Manitoba

Lower Fort Garry
National Historic Park
The Red River area had been important to the fur trade as early as 1738, when La Vérendrye, in the name of the King of France, founded Fort Rouge at the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. Around 1800, the Hudson’s Bay Company began to establish its authority in the region, and in 1821 it built a fort near the site of Fort Rouge as a trading post and as a depot for shipments of pemmican (dried bison meat).

This fort, the original, or Upper, Fort Garry, which was named after Nicholas Garry, Deputy Governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company, was severely damaged by flooding in 1826. Governor (later Sir) George Simpson decided to replace it with a fort to be built on higher ground. A location 19 miles downstream from the Upper Fort was chosen, and work on Lower Fort Garry (also called the Lower Fort or Stone Fort) began in 1831. The Fort was finished in 1847 with the completion of the wall surrounding the buildings.

Simpson hoped that his new fort would replace the Upper Fort as the centre of the Red River colony. However, the settlement at the Upper Fort was too firmly established, and the junction of the rivers was the natural place for the growth of commerce; thus, in spite of floods, it prospered and eventually grew into the city of Winnipeg. Although the Lower Fort never attained the status which Simpson had hoped for, it saw much that is exciting and important in the history of the West and of Canada.

For a period of eighty years a wide variety of activities, commercial, agricultural, and social, took place at the Lower Fort. From 1831 until the Fort was closed in 1911 it housed a retail sales shop where goods of all kinds were sold, both for cash and for furs, to Indians, Métis, and whites. A brewery, sawmill, and flour-mill were located in the Fort complex, and the employees of the Hudson’s Bay Company grew crops in the fields outside the walls.

Lower Fort Garry’s associations go far beyond the range of the merely commercial into the story of Canada’s military, social, and political development. The calm routine of the Fort was often shattered by unexpected occurrences which thrust it into the mainstream of historical events. In 1846, during the Oregon boundary crisis, when war between Britain and the United States seemed imminent, a detachment of the 6th Regiment of Foot arrived from England to be stationed at the Fort. The anticipated American invasion did not occur, but the walls of the southwest bastion, still blackened by soot from the troops’ cooking fires, record the episode.

In the mid-19th century the Fort housed a number of important historical figures. Among these was Dr. John Rae, the Arctic explorer, who lived at the Fort while planning the Franklin Relief Expedition. The Rt. Rev. Dr. David Anderson, first Bishop of Rupert’s Land, also lived for a time at the Fort, as did Thomas Simpson, another famous Arctic explorer.

In the winter of 1869-70 the Fort was used as a rallying-point by Colonel Stoughton...
Dennis and some of the settlers opposed to the provisional government of Louis Riel. Riel himself, with a number of his followers, made a surprise visit to the Fort in an unsuccessful search for his chief political enemy, Dr. (later Sir) John Schultz. Later in the year 1870, the Fort was occupied by the 2nd Battalion, Quebec Rifles, part of the Red River Expeditionary Force sent west to suppress the Red River Rebellion. Six companies were garrisoned at the Fort.

In 1871 the Fort was the scene of the signing of Indian Treaty Number One, between the Government of Canada and the Cree and Swampy Cree tribes, an event which set the pattern for the other treaties which permitted the peaceful settlement of the Canadian West. Over a thousand Indians gathered outside the west wall of the Fort, where the highway now runs, to negotiate the treaty with the government Commissioner, Wemyss Simpson. The raw recruits learning to ride were re­peatedly thrown from their horses to the frozen ground. However, by June 1874 the North-West Mounted Police (now the RCMP) received its first training at the Lower Fort. During the 1860’s and 1870’s, the importance of the Fort as a trading centre decreased, and agriculture became paramount. Barley and wheat were grown in the fields outside the walls of the Fort, vegetables were raised in the Fort gardens, and meat was pickled in barrels—all for sale or export to the Company’s more distant posts. Such industries as boat-building, sawing, lime-burning, iron-working, and brewing flour­ished during this period. Most of this work was done in buildings, no longer standing, which were located at the mouth of the creek to the south of the Fort.

The advent of new methods of pro­visioning and transportation, the importance of these ventures declined, and the Fort was used for a number of years as a summer residence by the Commissioners of the Company, who moved out from Winnipeg with their families. In 1913 the Fort was leased to a group of Winnipeg business and professional men incorporated as the Motor Country Club, and was used as a golf and social club until 1983.

In 1951 Lower Fort Garry was given to the nation by the Hudson’s Bay Company and declared a National Historic Park by the government. The present work of restoration and reconstruction was started in 1964. The Buildings of the Fort

1. The Big House. This was begun in 1831 and completed the next year as a residence for George Simpson, Governor of Rupert’s Land. It has been restored to the period of 1852, at which time it was occupied by Governor Eden Colville and his wife Anne. It was this building which served as an Officers’ Quarters for the 6th Regiment of Foot, the 2nd Battalion Quebec Rifles, and the North-West Mounted Police.
2. The fur loft building. This contained a retail sales shop on the ground floor. On the second and third floors was storage space for dry goods and furs. The original fur press used by the Hudson’s Bay Company has survived, and some of the marks used to distinguish the bales belonging to the Company may be seen on the walls of the upper storeys.
3. Museum building. This building is a modern reconstruction of one of the Company’s retail stores which stood on this site. It now houses a museum and offices.
4. The south-west bastion. This was used as a wash-house and a cook-house by the 6th Regiment of Foot in 1846-47. It was later used as a storehouse and still later as a summer house for the children of the Company’s Commissioner.
5. The north-west bastion. This was originally the Fort’s ice-house; it now houses the public washrooms.
6. The main or front gate. On the gate pillars are carved the names of some of the soldiers of the Red River Expedition garrisoned at the Fort in 1870-71.
7. The north-east bastion. This was the Company powder-magazine.
8. The penitentiary building. Originally a storehouse, it was used from 1871 to 1877 as the Manitoba provincial penitentiary, and subsequently as an asylum for the insane. Some of the original “solitary” cells have recently been discovered below ground level.
9. This wooden building, built in 1885, was used as an office by Dr. James Young, the asylum doctor.
10. The north-west bastion. This was the main Fort bake-oven. Individual bake-ovens were also located behind the penitentiary building and at the rear of the Big House.
11. This building was originally a residence for Hudson’s Bay Company employees. It was used as a stable by the North-West Mounted Police during their stay at the Fort.
12. The engineer’s cottage. Built in the 1840’s, it was occupied for a number of years by J. Abell, the Hudson’s Bay Company engineer in charge of the various industries at the Fort.
13. The Fraser House. This building was originally constructed by James Fraser around 1850. Born in Scotland, Fraser came to the Red River Settlement in 1815 to work on a hay farm. The house was moved to this site from its original location in West Kildonan. It represents a typical homestead of the Red River Settlement period.