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The Forts at the Junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers

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## Introduction

Over a one hundred and fifty year period, from 1738 to 1885, four fur trading forts operated at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. They were: the French Fort Rouge (1738-?), the North West Company's Fort Gibraltar (first fort active 1810-16 and rebuilt 1817-22), the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Garry I (renamed Fort Gibraltar 1822-52) and finally, the H.B.C. Upper Fort Garry which operated from 1835-85.

In addition to the four primary forts—and consistent with the growth of competition between rival fur trading companies characteristic of this period—a number of tiny independent fur trading cabins appeared and disappeared at the junction without leaving visible evidence. In his examination of the period A. S. Morton notes that "the lower Red River was one of the first places re-established by the Montrealers" following the conquest of Canada (1759).<sup>1</sup> The activities of these small competitors are, for the most part, unknown.

The more intense competition for furs during the late 18th century took place in the Saskatchewan country while the Red River, particularly in the vicinity of the Forks, was the scene of a less hectic, but growing trade.<sup>2</sup> In 1793 Nor'Wester John MacDonell described the Forks as follows:

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....is a favorite Indian encampment.<sup>3</sup>

From the beginning of the 19th century historical information on activities at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine becomes increasingly abundant. One of the most helpful sources



in this study has been the journals of Alexander Henry. Henry was assigned to the Red River Department of the North West Company from 1800 to 1808.

During the initial two decades of the 19th century settlement and rivalry for furs travelled a collision course which led to the destruction of Fort Gibraltar by the Selkirk Settlers and culminated the same year in the massacre at Seven Oaks in 1816. By 1821 the conflict between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company came to a peaceful end in amalgamation. At the Forks the merger was reflected in 1822 with the renaming of the second Fort Gibraltar—formerly a North West Company post—to Fort Garry under the Hudson's Bay Company.

Fort Garry 1 was used until 1835, when it was replaced by Upper Fort Garry erected under the orders of Alexander Christie. As noted earlier the first Fort Garry was demolished in 1852 and the later Fort Garry continued to serve the Hudson's Bay Company until 1882. Three years later, in 1885, it was demolished.

#### The Literature

The Forks of the Red and Assiniboine have drawn the attention of numerous historians studying the early development of Winnipeg and Western Canada. The first of these, George Bryce, was one of Manitoba's earliest historians. Bryce presented a paper titled "The Five Forts of Winnipeg" to the Royal Society of Canada in May of 1885 shortly after the dismantling of the last Fort Garry. Subsequently, the Transactions of the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba carried three articles devoted to the establishment of forts at the junction.<sup>4</sup> Arthur Silver Morton, in his detailed chronology A History of the Canadian West 1870-71, (Toronto, 1939) and in his unpublished draft manuscript dealing with the historical geography of the Red River has discussed this area extensively. More recently Antoine Champagne, in his Nouvelles Etudes Sur Les La Vérendrye: Et les Postes de L'Ouest, published in 1968, has made a detailed study of the establishments erected during the French period. An analysis of the methodology employed, the sources examined and the conclusions reached by these scholars is in order. In most instances their conclusions concerning the major establishments at the Forks are similar. The only contentious point concerns the historic location of Fort Rouge. George Bryce and Antoine Champagne both rely heavily on cartographic evidence which places Fort Rouge on the south bank of the Assiniboine River. In their respective articles for

the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Transactions, Charles Bell and William Douglas argue that it was probably situated on the north side. A. S. Morton is inconclusive.

Bryce's 1885 article appears to be based upon an examination of five maps of the La Vérendrye period deposited in the French Archives in Paris. He did not examine the La Vérendrye Journals and consequently his dating of the construction of Fort Rouge [1736] and his conclusions as to who built it are incorrect. In his 1900 study, The Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company, Bryce examined the La Vérendrye Journals and corrected the construction date of Fort Rouge to 1738. He still maintained, however, that Fort Rouge was on the south bank of the Assiniboine. As to the question of other forts, Bryce bases his conclusions on interviews with Red River old-timers, and on personal recollections. Once again Bryce is mistaken in claiming that the dismantled Fort Gibraltar was never rebuilt. Later evidence will prove that it was. Moreover, Bryce is also in error in the original construction of Fort Gibraltar to 1806.<sup>5</sup> He does not cite his source for this conclusion. His statements on the last Fort Garry may be considered close to the actual location since they are based primarily on personal recollection.

Charles Napier Bell's "The Old Forts of Winnipeg" is an improvement over Bryce's article. Like Bryce, he has examined some of the maps from the French period, but unlike Bryce he has used the maps in conjunction with the published La Vérendrye Journals published in 1927 by the Champlain Society. By relying on these journals Bell corrects the construction date of Fort Rouge to 1738, and furthermore states that it was not built by La Vérendrye but by M. De Lamarque. More importantly, Bell was the first to question the traditional opinion that Fort Rouge was located on the south bank of the Assiniboine. He was convinced that it was situated on the north bank. The basic points of his argument were that, first the south bank of the Assiniboine was considerably lower than the north and consequently, subjected to spring flooding. Also, the heavily wooded south bank would not have been an attractive site for a fort. Secondly, the north side of the Assiniboine was subsequently used by everyone who established themselves at the Forks, including the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company. Bell's final argument, and the one that convinced him to argue in favour of the north bank, was based on evidence from Alexander Henry's journals which Bell uncovered in the Parliamentary Library at Ottawa in 1887. Henry wrote:

Upon this spot, in the time of the French there was

a trading establishment, traces of which are still to be seen where the chimneys and cellars stood.<sup>6</sup>

Bell contended that these traces were from Fort Rouge, and that Henry was, at the time of writing, unquestionably situated on the north bank. The cartographic evidence, La Vérendrye maps which locate Fort Rouge on the south side of the Assiniboine, is dismissed by Bell as the rendering of a careless and inaccurate draftsman. Bell concluded that:

An impartial study of the ascertained facts must convince any student that Lamarque built the Fort Rouge post, that it was in existence for probably only one winter, and that it was on the north bank of the Assiniboine River at the Forks.<sup>7</sup>

With regard to the later forts, Bell is again more accurate and detailed than Bryce. He notes the journal of St. Pierre,<sup>8</sup> La Vérendrye's successor, and his reference to wintering at the Forks in 1752-53. Bell also has extracted from Alexander Henry's published Journal [Elliott Coues, edited 1897] that one, Dorion, wintered at the Forks during 1803-04.

For the details of the construction of the first North West Company fort at the Forks, Bell cites the testimony of John MacDonald of Garth, published in L. R. Masson's Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest. MacDonald claimed to have erected Fort Gibraltar, at the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine in 1807. Bell, it should be noted, shows some inconsistency here. He has relied heavily on Alexander Henry's Journal to "prove" that Fort Rouge was erected on the north bank of the Assiniboine. Had he used similar thoroughness in his examination of Fort Gibraltar, he would have concluded that Fort Gibraltar could not have been erected in 1807, as MacDonald claimed. Alexander Henry was still on the Red River during the autumn of 1808, and there was no fort established at the Forks when he left.

The former location of Fort Gibraltar allegedly was visited by Bell and a companion, Corporal Sam Steele, in 1871. They walked he writes, towards the traditional site of Fort Gibraltar "a few hundred yards from Fort Garry" and that there "...plainly to be seen very near the edge of the bank were recognizable hollows representing cellars....[and other evidence suggesting]...chimneys."<sup>9</sup> Bell's conclusions concerning the location and structural details of the two Fort Garrys [1822-35] and [1835-85] were based, as were Bryce's on personal recollections and interviews with long-time residents.

A.S. Morton avoids controversy surrounding the location

of Fort Rouge, stating merely that the French fort was established at the Forks of the Red River.<sup>10</sup> In his unpublished manuscript, deposited in the University of Saskatchewan Archives, Morton devotes considerable space to the subject of the forts at the junction of the Red River. He narrates in accurate detail the story of the Forks, commencing with La Vérendrye, and continuing through the subsequent phases. It is evident from some rough notes included in the manuscript that Morton visited the Forks attempting unsuccessfully, to ascertain in his own mind the actual location of Fort Rouge. Morton's paper "Forrest Oakes, Charles Boyer, Joseph Fulton, and Peter Pangman in the North-West 1765-93," in the Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada in 1937, is the most illuminating work extant on the Post Conquest penetration of the North West by Montreal based merchants. His placement of Forrest Oakes on the Red River, near Selkirk, Manitoba in 1766 and through to 1768 is of particular interest.

In the two articles presented to the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba: "The Forks Becomes a City," and "New Light on the Old Forts of Winnipeg" William Douglas has produced the most thorough work of all to date.<sup>11</sup> His first effort in 1944-45 is similar to that of Bell's. He agreed with Bell, that Fort Rouge was probably located on the north bank of the Assiniboine.<sup>12</sup> Douglas has corrected Bell's statement concerning the construction date of the initial Fort Gibraltar. He does not take John MacDonald of Garth's statement as definitive as it did not relate to Henry's tenure on the Red River which concluded in 1808. He notes that MacDonald of Garth's "Autobiographical Note" was written when he was 89 years old and concluded that this may explain the discrepancy. Douglas also examined other evidence for the most part from the Selkirk Papers—and reached the conclusion that the construction of Fort Gibraltar likely commenced in 1809, and finished in 1810-19.

The most recent study which specifically refers to the location of Fort Rouge is Antoine Champagne's Nouvelles Etudes Sur Les La Vérendrye: Et Les Postes de L'Ouest, published by the Laval University Press in 1968. His is by far the most exhaustive study on the French Régime in Western Canada. He has carefully analyzed La Vérendrye's Journal, and the letters of Beauharnois, Maurepas, and Hocquart in conjunction with the maps of the period. Champagne does not support Bell and Douglas in their contention that Fort Rouge was located on the north side of the Assiniboine nor does he follow their dismissal of cartographic evidence. It is Champagne's position that period maps are, in fact, the major source of information on the location of Fort Rouge. Implicit in his position is the assumption that the period maps must be

considered accurate until "proven" otherwise. The cellar remains and other telltale evidence on the north bank, Champagne suggests, could well have been left by St. Pierre in 1752-53, or Boyer in 1781-82.

