Brief History of Fort Langley

The original Fort Langley was established in 1827 by the Hudson's Bay Company. It served as part of a network of fur trade forts operating in the New Caledonia and Columbia Districts (now British Columbia and northern Washington). The fort maintained a good and peaceful trade in furs, salmon, and even cranberries with the local native inhabitants. Because of its strategic position on the Fraser River, the post developed into a regional depot and forwarding centre. European trade goods and supplies destined for the interior were received from the arriving steamers, re-packaged and sent inland from this fort and the District's outgoing fur, fish, and cranberry exports were prepared for overseas shipment. Langley also blazed the first useable all-Canadian route from the coast to the interior and with its sister posts helped preserve British interests west of the Rockies.

British Interests on the Pacific Slope
The first British interest was sparked by the rich supply of sea otter pelts brought back by mariners working the Pacific coast about 1793 and the abundance of fur collected by the North West Company in its exploration of the inland trade of the Pacific Slope from 1811. The Coast Salish had some control over the maritime fur trade, as it was a reciprocal relationship. Both the natives and the fur traders agreed upon price and goods traded. Each group's satisfaction ensured the continuation of the trading relationship.

After the union of the North West and Hudson's Bay companies in 1821, a Royal Licence was issued to the reconstituted Hudson's Bay Company, giving it a monopoly on trade west of the Rockies. The Hudson's Bay Company thus became Britain's custodian of the Pacific Northwest. This monopoly, however, could not exclude American competition. The Pacific region, then known as the Columbia District or the Oregon territory, had been jointly occupied by Britain and the United States since 1818, and commerce between latitudes 40' and 54'40' was open by international treaty. Although British traders dominated the interior, furs often found their way to American ships, which controlled the coast.

The Plans for A New Fort
During his first visit to the Columbia District in 1824, Governor George Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company worked out a plan to end American competition. He aimed by intensive hunting and underselling, to win control of the coast and the Columbia River region and to establish them as frontier zones to protect the company's valuable resources in the northern interior.

The heart of Simpson's strategy was a new depot to be erected near the mouth of the Fraser River. The existing depot, Fort George, was south of the Columbia River, which the Governor expected to become the United States border. In that event, the Company's supply line to its in-land posts might be blocked.

Looking to the Fraser River to provide a new access to the interior, a reconnaissance party led by Chief Trader James McMillan made a preliminary survey of the lower Fraser Valley in November 1824. Three years later, a site on the south bank of the Fraser near the Salmon River was selected for a prospective depot named Fort Langley in honour of Thomas Langley, a director of the

Company.

The First Fort is Built
Construction of the first Fort Langley commenced on August 1, 1827. The new fort measured 41 m by 36.6m and was solidly enclosed by a palisade 4.6m high. Buildings in the new complex included the Big House where the officers were quartered, a building with three compartments to house other ranks, a spacious store, one "good" house and a smaller house with two rooms and a kitchen. Two bastions equipped with artillery completed the new fort.

From the first years of the fort’s existence, the Company men married local native women, and these families lived at the fort. The employees were a unique social and ethnic mix of people, including English, French Canadian, Scottish, Hawaiian, Iroquois, and Coast Salish. Country marriages were encouraged by the Company and supported by the Native peoples, as inter-cultural relations and economic trade were enhanced. Coast Salish wives in the fort became linguists and cultural intermediaries, and also became an unoffical workforce doing essential work for the fort.

Scarcely had Fort Langley been comfortably established when Simpson discovered he had been too confident. The Fraser River was an impossible route for regular traffic. A terrifying trip through the Fraser Canyon in October 1828 convinced Governor Simpson that the river was un-navigable and that the Columbia-Okanagan supply route must be retained. The position of Pacific Depot went to Fort Vancouver on the north side of the Columbia, but Fort Langley was destined nevertheless to become an influential force in Company operations.

Economy and Trade at Fort Langley
From 1827 to 1833, Fort Langley played a major role in the British coastal offensive against the American traders. More than half of the 3,000 beaver collected by the Hudson's Bay Company on the coast in 1831, were from the new Fraser River establishment. Under the astute direction of Chief-Trader Archibald McDonald, Langley systematically undersold its American competitors and soon commanded the trade with Indian tribes throughout Vancouver Island, the Fraser River and Puget Sound.

As its immediate area became exhausted, Fort Langley's primary function shifted from fur collecting to provisioning. A network of posts and vessels was gradually built up to expand the company's control of the coast, and the Langley fishery and farm supplied many of their basic needs.

Bountiful salmon in the Fraser River had long been a staple of the Coast Salish, and could be traded with natives for blankets, vermillion and tobacco. Salting and packing of salmon became an industry under Chief-Trader McDonald and his successor James Murray Yale. By 1838 Langley supplied all the salt salmon required by the Company's operations west of the Rockies. As the Hudson's Bay Company became linked to the wider commerce of the Pacific, Langley-cured salmon found its way to markets in the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) and Australia.

Farming was begun on the fertile prairie 11 km from the fort, in the area then known as Langley

Prairie. Crops were frequently washed out in the low-lying land, but the agricultural operations steadily expanded until the Langley farm covered over 800 hectares. Producing potatoes, barley, peas and wheat and maintaining a stock of 200 pigs and 500 head of cattle, it supplemented the produce of many Pacific forts and provided food for the “SS Beaver” and other Company vessels.

