

# STATUS AND THE FUR TRADE IN THE NORTHERN DEPARTMENT, 1821-1870

GREGORY G. MONKS

Department of Anthropology  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3T 2N2, Canada

This paper constitutes a preliminary exploration of the relationship between social position (status) and material culture in the fur trade. The rationale for this undertaking is found in the scarcity of attempts to develop synthetic explanatory frameworks in fur trade archaeology (Adams 1981:43). The geographic scope includes the Hudson's Bay Company's Northern Department, and the temporal scope is 1821-1870, the so-called "monopoly period." This component of the fur trade was chosen because it constitutes a clearly bounded spatial and temporal entity within which distinctive cultural processes took place.

Social position (i.e., status) is defined here as the position held by an individual or a group in relation to an implicitly or explicitly recognized social hierarchy. It is also important here to distinguish between status within the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and outside of it. Within the HBC, the internal hierarchical organization, patterned along quasi-militaristic lines, was quite explicit (Livermore 1976:53). Outside the HBC, the relationships between individuals and/or groups were perhaps less explicit, but no less easily recognized by those involved, due to the Victorian British influence of the HBC (Livermore 1976:53).

Clearly, there are a number of factors that affect social position. The time period in question determines the configuration of the social hierarchy within which social positions exist. Change through time in social hierarchies is frequently modelled as a proliferation of social positions with increasing distinctiveness between extremes within the hierarchy.

Geographic location, particularly the dichotomy between Red River/non-Red River, would affect status in two ways. First, the existence of social groups outside the HBC in the non-Red River area was limited to aboriginal groups who were frequently regarded as belonging to a single group. Second, the existence of social groups both inside and outside the HBC in the Red River Settlement

meant that explicit and implicit hierarchies, and the attendant diversity of statuses, characterized this area. For these reasons, a discussion of status within the HBC could be conducted across the entire Northern Department whereas status outside the company would be discussed most profitably within the Red River Settlement. Within the latter exists the potential for integrating the explicit and implicit hierarchies so that variability in status and material remains for the entire Northern Department can be addressed synchronically and diachronically.

The occupation of an individual affected his status. The financial rewards derived from the job, and the public esteem in which the job was held, combined to influence heavily the social position of an incumbent. Strongly allied to occupation, and hence status, was ethnic affiliation. It is well established that certain ethnic groups were recruited by the HBC to fill certain kinds of positions and that there were social barriers in the hierarchy that limited upward and downward mobility (see Livermore 1976:38-53). The result was a tendency for individuals of the same ethnic affiliation, or a limited range of ethnic affiliations, to cluster in certain occupational categories. Given the ethnocentric character of the British upper class, it might be suggested as a testable hypothesis that the range of ethnic groups at a particular status level increased as one moved down the social hierarchy.

Social position of groups was also affected by sex. Males tended to dominate in the operation of the fur trade and the Red River Settlement, but women were critical elements in the social fabric of the Northern Department (Van Kirk 1981; Brown 1980). Relationships between males and females changed markedly during the monopoly period, especially vis a vis ethnicity and occupation, so toward the end of this period, the combination of sex and ethnicity might more reasonably account for the evolution of the Red River Settlement than traditional markers such as the Sayer Trial and the Riel

Rebellion (Pannekoek 1981:84).

Age is another factor related to status. Within the HBC, for example, clerks and apprentice clerks were recruited in their late teens and early twenties and constituted the junior ranks of the "gentlemen" class (Livermore 1976:44). They lived together in separate quarters, often called the Bachelor Hall, until such time as they were promoted, usually in their thirties (Livermore 1976:187). The example is merely a formalized reflection of the tendency for status to increase with age, at least within certain groups.

With these factors in mind, it is worth considering how social hierarchies might be manifested in space and time. Over space, there is the possibility of status being reflected both within sites and between sites. During the "monopoly period" it could be anticipated that social status differences would be present at every site. Furthermore, it might be expected that variation in social status would increase as site population increased. But, in spite of the fact that status differences within sites have been shown in historic archaeology (e.g., Losey 1973), such studies in the fur trade have been conspicuously absent. Intersite status variability is also to be expected due to the hierarchical structure of the HBC and the relative economic importance of each site. It would be appropriate to compare relative social position of equivalent groups between sites to see whether group status was affected by the relative economic importance of the site. Given the elitist character of HBC structure, it could be expected that the greatest status variability will be shown at the upper end of the social scale.