## The Forts

### Fort Rouge

The only hard evidence dealing directly with the La Vérendrye period in Western Canada (1731-44), and especially his activities in and about the Red River, are the journals, letters, memoirs, and maps produced by him or under his authorization. A comprehensive collection of these documents were collected, edited and published by Lawrence J. Burpee for the Champlain Society.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, the journals contain little information on the Forks of the Red River, and the establishment of a fort there. The first establishment on the Red River was not at the Forks, rather it was near the mouth of the Red. The order for its establishment was issued by La Vérendrye in May 1734, and in all likelihood it was erected that summer. In June of 1735, La Vérendrye's second son wrote to Beauharnois in Quebec that:

I have established a fort at Lake Winnipeg (Ouynipigon) five leagues up the Red River, on a fine point commanding a distant view... The fort and the river bear the name of Maurepas.<sup>14</sup>

The elder La Vérendrye's intention to proceed to Lake Winnipeg in 1736 was stymied by the news of the massacre of 21 of his men on Lake of the Woods in June, 1736. Thus, it was not until the late winter of 1737 that he left Fort St. Charles for Lake Winnipeg and the Red River. He embarked on the eighth day of February.<sup>15</sup> The route taken was not the familiar Winnipeg River route, rather he proceeded to the "southwest corner of the Lake of the Woods, across a short passage (Savanne), to the upper waters of the Roseau River, which flows into the Red near Pembina..."<sup>16</sup> and then down the Red to Fort Maurepas. The journey lasted eighteen days as he reached Fort Maurepas on 25 February 1738. Upon his arrival he noted in his journal that:

...although the accident that had occurred last summer [smallpox breakout] had prevented the trans-

fer of the fort to their neighbourhood, namely to the fork of the Red River, which was their own proper territory, he hoped that I would nevertheless, keep my work this year; that his tribe offered me all the help in their power for that purpose, and that they would form a village at the spot in order to reside permanently near the fort: that it was easy there to get a living by hunting and fishing, as buffalo and tourtes were attracted there all year by a saline spring that was close by.<sup>17</sup>

In the Spring of 1737 La Vérendrye decided to return to Quebec. He ventured across the southeast portion of Lake Winnipeg, up its east shore to the mouth of the Winnipeg River, and then eastward to Fort St. Charles. From there he took the accustomed route to Quebec. Upon his arrival he reported to the Governor.<sup>18</sup> Accompanying his report was a map dated 1737 [see fig. 1], of the recently explored territory. This map is the only one of the 12 maps attributed to La Vérendrye and his associates that indicates that a fort existed at the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine, on the north bank of the latter. All of the other maps that indicate an establishment at the Forks, place it on the south bank of the Assiniboine [see figures 2,3]. The explanation for this discrepancy becomes clear when the 1737 map is used in conjunction with the journals. As mentioned previously, La Vérendrye's route to the Red River, and Lake Winnipeg in 1737, followed the Savanne Portage on the Roseau River route. Evidence extracted from the journals tells us, on more than one occasion, that La Vérendrye planned to move Fort Maurepas from the mouth of the Red to the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine. Thus, the notation "Fort abandonné", on the 1737 map [figure 1] refers to the intended abandonment of the fort. Fort Maurepas located at the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine on this 1737 map is therefore the intended new Fort Maurepas. La Vérendrye, apparently, when planning this new fort envisaged it situated on the north bank of the Assiniboine. It was not La Vérendrye, however, who established the fort at the Forks [Fort Rouge]. His intention to build at the site was not fulfilled.

Upon La Vérendrye's arrival in Quebec in late summer of 1737, he found that his lack of progress in the search for the Western Sea was being highly criticized. Maurepas complained to Beauharnois: "...I am considerably surprised at the little progress, that officer has made toward the discovery of the Western Sea..."<sup>19</sup> La Vérendrye had been on the verge of venturing into the Lake Winnipeg region as early as

1732-33, but it was not until 1737 that he reached it. The criticism levelled at him, therefore, had some justification. On the other hand, La Vérendrye had many good reasons to support his lack of progress. These included the massacre of 21 of his party in 1736, and the lack of financial support from the crown. In any event, La Vérendrye was encouraged to get on with the task.

He set out for the west again and reached the Fork of the Red and Assiniboine on 24 September 1738 where he "...found ten cabins of Cree, including two war chiefs, awaiting me with a large quantity of meat...They begged me to stay with them for a while."<sup>20</sup> He stayed for two days. On 26 September his party proceeded up the Assiniboine in canoes, while he walked along the north bank for a distance of "thirty-five or forty leagues." At this point near present day Portage la Prairie, he decided to halt, and build wintering quarters, later known as Fort la Reine. It was there, while in the midst of constructing Fort la Reine that M. de Lamarque arrived from the Lake of the Woods via Fort Maurepas and the Forks. Lamarque, it appears from the content of the Journal, and from Burpee's biographical note (p.261), was a trader "interested in the commercial side of La Vérendrye's expedition." Lamarque explained to La Vérendrye the deployment of the men left behind at the other establishments, and later told La Vérendrye that:

...he had brought M. de Louvriere to the fork with two canoes to build a fort there for the convenience of people on the Red River. I [La Vérendrye] thought that was our right provided the savages are notified of it.<sup>21</sup>

The La Vérendrye expedition continued to move westward. Establishments were erected to the northwest at Fort Dauphin and Pasquia. The Forks of the Red River were never again mentioned in the journals. In an abridged memorandum prepared by the sons of La Vérendrye in 1749, it is noted that a fort built at the fork of the Assiniboine River had been abandoned, owing to its proximity to Fort la Reine and Maurepas.<sup>22</sup>

French activity in the west did not end with the retirement of La Vérendrye. He was replaced by the Sieur de Noyelles and he by Jacques Ropentigny Legardeur de St. Pierre. The combined contributions of these two men pales when their careers are compared to La Vérendrye's. Neither of them possessed the needed aptitude or experience for the position. St. Pierre left a journal of his activities during his two-



year stint in the west, 1751-53. A copy of it was produced in the Report on the Canadian Archives for 1887.<sup>23</sup> The journal is anything but clear and concise. Dates are in most instances incorrect, or left out altogether. Furthermore, his placement of Fort la Jonquiere "at the Rocky Mountains" is, as A. S. Morton argues, open to serious doubt.<sup>24</sup> It does, however, suggest that St. Pierre may have spent the winter of 1752-53 at the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. Following a conflict with a group of Assiniboine Indians at Fort la Reine, in the summer of 1752, St. Pierre left for Grand Portage. Shortly after his departure, the Indians returned to the vacant Fort la Reine and burned it to the ground. St. Pierre on his return trip to the west was informed of the destruction of his fort:

...on my return was on the [Fork?] at the Red River where I was compelled to winter having learned that four days after leaving [Fort la Reine] the Indians had set it afire.<sup>25</sup>

St. Pierre's wintering at the Forks in 1752-53 is the last known occupation of the Forks during French times. Charles Boyer was the next to winter there, in 1781-82. It is interesting to note that both St. Pierre and Boyer were forced to seek refuge at the Forks under similar circumstances. Their treatment of the natives, St. Pierre at Fort la Reine, and Boyer at Fort des Trembles, both situated on the Assiniboine, resulted in an uprising and the subsequent abandonment and destruction of their posts.

Where exactly then was Fort Rouge? Charles Bell in his paper presented to the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, contended that Fort Rouge was probably located on the north bank of the Assiniboine. He supported this conclusion with a number of circumstantial pieces of evidence and summed up his argument in this way:

...to anyone cognizant of the topography of the land on both sides of the Assiniboine River at the Forks, (the south side being relatively very low, subject to spring floods, heavily covered with willows and small trees, and quite open to attack by the fierce and hostile Sioux...while the north bank was and still is much higher, and, in fact, the edge of a large prairie area extending both north and west, with a shallow line of heavy timber reaching back from the banks of both streams), common sense would dictate that the side to build was on the north bank, which naturally and invariably afterwards was chosen

by the French and British trades for camping ground and building site purposes.<sup>26</sup>

The evidence to support Bell's position is open to question. Firstly, his statement concerning the "relatively very low" elevation of the south bank is exaggerated, if not inaccurate. In a 1912 topographic survey of the confluence of the rivers, prepared by the Canadian Department of the Interior, the prairie level on both sides of the Assiniboine is given as 760 ft. above sea level. Furthermore, on a Canadian Northern - Grand Trunk Pacific Railway profile plan of the area, dated 1908, the south side of the Assiniboine is just over one foot lower than the north.

Bell's statement on the vegetation of the river banks is misleading. He cites Alexander Henry's 1800 description as his source. Henry does note (p. 48) that the south side of the Assiniboine was so thickly overgrown "as scarcely to allow a man to pass on foot;..." Bell, it appears, saw this remark and concluded his reading of the journal. Had he continued he would have seen Henry's description of the banks of the Red River which indicated that they too were shrouded in tree growth:

The banks [of the Red] are covered on both sides with willows, which grow so thick and close as scarcely to admit going through...<sup>27</sup>

Alexander Henry's notation of the discovery of remains from a French establishment on the north bank of the Assiniboine, is interpreted by Bell as conclusive proof that Fort Rouge was located on the north bank. Could not these remains just as conceivably be the remains of St. Pierre's 1752-53 fort, or perhaps Boyer and Bruce's 1781-82 establishment? Bell's statement that all subsequent establishments built at the Forks were located on the north bank cannot be disputed. Furthermore, La Vérendrye intended to transfer his Fort Maucpas of 1737 to the Forks, on the north side of the Assiniboine. It was not La Vérendrye, however, but Louviere who erected Fort Rouge.

Bell's dismissal of the cartographic evidence, which clearly indicated that Fort Rouge was located on the south bank is inexplicable. His excuse that 18th and 19th century mapmakers were careless and inaccurate does not hold water. Granted, the orientation and detail of large bodies of water and land forms were in many cases faulty. These errors can be attributed to the fact that the mapmakers, in most every case, saw only fragments of the entire territory. Their field of vision usually extended only a few hundred yards

from the water routes. The rest of the information contained on their maps was usually extracted from evidence given to them by the Indians. The courses of the travelled rivers, and their intersections with other streams and lakes are in most cases accurately depicted. Moreover, the location of the numerous other French posts, including Fort Maurepas and Fort St. Charles, have not been questioned. Why then should Bell, or anyone else, ignore the cartographic evidence which pinpoints the site of Fort Rouge? It is this writer's opinion that the site of Fort Rouge (1738) was most likely on the south bank of the Assiniboine at the Forks.

The wintering quarters of St. Pierre (1752-53) and Bruce and Boyer (1781-82) were in all probability at or near the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine. Alexander Henry's discovery of building remains in 1800, at the Forks, may well have been one of their establishments. The Journal of St. Pierre, the only documentation available for the 1751-53 period is, as has been discussed, unreliable and does not contain any substantial information on either the Forks, or his establishment there.