The Second Fort Burns Down

In 1839 the Hudson's Bay Company agreed to lease the Alaskan Panhandle from the Russian American (Fur) Company for an annual rent in otter skins and specified farm products. Fort Langley was called upon to produce wheat and butter for the Russian contract. In order to facilitate farming operation, the original fort, now in a dilapidated condition, was abandoned, and a new one built 4 km upstream, closer to the large prairie.

New Fort Langley had been occupied just 10 months when it was consumed by fire and had to be completely rebuilt. In May 1840, construction commenced on a new complex which eventually enclosed an area 192 x 73 m and contained three to four bastions and about 15 buildings. It is on this site that the present reconstruction bas been made.

Fort Langley in the Peak of Economic Production

Two decades of intense activity followed the establishment of the new fort. Grain production increased; beef and pork were salted for the Company ships and two dairies were kept in full production. Salted salmon continued to be popular in the Sandwich Islands, and an annual export of 2,000 barrels was not uncommon in the years between 1845 and 1854. Cranberries traded from the natives and packaged at Langley sold at substantial profit in San Francisco.

When the Company established Fort Victoria as future Pacific headquarters in 1843, Langley's Chief-Trader Yale felt the importance of his post was being undermined. He so resented the supremacy of the nearby fort that he misjudged its effect. In fact, the reorganization of HBC Pacific operations occasioned by the settlement of the Oregon boundary in 1846 increased the value of Fort Langley.

The international line drawn at the 49th parallel limited Company access to the Columbia-Okanagan supply route, just as Simpson had predicted, and forced a re-examination of the Fraser River as a possible artery to the interior. By 1848, a new route for the fur brigade was established by horse from Kamloops through the Cascade Mountains to Hope and from there by the flat-bottomed cargo boat or bateau down the Fraser. Fort Langley, at the head of navigation, became the transhipment depot for the interior finally making Simpson's plan for the Fraser a reality.

The urgent duties of brigade terminus were added to the normal occupations of fishery and farm. Trade goods and supplies shipped from Fort Victoria were packed at Langley for distribution inland; bateaux were built for river freighting to Hope; iron goods were manufactured for inland forts; and provisions and fodder were grown for the horse brigades. In addition, outgoing furs were sorted, cleaned and packed in 113 kg bales for shipment to England.

The 1858 Gold Rush

In 1858 Fort Langley achieved world fame as the starting point for the Fraser River gold fields.

In March of that year, news reached San Francisco that gold had been discovered in the sand bars of the upper Fraser, and within two months 30,000 prospectors had poured into the area. The Langley post became crowded with strangers eager for news of the latest discoveries, and its sales shop, issuing miners' tools and provisions, had a daily turnover of $1,500.

During the "rush" James Douglas, Governor of Vancouver Island and manager of the Hudson's Bay Company's Pacific business, took prompt action to secure British sovereignty and enforce the Company's trade monopoly. Yet the licensing system which he introduced was clearly insufficient to permanently govern the growing population. The era of fur trade guardianship was drawing to a close. In August 1858 the British Parliament revoked the Company's monopoly and passed an act providing for a crown colony on the Pacific mainland. James Douglas was named first Governor of British Columbia.

British Columbia is Proclaimed a Colony

The "Big House" at Fort Langley provided the background for the official ceremony proclaiming the establishment of British Government on the Pacific mainland. On November 19, 1858, 100 people assembled in the hall to hear the announcement that the Company's licence was revoked and to witness the administration of oaths to the officers of the new government. Outside, a 17-gun salute which pierced the drizzling rain marked the historic transition from fur trade domain to British Colony.

The inaugural ceremony both honoured Langley and signaled its decline. The Hudson's Bay Company received title to land at Fort Langley in 1864, but the revocation of its monopoly created competition for the fishery and farm. In 1858 navigation was extended to Hope and Yale, and Langley's function both as mining supplier and transhipment depot abruptly ceased. The selection of New Westminster as the capital pushed Langley "out of the way of travelers".

The Decline of Fort Langley

In the 1860s, Langley farm was expanded to support the Hudson's Bay Company's overland transport service to the Caribou. Local competition was very strong, however, and from 1870 the land was offered for sale or lease. Company officers considered it "the finest land in British Columbia", and terms were kept stringent. Since no one could pay enough for the whole property the farm was subdivided. Four lots were sold at auction in Victoria in 1878 and the rest by private sale over the next eight years.

After 1858 the fort fell slowly into disrepair. The palisade was dismantled in 1864, and by 1871 the blacksmith shop had been converted into a dwelling and the cooperage to a saleshop. A year later, the "Big House" was pulled down and a new residence built for the post manager. Finally, in April 1886, a new Hudson's Bay Company saleshop was constructed in the nearby village, and Fort Langley ceased operations as a company post.

Fort Langley as a National Historic Site

In May 1923 the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada declared Fort Langley to be of national historic importance and erected a commemorative plaque near the surviving fort structure. Fort Langley was established as a National Historic Park in May 1955, and the process of restoration was begun for celebration of the centennial of the Colony of British Columbia.

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