The question of who held what relative status is an interesting one. Within the HBC, the hierarchy was quite clear. The overseas Governor stood alone at the top. Beneath him were a group of Chief Factors, and below them were Chief Traders. Clerks were near the bottom of the "gentlemen" class, followed only by apprentice clerks. Post Masters stood below clerks and represented an intermediate group between "gentlemen" and "servants." The rank of Post Master was the highest to which a "servant" could rise. Servants ranked below Post Masters, and below servants stood tradesmen then labourers (Livermore 1976:38-53). Within each group in this hierarchy there were ranked sub-groups, each with its own function within the HBC (Livermore 1976:53). As the Red River Settlement grew, however, and its populace came to depend less and less on the HBC, this hierarchical structure within the settlement began to break down. This point will be mentioned again later.

Outside the HBC, the hierarchy is more difficult

to describe, although settlers' relationships with the HBC provide some clues. The Governor of Assiniboia stood at the head of the "outside" populace, but on occasion the HBC's Governor and the Governor of Assiniboia were the same person. Below the Governor of Assiniboia, stood administrators and functionaries such as the Recorder. While it cannot be stated with certainty, one suspects that religious personnel (ministers, priests, missionaries, nuns) ranked near the upper end of the social hierarchy. Agriculturalists, a broad and diverse group, made up the bulk of the permanent population in the settlement and appear to have operated in the middle to lower levels of the social hierarchy. It was from this group that most of the "servants," labourers, and tradesmen were drawn, and much of the occasional and piece work required by the HBC was done by members of this group (Livermore 1976:51-53). Hunters remained at the bottom of the "outside" hierarchy, not because the function they performed was unimportant, but because the ethnic composition and lifestyle of hunters was perceived as undesirable by people in the upper levels of both "inside" and "outside" hierarchies.

The "outside" social hierarchy was not a static phenomenon either. Subsequent to the Sayer trial of 1849, and the commencement of steamboat traffic between the Red River Settlement and St. Paul in 1859, an entrepreneurial group quickly expanded, grew independent of the HBC, and frequently crossed former group boundaries. Indeed, it may be that, instead of "racism" acting as a flashpoint for social change in the settlement (Pannekoek 1981:84), it was challenges to status boundaries, represented by the Ballenden scandal, the Sayer trial and the Riel Rebellion, that represented critical junctures in the cultural processes at work in the settlement.

Impermanent groups were also incorporated into the social hierarchy at Red River. The military is a case in point, but even this group was not homogeneous in its social relationship to the HBC and the settlement. The Sixth Regiment, garrisoned at Upper and Lower Forts Garry from 1846-1848, was brought from England by the HBC to keep the settlers "in line." They clearly represented the instrument of force employed by a state level society to maintain its version of law and order. In this capacity, the military was an appendage of the top levels of the HBC hierarchy and stood in a social position immediately under the HBC Governor and above the settlement population. Indeed, the Commanding Officer of the Sixth Regiment acted as Governor of Assiniboia. The Fifty-sixth Chelsea Pensioners and the Royal Canadian Rifles, on the

other hand, were quartered in the settlement instead of at Upper and Lower Forts Garry, and their function was to maintain internal order for the benefit of the settlers, rather than to impose an external rule on them (Ingersoll 1945:17). Their status, therefore, would have been less than the Sixth Regiment, probably around the middle to upper levels of the "outside" society.

It seems that, early in the "monopoly period," the HBC social hierarchy heavily influenced the social position of both employees and nonemployees in the Northern Department. Throughout the course of this period, however, especially in the Red River Settlement, the growing and increasingly independent population was evolving a more complex social hierarchy that gradually eclipsed that of the HBC.