Boyer and Bruce's stay at the Forks in 1781-82 is even less documented<sup>28</sup> and no definite conclusions can be reached concerning their stay at the Forks.

The Forks of the Red and Assiniboine held little interest for fur traders during the latter part of the 18th century. There is, however, documentary evidence that indicates that the Forks was visited on occasion by Nor'Westers and Hudson's Bay men.<sup>29</sup>

Alexander Henry's arrival on the Red River in 1800 and his subsequent establishment of a post near Pembina signalled the first real and permanent occupation of the Red River since French times. Through a reading of Henry's Journal, it becomes clear that the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine began to take on a new role of increased importance and significance after 1800. The Forks became an important meeting place.<sup>30</sup>

While acquiring increased importance during Henry's tenure the junction still had no permanent buildings. A small wintering quarters may well have been erected in 1803, as Henry stated: "I made up an assortment of goods for this place, where I leave Mr. [Louis]Dorion..."<sup>31</sup> The extent or permanency of Dorion's house, could not have been great, as witnessed by Daniel Williams Harmon who passed by the Forks in June of 1805. Harmon made numerous observations regarding the Forks, but there was no mention of any establishment of residence.<sup>32</sup>

### Fort Gibraltar I

Henry's posting to the Red River ended in 1808. His last visit to the Forks was on 10 August 1808 (p. 447).<sup>33</sup> Daniel McKenzie, Henry's replacement retained possession of the post at Pembina until sometime in 1809.<sup>34</sup> William Douglas who cites McKenzie's letters, copies of which he found in the Selkirk Papers, claims that it was the hostile Sioux near Pembina which forced the Nor'Westers to move their fort northward to the Forks. Douglas has also uncovered the fact that it was McKenzie's successor, John Wills, who commenced the construction of the fort at the Forks, called Gibraltar.<sup>35</sup> Douglas, using some sound analysis and logic states that Wills commenced to erect Fort Gibraltar in the summer of 1810, and continued through to the following winter. George Bryce, in his Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company, also states that John Wills was the moving force behind the construction of Fort Gibraltar. Bryce further stated, unfortunately, without documentation that: "Wills was a year in building it having under him twenty men."<sup>36</sup> Peter Fidler in his "Account of the Red River District" prepared for the Hudson's Bay Company in 1819, noted that the North West Company's post "...at the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers on the left bank [was] first built in 1811..."<sup>37</sup>

The years between the first establishment of the North West Company at the Forks in 1811 and 1816 were marked by conflict between the Hudson's Bay Company, the Selkirk settlers and the Nor'Westers. The difficulties culminated in the spring of 1816. In the course of three weeks the Hudson's Bay Company and the settlers dismantled Fort Gibraltar. In response the Nor'Westers killed 21 settlers including Governor Robert Semple at Seven Oaks on June 19th.

The exact location of the dismantled Fort Gibraltar is open to contention. Contemporary accounts, for the most part, merely note that this North West Company establishment was situated at the Forks on the north side of the Assiniboine. Jean Baptiste Roi, a longtime resident of Red River, testified in one of the many court cases that arose from the disputes at Red River, that the "...North West fort was fifteen paces from the adjacent shore."<sup>38</sup> Fifteen paces would convert to approximately 45 feet. Colin Robertson who occupied Fort Gibraltar from March to June of 1816, noted in a recitation concerning his departure from the fort and Red River that:

...I walked to the platform where the Governor Mr. Semple was standing, to bid him farewell;... I then went with a quick step and threw myself into the boat that was waiting for me—.<sup>39</sup>

There had, therefore, to be room for a platform or wharf between the fort's exterior and the waterfront. C. N. Bell's conclusions regarding the site of Fort Gibraltar (he does not mention whether it was the original one or the rebuilt Gibraltar) are even more vague.

Fort Gibraltar was erected on the north side of the Assiniboine River, where that stream joins the Red River, and extended somewhat along the bank of the latter.<sup>40</sup>

Terms like "somewhat along," are difficult to measure. Bell went on to say that in 1871 he and a companion walked "a few hundred yards" from Fort Garry to the traditional site of Fort Gibraltar and there "very near the edge of the bank" were remains of an establishment that convinced Bell were traces of Fort Gibraltar. An extensive search of all the primary sources has not yet been completed. The thousands of pages of the Selkirk Papers, along with the holdings of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives and the Church Missionary Society may yield some information on the exact location of the initial Fort Gibraltar. The only information uncovered so far has been Jean Baptiste Roi's statement that it was fifteen paces from the adjacent shore [see endnote 38]

The dimensions of the fort and its components can be deduced from secondary and primary sources. Jean Baptiste Roi's description of the fort, coincides closely with that of George Bryce's informant:

It was a fort of wooden picketing, made of oak trees split in two, which formed its enclosure. Within the said enclosure were built the house of the partner (64 ft. in length), two houses for the men (36 ft. and 28 ft. respectively), a store (32 ft. long), two hangards or stores, a blacksmith's shop and a stable; there was also an ice-house with a watch-house (guerite) over it.<sup>41</sup>

The first Fort Gibraltar also had two bastions, and a "Great Hall" or "Large Room."<sup>42</sup> Colin Robertson who occupied Fort Gibraltar from March to early June 1816, left a very descriptive account of the original Fort Gibraltar. Shortly Robertson wrote:

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 these are proof against musketry. This is not only a strong place but very comfortable lodgings such as I have not been accustomed to for some time past.<sup>43</sup>

Colin Robertson, who was still at Fort Gibraltar in May of 1816, received a letter from Governor Semple who resided in Fort Douglas, a mile or so below the Forks. The letter was dated 20 May 1816, and its tone relays the exciting atmosphere which existed at the Forks a few weeks prior to the Seven Oaks tragedy. It also gives us a few structural details concerning the Nor'Westers' fort.

When our enemies [N.W.Co.] come near, the men, or at least a strong party, should sleep in the great hall, the doors and windows of which should be barred and a regular sign and counter sign given out every evening. In case of alarm they must not run out in a tumultuous manner, but act together with coolness--...The Great Hall and the Bastion are the main points, as long as they are held even by a few men, the Fort is safe and all int[ruders?] must speedily retire or fall victims to the Bayonet.<sup>44</sup>

A few days after receiving this letter, Robertson reviewed the defence plans and suggested to Semple that the defending of one fort would be much easier than two, suggesting in consequence that Fort Gibraltar should be demolished. Robertson's suggestion was taken up by Semple.

As soon as I had left Red River [June 11, 1816] the Governor demolished the North West Fort and brought over the Bastions and Stockades which he formed into a strong fortification at Fort Douglas;...<sup>45</sup>

The scenario at Red River concluded in 1817. A special commissioner from Canada, William Coltman, arrived at Red River to investigate the dispute and his report formed the basis of an arbitrated settlement. He recommended the restitution of all property. The North West Company insisted that they be allowed to retain the site of Old Fort Gibraltar. Lord Selkirk, while willing to concede to the Nor'-Westers the right to rebuild did not approve of the old location, at the Forks.

Fort Gibraltar II

The Nor'Westers' influence over Coltman was sufficient to win the argument. They retained the site of Old Fort Gibraltar and rebuilt. Peter Fidler's Report of 1819 provides valuable detail.

Their [the N.W.Co.] next post is at the Forks of the Red and Assiniboyne Rivers on the left bank first built in 1811, pulled down June 1817 by Governor Semple and Mr. Robertson...[T]hey began in July 1817 to rebuild it and have enclosed the whole with excellent sawn oak piquets 14 feet above ground set very close together like a continued wall about 100 feet square. Their large dwelling house is not yet built but to be this summer a Mr. McKenzie a young clerk is master there this winter with about 4 to 6 men.<sup>46</sup>

The site of the Second Fort Gibraltar must have been close to that of the original fort, as it was built on the parcel of land returned to them by order of Commissioner Coltman. George Bryce, relying on the evidence of a Red River settler, says that Fort Gibraltar in 1818 was 50 yards<sup>47</sup> from the bank of the Red River. An American exploration expedition headed by Major Long visited Red River in 1823 and his report suggests that the new fort was not built over top of the dismantled one.

...here are two stockade works viz. Forts Gerry (sic) [which was the renamed Fort Gibraltar II] and Douglas: the former called the Hudson's Bay Company fort, and the other the colony's also the remains of two others of a similar character.<sup>48</sup>

One of these sets of remains was undoubtedly the dismantled first Fort Gibraltar.

The death of Lord Selkirk in the spring of 1820, opened the way for a negotiated peace between the Hudson's Bay and the North West Companies. In March of 1821 the two concerns merged. This amalgamation dictated a consolidation policy in the fur trade of the Northwest. At Red River, there no longer existed a need for two fur trade posts. George Simpson, the new Governor of Rupert's Land was left to make the decision as to which of the two forts would be abandoned.

Fort Garry I

Simpson in a letter to Alexander Colvile, dated 20 May 1822, wrote that he had reached a decision concerning the forts at

Red River. The old Hudson's Bay Company quarters was "filthy, irregular and ruinous", he continued:

I am therefore getting the new North West Fort in order so as to remove into [it] next fall; there is a good frame of a dwellers house 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 to christen it after him Fort Garry.<sup>49</sup>

Fort Garry I was, therefore, the renamed second Fort Gibraltar.

The fort at the Forks, named Fort Garry in 1822, was not a very substantial establishment, and one that did not impress Alexander Ross on his first sighting it in 1825.

Instead of a place walled and fortified as I had expected, I saw nothing but a few wooden houses huddled together without palisades, or any regard to taste or even comfort. To this cluster of huts were, however, appended two long bastions in the same style as the other buildings.

These buildings according to the custom of the country, were used as dwellings and warehouses for carrying on the trade of the place. Nor was the Governor's residence anything more in its outward appearance than the cottage of a humble farmer.<sup>50</sup>

The flood of the Red River in 1826, wracked havoc at Fort Garry. Donald McKenzie, who was in charge of the fort, wrote in 1826 that: "our fort being situated at the junction of both rivers it has been subject to great delapidation."<sup>51</sup> The fort continued to deteriorate, so much so that in 1830 the Council of the Northern Department of the Hudson's Bay Company resolved:

"51. That a new establishment to bear the same name be formed on a site to be selected near the lower end of the rapids [of the Red River]...<sup>52</sup>

Governor Simpson, it appears, had given up on the Forks and decided to remove himself and the Company's headquarters to the lower end of the settlement. The fort at the Forks,



although abandoned as the headquarters of the Company, remained standing. It remained in a rather neglected state until it was finally dismantled in 1852.<sup>53</sup> The site of Fort Garry I, which was also the rebuilt Fort Gibraltar, is clearly visible in the 1848 "General Survey of Upper Fort Garry & Its Immediate Vicinity" (see figure 5).

