 1799-1814. (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1897), Vol. I, p. 42. This graveyard is thought to have been the site now lying east of Main from Graham to York.

⁸ Richard Glover, ed. David Thompson's Narrative (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1962), p. 158.

⁹ Coues, ed. Journals of Henry and Thompson, p. 42.

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 225, 236, 245.

¹¹ Cited in Douglas, "The Forks' Becomes a City" p. 56.

¹² The building of Fort Gibraltar is generally credited to John McDonald of Garth, who claimed in his memoirs to have built the fort in 1807 (see John McDonald of Garth, "Autobiographical Notes," in Masson, ed. Les Bourgeois, Vol. II, p. 36.). However there was no Fort Gibraltar when Alexander Henry was transferred from the Lower Red River in 1808.

¹³ J. J. Hargrave, Red River (Montreal: John Lovell, 1871), p. 197.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 307

¹⁵ "To Red River and Beyond," Harper's New Monthly, Vol. XXII (1861), p. 309.

¹⁶ Hudson's Bay House File, Mills-Old.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hargrave, Red River, pp. 183-185.

¹⁹ Alexander Begg, Ten Years in Winnipeg (Winnipeg: Times Printing and Publishing, 1879), p. 67. See also Hudson's Bay House File, Mills-Old.

²⁰ Hargrave, Red River, p. 187.

²¹ The Crown Grant pertaining to the H.B.C. Reserve at the Upper Fort, 5 June, 1873, specified that 50 acres be given for the use of new government buildings within one mile of the Forks. Hudson's Bay House File, Land.