Historians have for some time discussed Canadian frontier contexts, but much of this discussion has centered on Upper Canada. It is intriguing to note their observations, however, for the potential applications to the Northern Department. The implicit or explicit model of frontier society evolving from simple to complex is widely held (Turner 1983; Hofstadter 1968:5; Careless 1970:76,78; Lewis 1976:13-14). Careless (1970) identifies a difference in elaborateness of social hierarchies in urban versus rural contexts. In urban contexts, an upper class consisting of officials is distinct from a middle class of merchants, shopkeepers and skilled craftsmen which, in turn, is distinct from a lower class consisting of wage labourers, many of whom were immigrants. In rural contexts, social distinctions are less evident. A broad agrarian middle class is internally differentiated by wealth which is directly related to the length of time a farmer has been established. It has also been pointed out that the urban upper class was generally in close social contact with the British garrison, where one existed (Careless 1970:76). It has further been observed that frontier populations tended to be indifferent to the institutions to which they gave their support. Circumstances of convenience and waves of enthusiasm governed transitory attachments to institutions or groups (Clark 1970:182).

In the Northern Department's "monopoly period" there was indeed a tendency toward increased social complexity. The earlier fur trade had maintained a relatively simple social hierarchy, but one that was imposed and explicit. In that respect, the fur trade frontier can be seen to differ from other frontiers that emerged without the benefit of formal internal organization. The differential elaborateness of social hierarchies between larger nucleated populations and small dispersed ones is paralleled in the Northern Department. While a slower

rate of change in social hierarchies is evident at dispersed trading and provisioning posts, the relatively large, dense population at Red River maintained two elaborate parallel hierarchies. The binary character of the HBC hierarchy, "gentlemen" versus "servants," does not reflect the three-part social classification outlined for urban Upper Canada, but the placement of "officials" at the top of the social hierarchy is consistent in both cases. Internal differentiation of social groups is also a feature of both areas, as is the affiliation of the urban class with the military, especially in the early part of the "monopoly period."

The loyalty of the frontier populations to existing institutions is an interesting observation, which could be evaluated as a hypothesis. One might expect, for example, that loyalty to a given institution would vary directly with the benefits received from it. In the Northern Department, during the period in question, the majority of institutions were Victorian British. The bulk of the population at Red River, however, was not. It would not be a surprise, therefore, to find that social groups at the lower end of the "outside" hierarchy were more heavily involved in free trade with Americans, for example, than those further up the ladder. The lower members of the HBC hierarchy, as employees, were obligated to remain loyal to the institutions of their employers.

Social status may be reflected in many ways, but the material remains available for archaeological study can be examined in terms of type, range of types, and quantity within types. It is beyond the scope of this paper to present an exhaustive list of all remains that could be considered status indicators. Extant and future studies will compile this list. It is important to note, however, that information on status can be expected not only from the artifacts, but also from structural features, faunal remains, floral remains, and spatial distributions.

Research in progress at Upper Fort Garry has, as one of its principle foci, the examination of social stratification. During the "monopoly period," the fort was the social, economic and military headquarters of the Northern Department. It was also the focus, after its construction in 1836, of the Red River Settlement (Guinn 1980:82) which, as I have suggested elsewhere (Monks 1983), can be described as a "frontier community" in Lewis' (1976, 1977) sense.

Excavations at the site in 1981, 1982, and 1983, were spatially limited to the southwest corner of the fort, the remainder being inaccessible. Test excavations had been conducted in 1978 (Priess 1980) and 1979 (Kelly 1980) adjacent to the wall and gate

at the north end of the fort, but the materials recovered from those excavations are not included in this report. The southwest corner of the fort was shown to contain the foundation of the fort's west wall, the foundation of a large building inside the fort, and two privy/refuse pits. The latter deposits contained the vast majority of the fur trade artifacts recovered by this project. These deposits were particularly informative, however, because they were water saturated and therefore contained large quantities of organic remains. The remaining materials are being analyzed under my direction.

Preliminary analyses have shown that the deeper of the two privy/refuse pits was used at least during the Sixth Regiment garrison of the fort from 1846 until 1848. The second pit, much shallower than the first, appears to have been deposited within the last two years of the fort's existence (1880-1882). The potential therefore exists to consider and compare social processes at two different points in time.

Given the exploratory nature of current investigations into the characteristics of material assemblages associated with different social positions, a first step in the present investigation is the description of an assemblage and association of that assemblage with a group of known status. The deeper privy/refuse pit contained the remains of the Sixth Regiment garrison. The very fact that the earlier of the two pits indicates a military presence suggests that change through time, in social structure and means of social control, may be reflected in material remains. A military presence in the principle site of the Northern Department also confirms the observation made for Upper Canada that the British social elite maintained close contacts with the military whenever possible (Careless 1970:76).