#### Upper Fort Garry

The Hudson's Bay Company's decision to abandon the Forks in favour of a site in the lower end of the settlement, was reversed in 1835. Alexander Christie, assumed command in that year, and one of his first instructions was to commence the building of a stone fort at the Forks. This new fort would be called Upper Fort Garry to distinguish it from the one at the lower settlement.

The second Fort Garry was the last and the most substantial of all the fur trade establishments at the Forks. The new fort continued as the administrative centre of the Hudson's Bay Company in the west right up to 1882, when it was sold during the real estate boom in Winnipeg. It remained standing until 1885. The lateness of its dismantling has resulted in the accumulation of a large amount of information on the fort. There are numerous photographs, the earliest being from the Hime collection of 1858. The remaining photographs, taken from varying vantage points including those from within the walls, provide a detailed and comprehensive record of the structural components of the fort.

A precise pinpointing of the fort's location in relation to its surroundings both man-made and natural is also possible through an examination of survey and engineering plans.

#### Conclusions

There have been four major fur trade establishments at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. The first, Fort Rouge, built in October 1738, was in all probability situated on the south bank of the Assiniboine. The location of the North West Company's first Fort Gibraltar, built in 1810-11, is somewhat uncertain. Jean Baptiste Roi placed it very near the bank of the Red River (45 ft). George Bryce concurred, and added that it was...."situated below the site of the recently removed immigrant sheds."<sup>54</sup> The site of the rebuilt Fort Gibraltar (1817-22) and the first Fort Garry (1822-35), are the same. It

can be deduced from the original full sized "General Survey of Upper Fort Garry..." produced in 1848, deposited in the P.A.M. Figure 5 is a reduced copy of this map. According to this survey the "site of the old fort" is 990 ft. from the south-east bastion of Upper Fort Garry, 198 ft. from the Assiniboine River, and 330 ft. from the Red. This places it just south of the old Northern Pacific and Manitoba Round House. The location of Fort Garry II, or Upper Fort Garry, is certain. The most reliable source as to the exact site-area and dimensions, is the 1911 map produced by the City of Winnipeg Survey Office, which locates the fort in relation to the adjacent Winnipeg streets.

### Endnotes

- 1 Arthur Silver Morton, "Forrest Oakes, Charles Boyer, Joseph Fulton, and Peter Pangman in the Northwest, 1765-93," Royal Society of Canada Transactions, (1937) p. 89; see also *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- 2 Numerous fur traders on their way to the upper reaches of the Assiniboine River passed by the Forks in the decade between 1765 and 1775. William Tomison of the Hudson's Bay Company wintered in the vicinity of Lake Winnipeg in 1767-68 and possibly entered the Red River in May or June, 1768 where he "Seed 2 old french houses," which may have been the remains of Fort Maurepas at the mouth of the Red and Fort Rouge at the Forks. Hudson's Bay Company Archives (hereafter cited as HBCA), B. 198/a/10. fol. 3. See also A. S. Morton *op. cit.*, p. 89. "Pedlars" from Montreal such as Forrest Oakes reached the Red River as early as 1766 and "...occupied a post on the Red River near Dynevor, Manitoba from 1766 to 1768..." (*Ibid.*, p. 93). Louis Nolin told Alexander Ross that he first came to the Red River country in 1776. (Alexander Ross, The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress, and Present State. [Edmonton: Hürtig Publishers, 1972] p. 107).
- 3 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. In May of 1794 on his return trip to Grand Portage Macdonell passed by the Forks again. (*Ibid.*, p. 268).

- 4 Charles Napier Bell, "The Old Forts of Winnipeg 1738-1927," Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Transactions (hereafter cited as HSSM); New Series No. 3, (1927) William Douglas, "The Forks Becomes a City" HSSM Series III, No. 1, (1944-45); and William Douglas "New Light on the Old Forts of Winnipeg" HSSM Series III, No. 11, (1956).
- 5 George Bryce, "The Five Forts of Winnipeg," Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, (1885), p. 137.
- 6 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, (hereafter cited as Journals of Alexander Henry) (19 August 1800). ed. Elliott Coues (Minneapolis: 1965).
- 7 Charles Napier Bell, op. cit., p. 15.
- 8 "Memoir or Summary Journal of the Expedition of Jacques Repentigny Legardeur de Saint Pierre, Knight of the Royal and Military Order of Saint Louis, Captain of a Company of the Troops Detached from the Marine in Canada, Charged with the Discovery of the Western Sea," (hereafter cited as "Journal of Saint Pierre"). Report on the Canadian Archives, Canada Sessional Papers, No. 12, (1887).
- 9 Charles Napier Bell, op. cit., p. 19.
- 10 Arthur Silver Morton, A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71. ed. L. G. Thomas, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), pp. 191, 194.
- 11 William Douglas, "The Forks Becomes A City," "New Light on the Old Forts of Winnipeg."
- 12 Ibid., p. 40.
- 13 Journals and Letters of Pierre Gaultier de Varennes de la Vérendrye, and his Sons; with Correspondence Between the Governors of Canada and the French Court, Touching the Search for the Western Sea, (hereafter cited as Journals of la Vérendrye). ed., L. J. Burpee (Toronto: The Champlain Society, Vol. 16, 1927).
- 14 Ibid., pp. 197-198, (See also p. 191).
- 15 Ibid., p. 242.

- 16 John Warkentin and Richard Ruggles ed., Manitoba Historical Atlas (Winnipeg: The Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba p. 64.
- 17 Journals of la Vérendrye op. cit., p. 243.
- 18 Warkentin and Ruggles, op. cit., p. 64.
- 19 Journals of la Vérendrye Maurepas to Beauharnois, 23 April 1738. p. 275.
- 20 Ibid., p. 298.
- 21 Ibid., 15 October 1738, p. 308.
- 22 Ibid., p. 484.
- 23 "Journal of Saint Pierre."
- 24 A. S. Morton, A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71. pp. 237-238.
- 25 "Journal of Saint Pierre" p. cixvii.
- 26 Charles Napier Bell, op. cit., pp. 14, 15.
- 27 Journals of Alexander Henry, p. 48.
- 28 For the story of the skirmish at Fort des Trembles, and the ensuing abandonment of that post, and the subsequent wintering at the Forks by Boyce and Bruce, See Journals of Alexander Henry, p. 293.
- 29 "Journal of John Macdonell" in the L.R. Masson Collection Canada. Public Archives (hereafter cited as PAC)  
"Journal of John Macdonell" L. R. Masson Collection MGL9, C1, Vol. 54. 20 May 1794, p. 15.
- 30 For a record of the numerous meetings that occurred at the Forks during the first decade of the 19th century. See Journals of Alexander Henry, especially 19 August 1800, p. 46; 25 May 1805, p. 264; and 4 June 1806, p. 276.
- 31 Ibid., 27 September 1803, p. 225.
- 32 Sixteen Years in the Indian Country: The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon, ed. W. Kaye Lamb (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1957), p. 91.

- 33 From Red River, Henry was transferred to the far west and it was while he was at Fort George that he drowned while attempting to cross the Columbia River in a small boat, on 22 May 1814.
- 34 William Douglas "New Light on the Old Forts of Winnipeg," p. 41.
- 35 Ibid., p. 41.
- 36 George Bryce, The Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company, (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1900) p. 189.
- 37 HBCA B.22e/1 p. 1819, p. 16.
- 38 Testimony of Jean Baptiste Roi, in William Douglas, "New Light on the Old Forts of Winnipeg," pp. 40, 41.
- 39 HBCA E.8/6 fol. 186d.
- 40 Charles Napier Bell, op. cit., p. 19.
- 41 Testimony of Jean Baptiste Roi in William Douglas "New Light on the Old Forts of Winnipeg," pp. 40, 41, and George Bryce, The Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company, p. 189. The dimensions of the structures given in brackets are those of Bryce.
- 42 Colin Robertson's description of Fort Gibraltar, cited in William Douglas "New Light on the Old Forts of Winnipeg," p. 58 and the "Deposition of Francois Delorme" in HBCA E.8/6 fol. 168.
- 43 Robertson's description in William Douglas "New Light on the Old Forts of Winnipeg," p. 58.
- 44 Governor Robert Semple to Colin Robertson, 20 May 1816, HBCA E.8/6 fol. 8.
- 45 Colin Robertson to Lord Selkirk n.d., HBCA E.8/6 fol. 189d.
- 46 HBCA, B.22 e/1 1819 p. 16.
- 47 George Bryce, The Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company, p. 189.

- 48 William Keating, ed., Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River, Lake Winnipeg, Lake of the Woods, etc. (Vol. II) (London: George B. Whittaker, 1825) p. 261.
- 49 Manitoba. Public Archives, Governor George Simpson to Alexander Christie, 20 May 1822; The Selkirk Papers, p. 7617.
- 50 Alexander Ross, The Fur Traders of the Far West: A Narrative of Adventure in the Oregon and Rocky Mountains, (Vol. II), (London: Smith, Elder and Company, 1855) p. 261.
- 51 Cited in William Douglas, "New Light on the Old Forts of Winnipeg," p. 87.
- 52 Minutes of Council, Northern Department of the Hudson's Bay Company; Cited in William Douglas "The Forks Becomes a City," p. 66.
- 53 George Bryce, A History of Manitoba: Its Resources and People, (Toronto: Canadian History Company, 1906) p. 94.
- 54 George Bryce, "The Five Forts of Winnipeg," p. 137.



Figure 1. Original from Les Archives Nationales, Paris, France. Copy from National Map Collection, P.A.C. (PH/902-1737) Carte contenant les nouvelles découvertes de l'ouest en Canada, mers, rivières, lacs et nations qui y habitent en l'année 1737. (This map was probably drawn by one of La Vérendrye's sons. It was this map that La Vérendrye carried with him to Québec in the summer of 1737.)

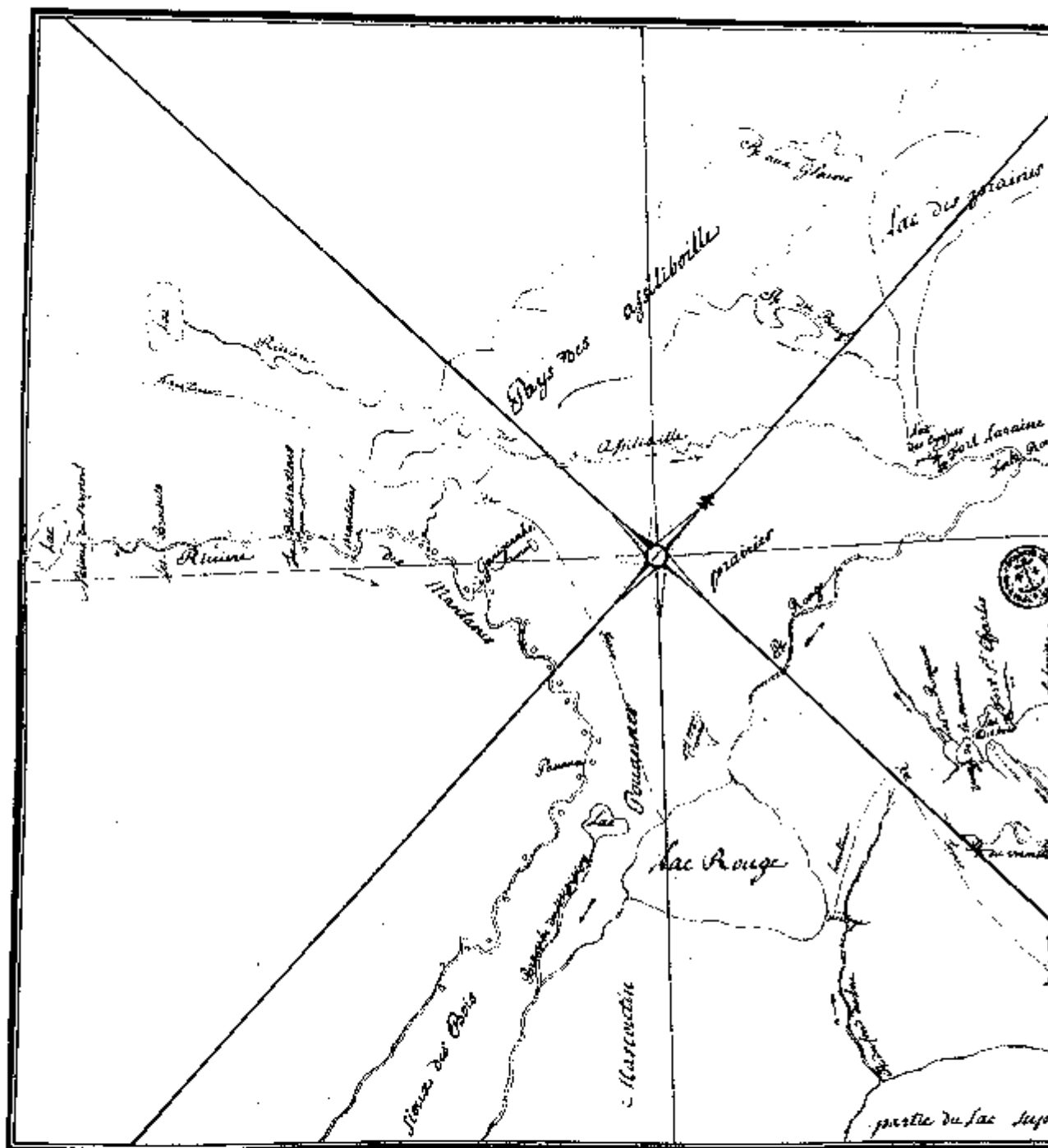
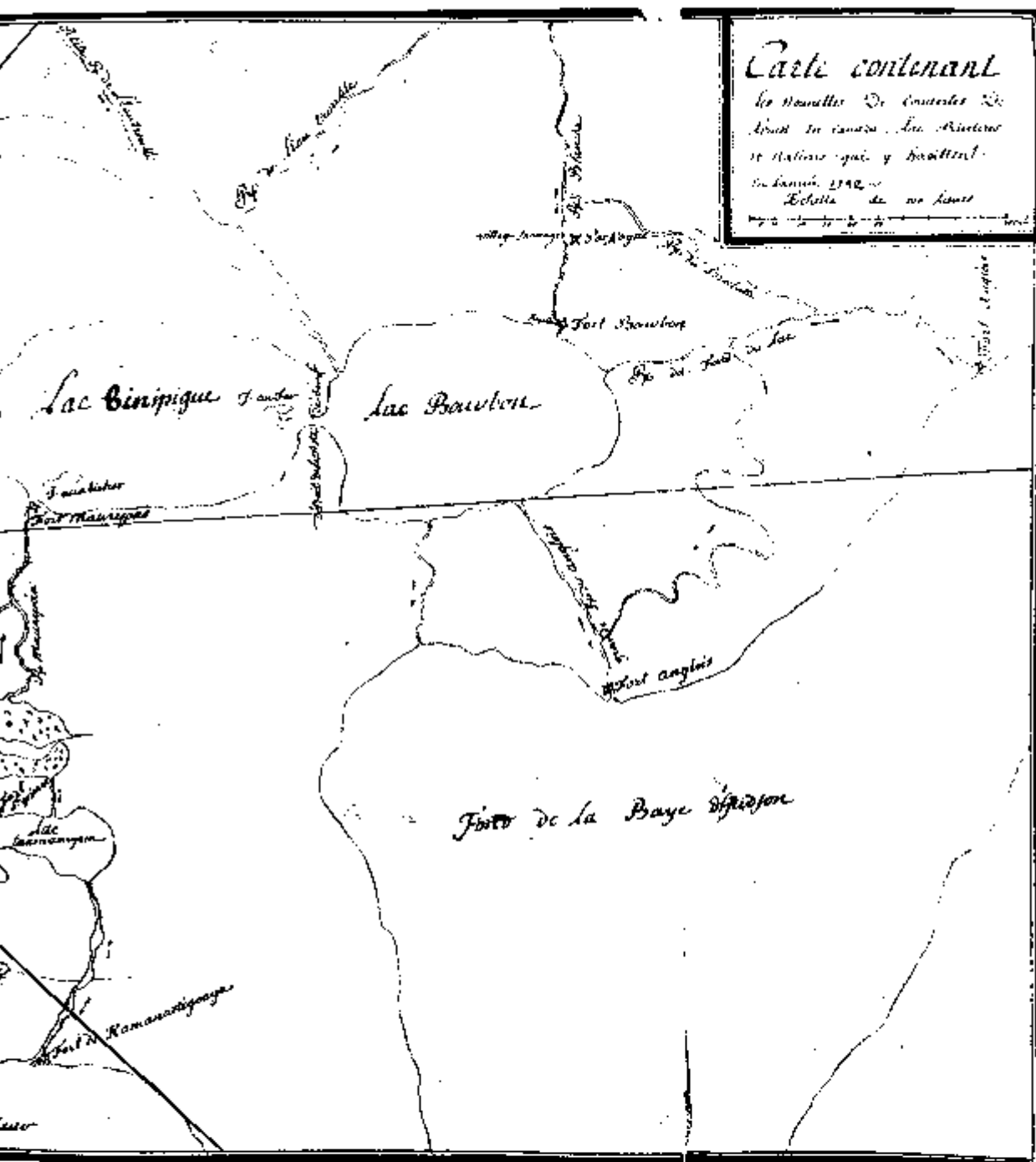


Figure 2. Original from Les Archives Nationales, Paris, France.  
 Copy from National Map Collection, P.A.C. (PH/902-1740) Carte





contenant les nouvelles découvertes de l'ouest...1740.

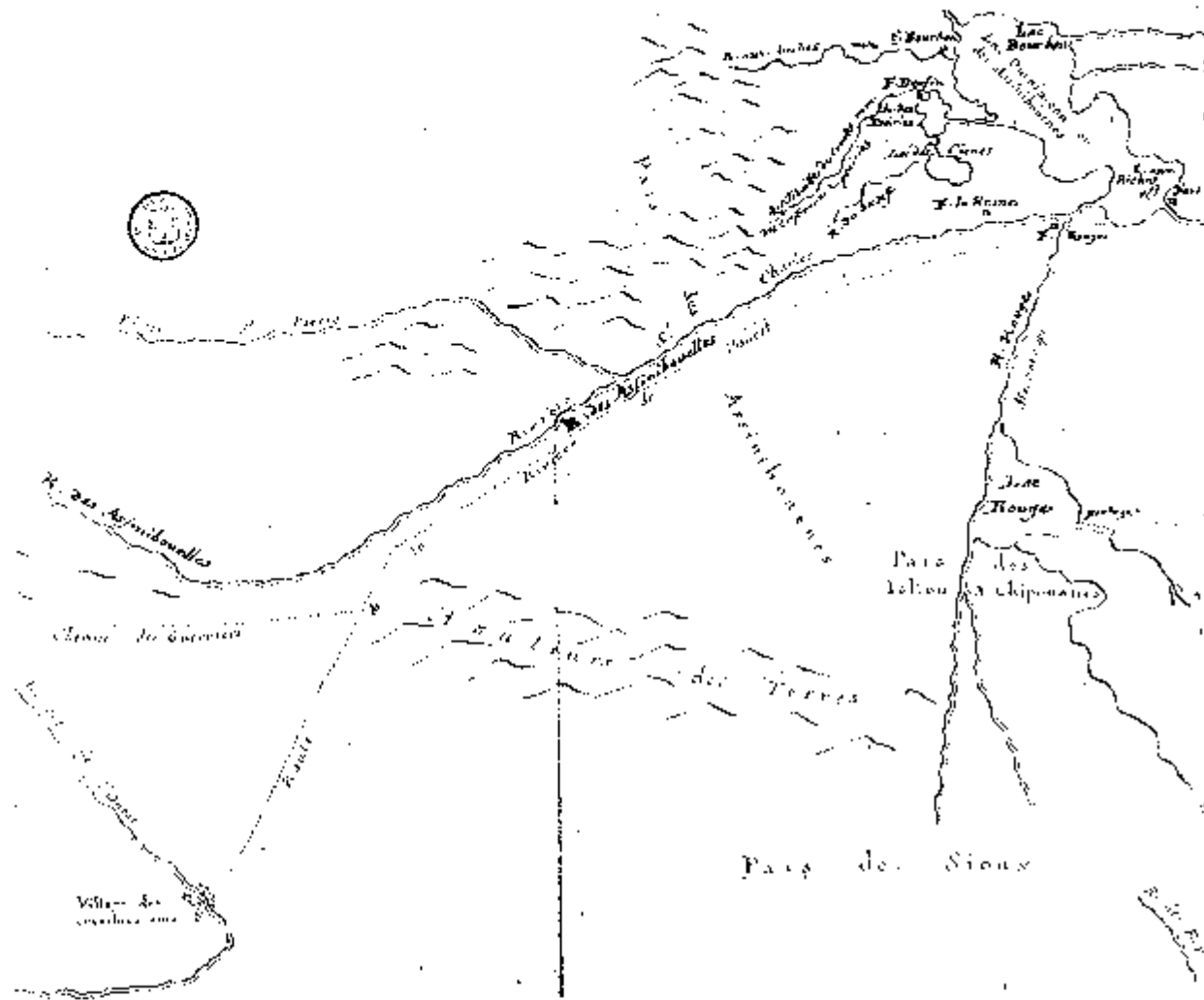


Figure 3. Original from Les Archives Nationales, Paris, France. Copy from National Map Collection, P.A.C. (PH/701-1733) Carte d'une partie du Lac Supérieur avec la découverte de la rivière

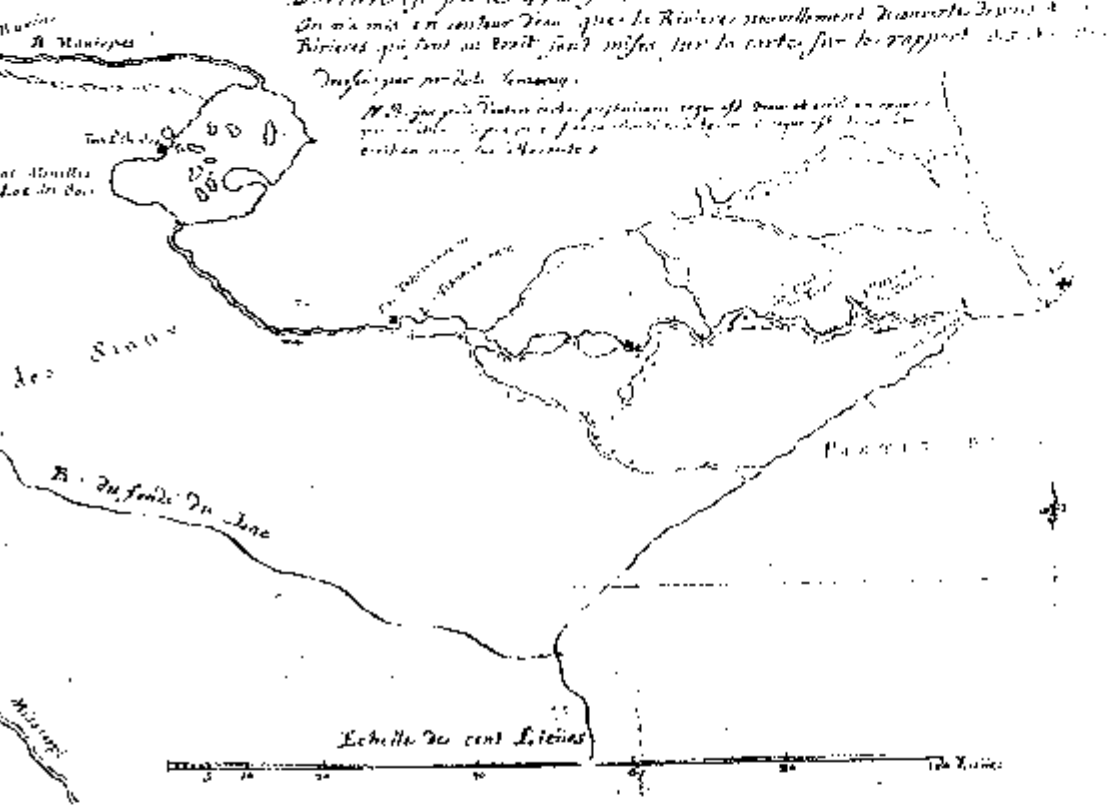
Carte d'une partie du Lac Supérieur avec la découverte de la Rivière.  
Depuis le grand portage A. jusqu'à la Barrière B. Le Fort St. Louis  
est construit dans le Lac des Bois, et dans le Lac Tekamouïen qui est  
qui porte le nom du Lac.

Le Fort Tekamouïen est par les 47° 15' de latitude le grand portage mesuré A. est par les 47° 15'  
le Fort de la Conception est par les 47° 27' le Fort du Lac des Bois est par les 47° 30'  
Barrière est par les 49 Degrés.

On m'a mis en doute que la Rivière nouvellement découverte de la Rivière de la  
Rivière qui font au Nord sont mis sur la carte sur le rapport de la Rivière de la

quelques autres voyageurs.

M. B. qui par l'usage de la boussole a vu que le lac est dans un sens  
qui est différent de celui qui est sur la carte et qui est dans le  
sens de la Rivière.



dupuis le grand portage... [dated 1733 and attributed to La Jemeraye].  
The locations of Fort Rouge, Fort la Reine, Fort Dauphin and Fort  
Bourbon must have been placed on the map after 1740.

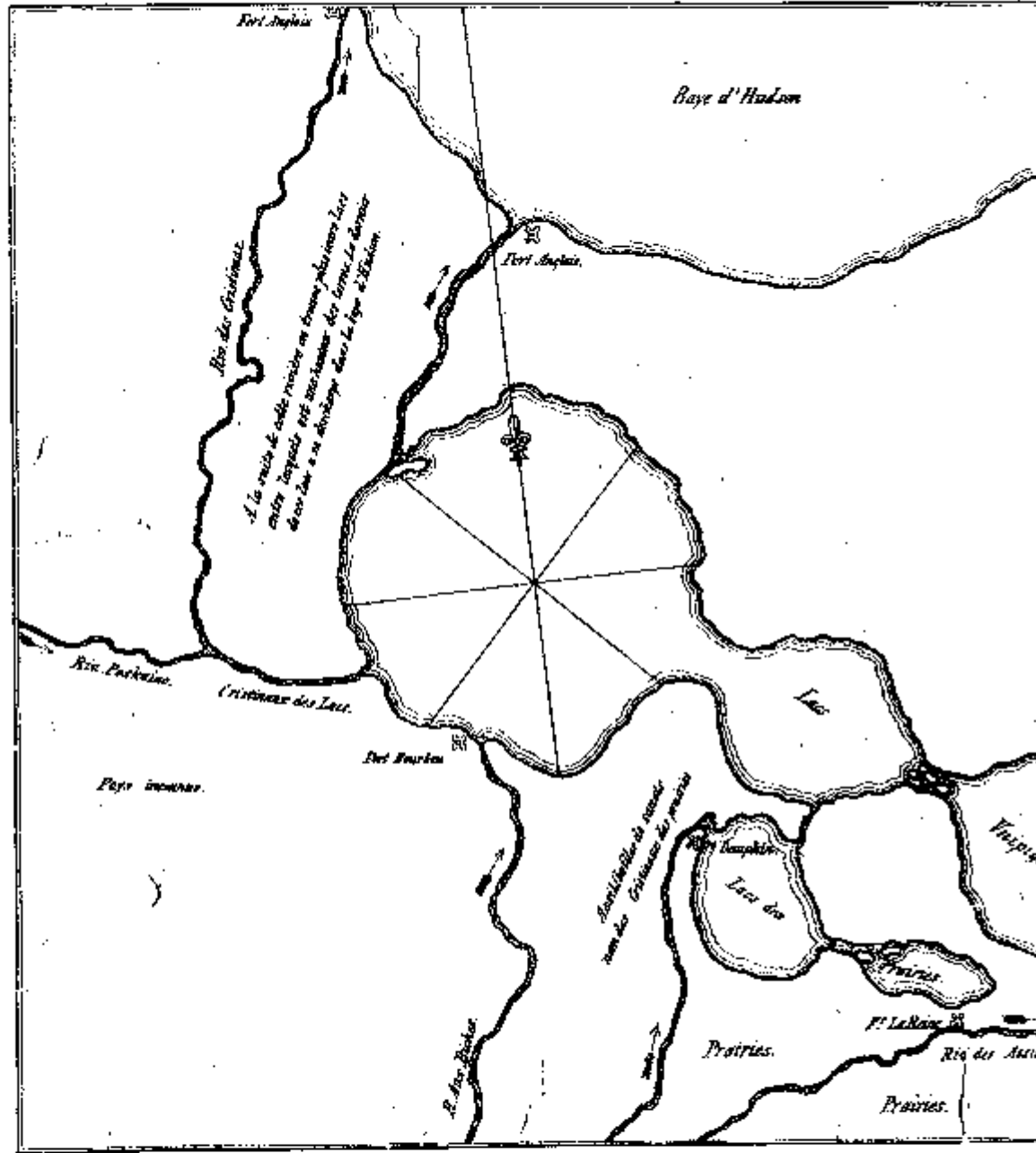
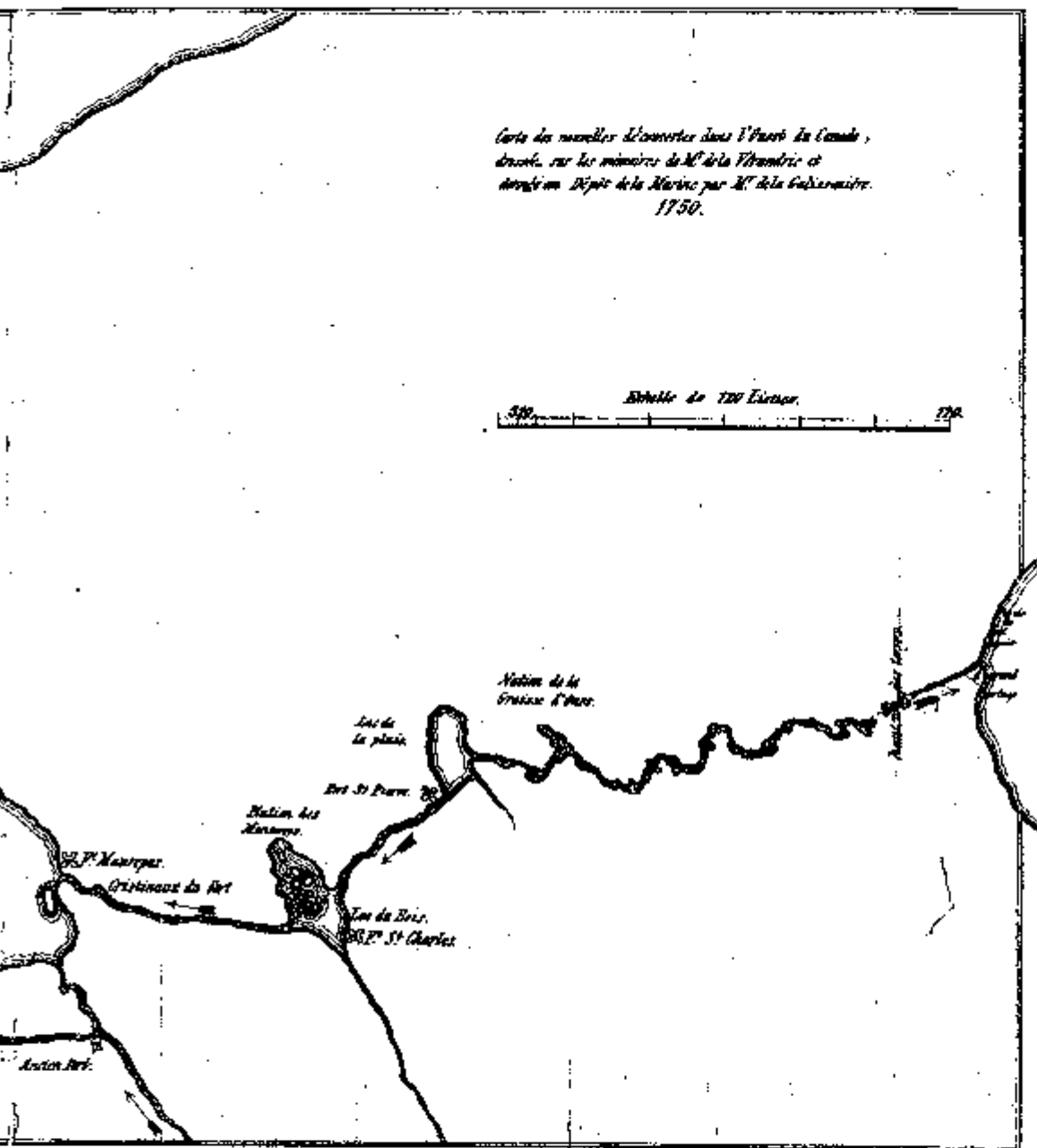


Figure 4. Manitoba Archives Collection: A map showing the locations of Fort Rouge, Fort Gibraltar I, Fort Gibraltar II,



and Fort Garry I, and Upper Fort Garry.

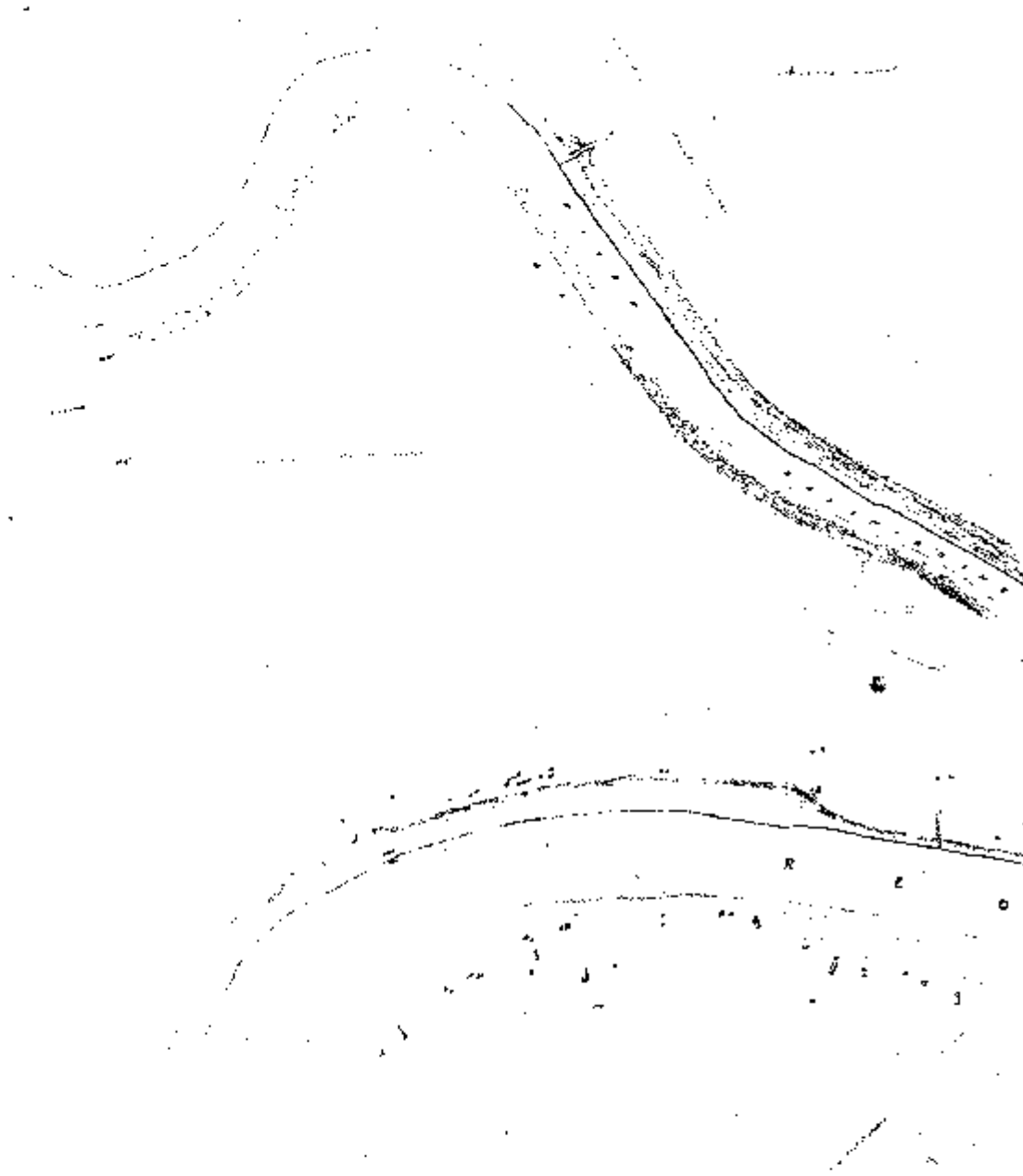


Figure 5. Manitoba Archives Collection General Survey of

General Survey  
 of  
**UPPER FORT GARRY**  
 & its Immediate Vicinity.

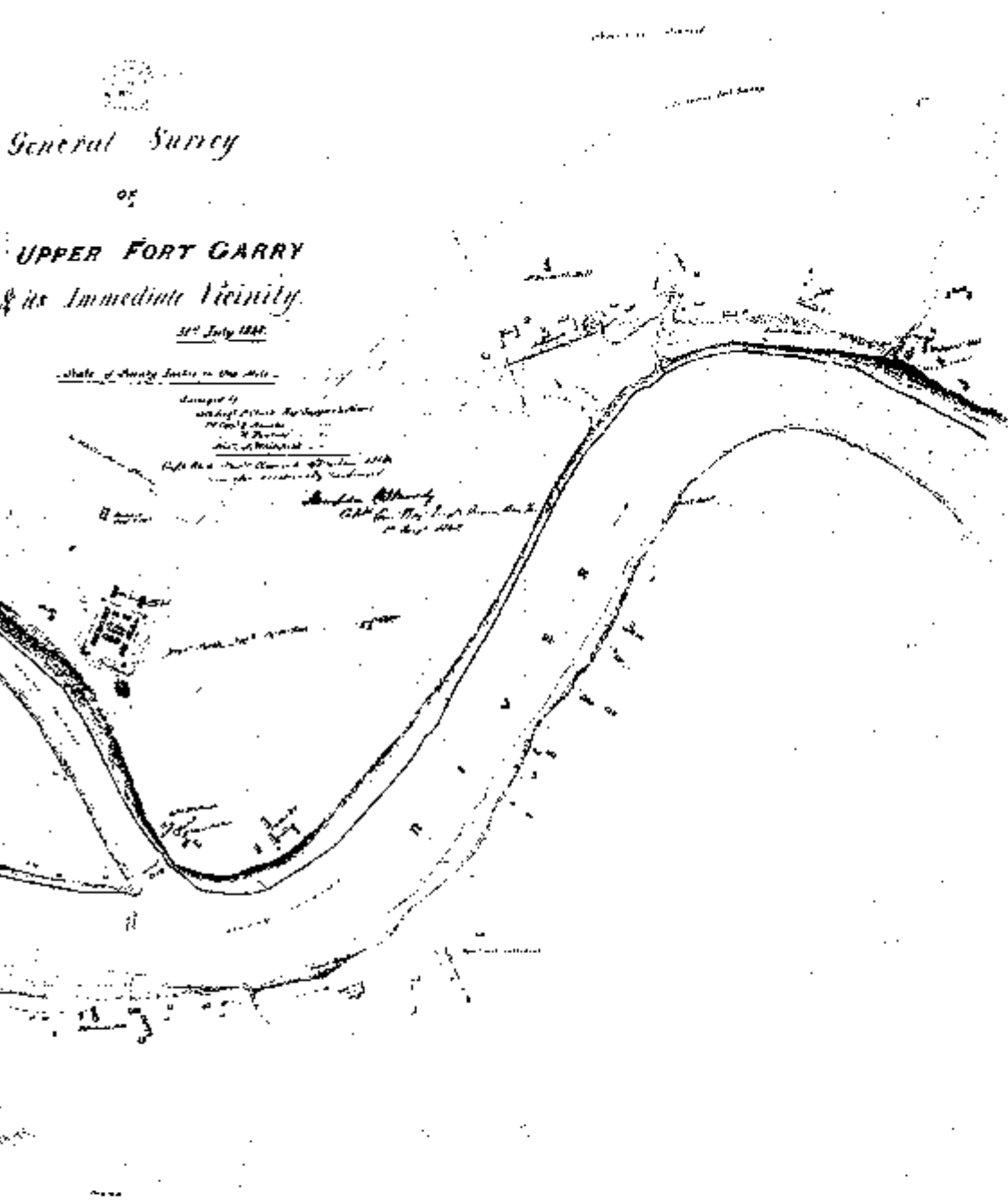
31<sup>st</sup> July 1848.

State of Survey taken on the site.

Surveyed by  
 William Mitchell Esq. Surveyor General  
 of the Province of Ontario  
 in the year 1848.

Reference to the plan of the  
 Survey of the Province of Ontario  
 in the year 1848.

London Ontario  
 31<sup>st</sup> July 1848



Upper Fort Garry and its Immediate Vicinity (1848).