Beyond this, a number of remains derived from the military bespeak a high social status. C.T. Shay's (personal communication 1983) work on the botanical remains reflects the military's status. The faunal remains are in the early stages of analysis, but it is still possible to make some preliminary statements. Company records from Lower Fort Garry pertaining to 1861-1862 show the following distribution of meat (Livermore 1976:129):

Male Servants — 4330 lb. pemican; 4976 lb. fresh beef; 2275 lb. salt beef; 1038 lb. dried meat; 1237 lb. salt pork; 181 lb. sturgeon; 6 lb. ham.  
Gentlemen — 2735 lb. fresh beef; 84 ducks; 48 doz. eggs; 507 whole fish; 31 fowl (chickens); 9 geese; 233 lb. ham; 437 lb. mutton; 8 sturgeon.

There is clearly a dichotomy between gentlemen and servants on the basis of variety, quantity, and freshness. Servants received preserved meats, whereas gentlemen received fresh meat. Servants received pork but no mutton, where the reverse was

true for gentlemen. Ham was eaten in far greater quantity by gentlemen than by servants, and the quantity and variety of fish eaten by gentlemen far exceeded that of servants. Gentlemen exclusively ate birds (ducks, chickens, geese) and eggs.

If the argument is valid that the military was closely associated with the upper levels of the HBC hierarchy, one expects to find faunal remains similar to those of HBC gentlemen associated with at least some of the military remains. This expectation is met in the first privy/refuse pit. A "grab sample" of skeletal elements shows that sheep are minimally represented, followed by cow, pig, and bison in increasing rank order of element frequency. Among avian remains mallard duck is minimally represented, and the preponderance of skeletal elements belongs to wild or domestic chicken. Sturgeon is not represented in the sample, whereas bullhead, minnow, drum and catfish are minimally represented, and goldeye and walleye are represented by the greatest, but still small, numbers of elements. Numerous eggshell fragments were also recovered from this deposit.

The profile of this assemblage, if the sample is any indication, mirrors that of the HBC gentlemen's rations. The bird, fish and egg remains point out the similarity most clearly. Mammal remains diverge from the rations allotted to HBC gentlemen in the scarcity of sheep remains, the relative importance of pig remains, and the abundance of bison remains. The scarcity of sheep remains is a puzzle, but it may reflect a subtle difference in status between HBC gentlemen and military. On the other hand, sheep may have been spread more thinly in 1846-1848, due to the sudden population increase caused by the arrival of the Sixth Regiment. Ingersoll (1945:16) reports the purchase of cattle, pigs, sheep, and grain from settlers to support this garrison. The pig remains may represent fresh or salt pork, or ham. Further work on butchering patterns and storage technology is required here. Cow as an important resource is no surprise, but the importance of bison is unanticipated. Again, subtle status differences may be indicated, or the stress of the preferred resource with the arrival of troops may have brought this resource more frequently into use.

Among the artifacts, there are several categories of goods that suggest high status of the users of this privy/refuse pit. Blue transfer printed Copeland/Spode fragments comprise the vast majority of ceramics, but there are also significant numbers of brown and green patterns as well. Hamilton (1982:54-55) has indicated that non-blue transfer printed Copeland/Spode ceramics were relatively

more expensive than the blue patterns. The proportions from Upper Fort Garry alone are not proof of high status. Confirmation of status will depend on comparative study of ceramics from a variety of other sites.

Stemmed glassware has been recovered from military deposits. As a fragile import, such material was unlikely to have been generally available. The consumption of wine from such glasses is indicated from both the archaeological and historical records. The latter also record the consumption, by regimental members, of champagne and other imported delicacies at large dinners (Ingersoll 1945:16).

Seventeen wives and 19 children are reported to have accompanied the Sixth Regiment. One assumes these were officers' dependants. The privy/refuse pits contain large quantities of cloth and leather fragments, among which are printed Indian cottons, silk brocades, and children's leather boots. A child's potty seat was also recovered. These items indicate the expected status differences within the military, based on age, sex, and military function. The items also imply the social status that military officers were expected to occupy in relation to the HBC and the Red River Settlement.