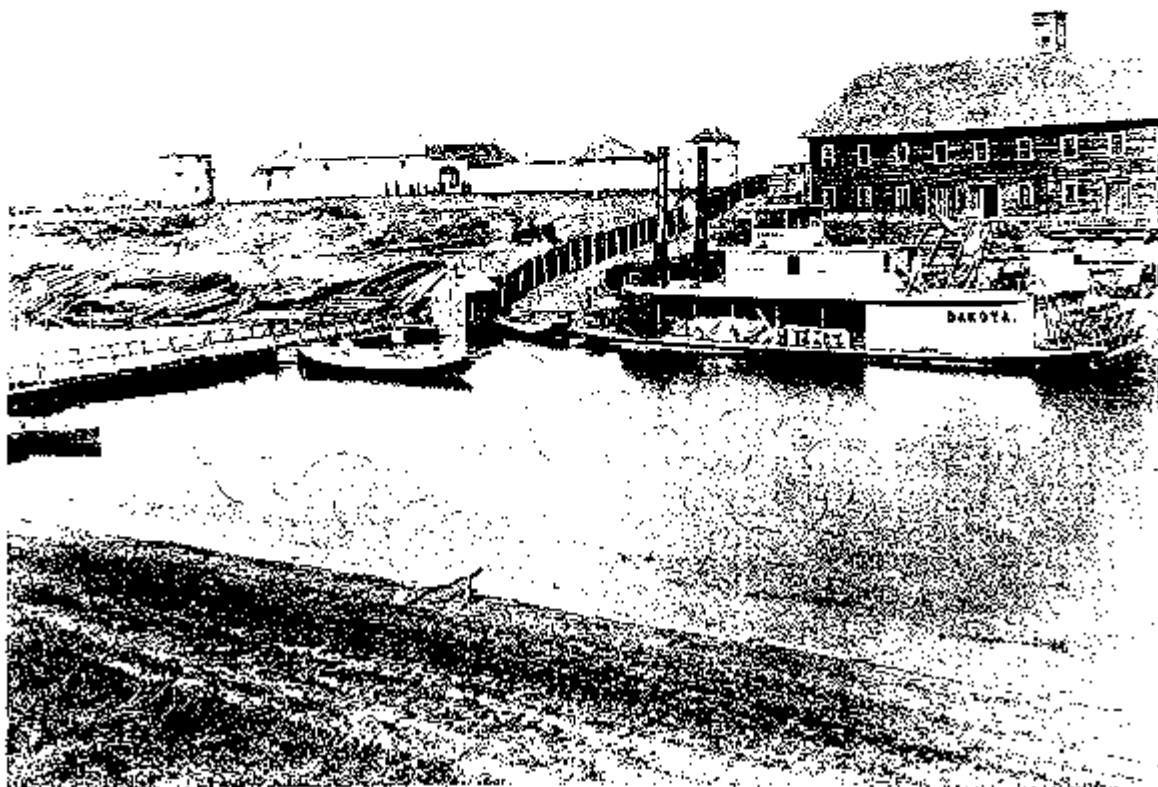


Figure 6. Public Archives of Canada (PA11337) Fort Garry, Assiniboine River with a drawbridge over it and the steamer, Dakota.



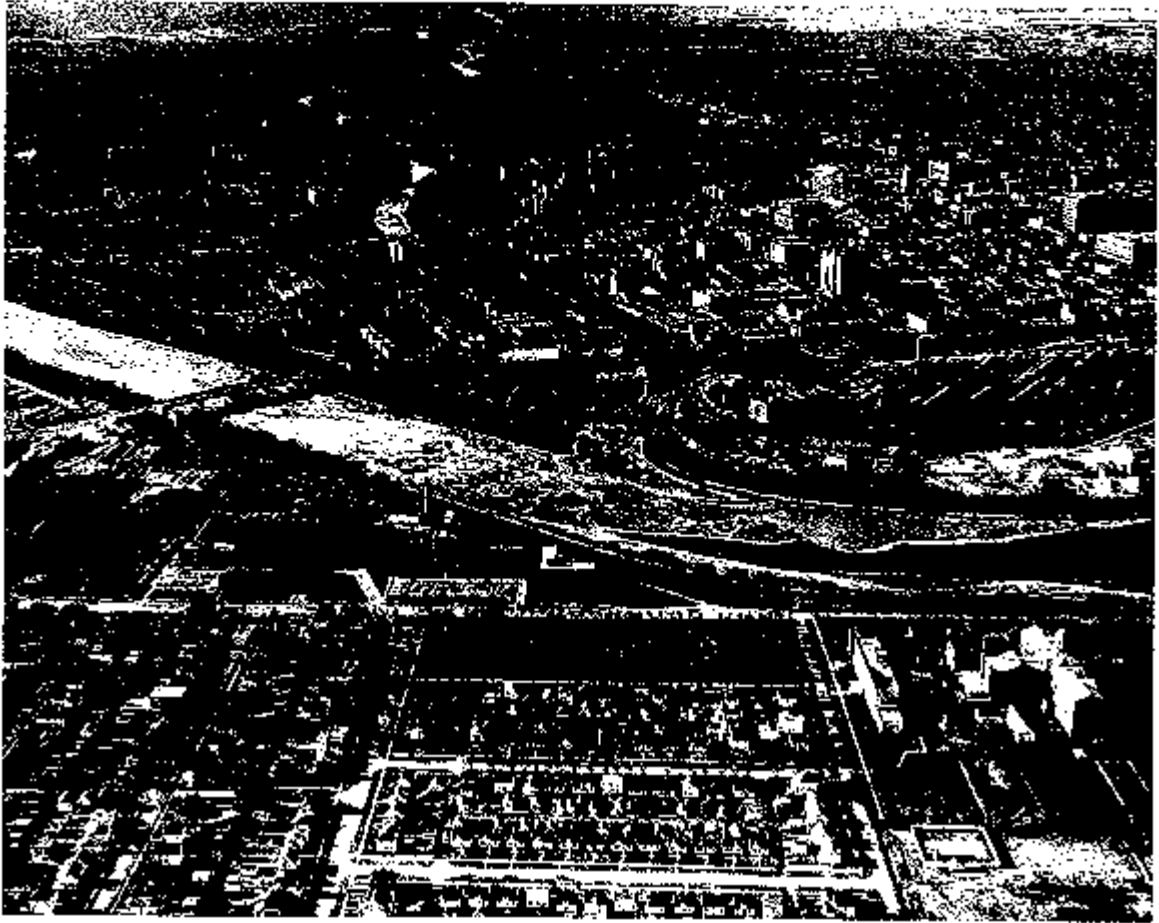
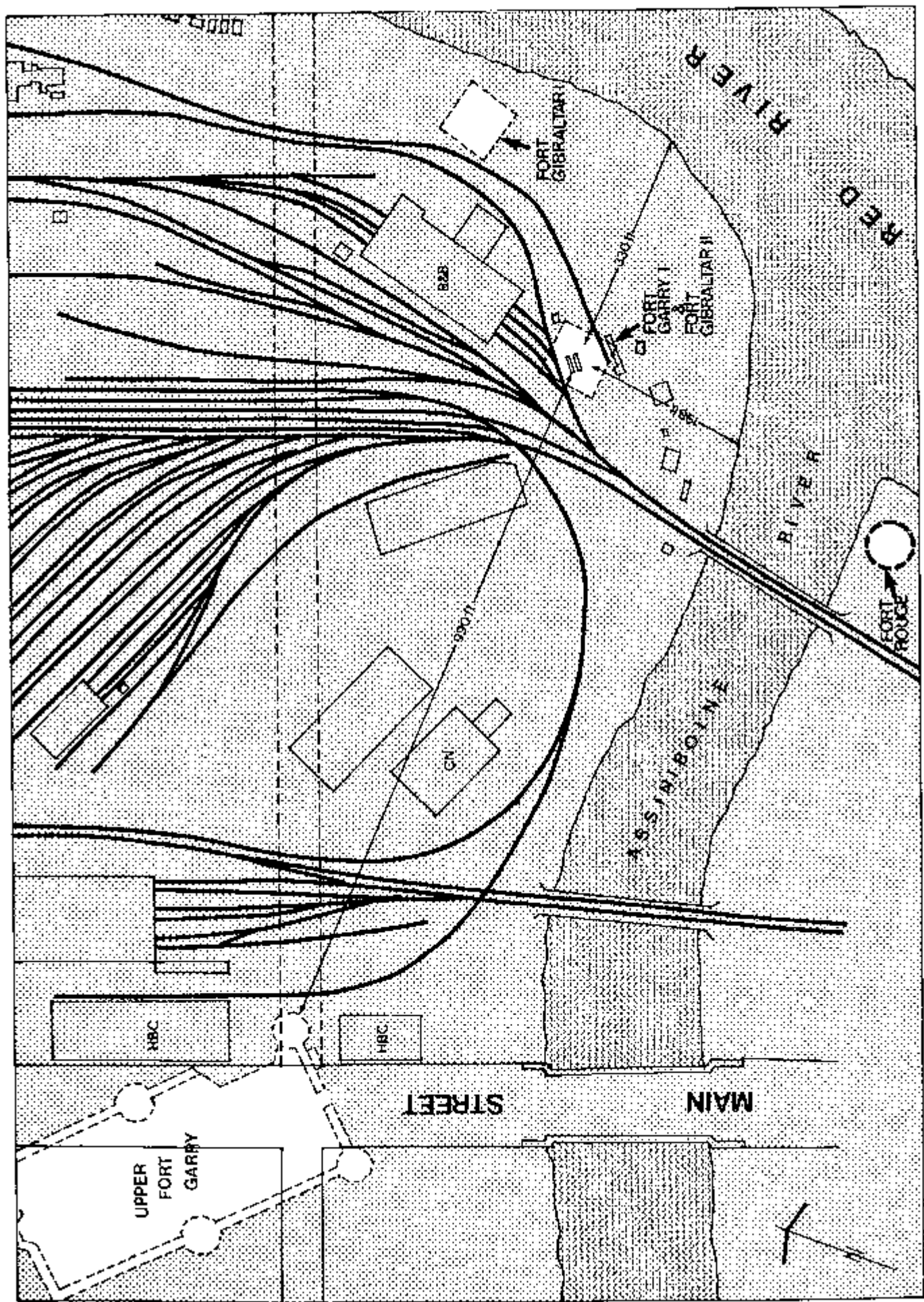


Figure 7. Manitoba Archives Collection, ca. 1960.



Approx. Scale 1 in. = 186 ft.

Figure 6. Junction of the Red & Assiniboine.

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