Space does not permit a parallel examination of the second privy/refuse pit, or a temporal comparison between the two, much less comparisons outside the fort. The foregoing discussion, however, should indicate some of the factors that need to be considered in an examination of status differences in the western fur trade based on material remains. It is hoped, too, that this brief consideration of some data from Upper Fort Garry has shown that a variety of material remains hold the potential to reveal and identify social position of groups and sub-groups. Of critical importance to the investigation of social status is a comparative approach between sites. Encouragement should be given to studies that attempt to apply the concept of status variability as a synthesizing concept at the regional level in the fur trade.

#### REFERENCES CITED

- Adams, G.  
1981 *Fur Trade Archaeology in Western Canada: A Critical Evaluation and Bibliography*. *Saskatchewan Archaeology* 2(1 and 2):39-53.
- Brown, J.S.H.  
1980 *Strangers in Blood*. University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver.
- Careless, J.M.S.  
1970 Upper Canada in a Metropolitan Context: A Historian's Analysis. In *The Frontier Thesis and the Canadas: The Debate on the Impact of the Canadian Environment*, edited by M.S. Cross, pp. 76-78. Copp Clark, Toronto.
- Clark, S.D.  
1970 The Commercial Frontier: A Sociological Interpretation. In *The Frontier Thesis and the Canadas: The Debate on the Impact of the Canadian Environment*, edited by M.S. Cross, pp. 180-185. Copp Clark, Toronto.
- Guinn, R.  
1980 *The Red-Assiniboine Junction: A Land Use and Structural History, 1770-1980*. Manuscript Report 355. Parks Canada, Ottawa.
- Hamilton, J.F.A.  
1982 Ceramics Destined for York Factory: An Examination of Hudson's Bay Company Archival Sources. *Material History Bulletin* 16:47-68.
- Hofstadter, R.  
1968 Introduction. In *Turner and the Sociology of the Frontier*, edited by R. Hofstadter and S.M. Lipsitt, pp. 3-8. Basic Books, New York.
- Ingersoll, W.E.  
1945 Redcoats at Fort Garry. *The Beaver* 275(2):14-17.
- Kelly, M.  
1980 Archaeological Investigations at Upper Fort Garry, 1979. Ms. on file, Manitoba Historical Resources Branch, Winnipeg.
- Lewis, K.E.  
1976 *Camden: A Frontier Town*. Anthropological Studies 2. Occasional Papers of the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, The University of South Carolina, Columbia.
- 1977 Sampling the Archaeological Frontier: Regional Models and Component Analysis. In *Research Strategies in Historic Archaeology*, edited by S. South, pp.151-201. Academic Press, New York.
- Livemore, C.  
1976 *Lower Fort Garry, the Fur Trade and the Settlement at Red River*. Manuscript Report Number 202. Parks Canada, Ottawa.
- Losey, T. (editor)  
1973 *An Interdisciplinary Study of Fort Enterprise, Northwest Territories, 1970*. Occasional Paper 9, Boreal Institute of Northern Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton.
- Monks, G.G.  
1983 The Frontier Model, the Western Fur Trade and Upper Fort Garry. Paper presented to the XVI Annual Meeting of the Canadian Archaeological Association, Halifax, Nova Scotia.
- Pannekoek, F.  
1981 The Historiography of the Red River Settlement. *Prairie Forum* 6(1):75-85.
- Priess, P.  
1980 *Archaeological Investigations at Upper Fort Garry, 1978*. Parks Canada Research Bulletin 125. Ottawa.
- Turner, F.J.  
1983 *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. American Historical Association, Annual Report. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington D.C.
- Van Kirk, S.M.  
1981 *Many Tender Ties*. Watson and Dwyer, Winnipeg.



**STATUS, STRUCTURE AND  
STRATIFICATION:**

CC  
72  
.4  
.U22  
1782

**CURRENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
RECONSTRUCTIONS**

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE SIXTEENTH  
ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

Edited by:

Marc Thompson  
Maria Teresa Garcia  
Francois J. Kense

**THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY**

The University of Calgary  
Archaeological Association, 1985

ISBN: 0-88953-065-3

STATUS  
STRUCTURE  
AND STRATIFICATION

CURRENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECONSTRUCTIONS

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SIXTEENTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

EDITED BY  
MARC THOMPSON  
MARIA TERESA GARCIA  
FRANCOIS J. KENSE



**CHACMOOL**

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY