Fort Livingstone

Fort Livingstone, which was located near the present town of Pelly, Saskatchewan, became quite prominent for a brief period in the history of Western Canada. It was successively a telegraph station, the headquarters of the North-West Mounted Police and a temporary site for the Government of the North-West Territories. Named after the missionary and traveller, Livingstone was a repeater station on the telegraph line between Winnipeg and Edmonton. The Swan River Barracks of the North-West Mounted Police were built close to the Livingstone telegraph station in 1874 and in 1877 the Council of the North-West Territories met in the police buildings. The barracks were sometimes referred to as Fort Livingstone but they were also referred to as Fort Pelly in government records although the actual site of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Fort Pelly was some ten miles away. In this sketch, the buildings will be referred to as the Swan River Barracks or Fort Livingstone in order to avoid any confusion with either the Hudson’s Bay Company’s post or the Livingstone telegraph station. The police buildings were only in practical use until 1878 after which they were of minor importance and were finally destroyed by fire in 1884. Viewed in the light of the situation at the time and the anticipated future pattern of settlement the decision to establish police and government headquarters near Livingstone was logical. However, new developments quickly changed the situation and Livingstone’s brief bid for a place of prominence in the history of western Canada was over.

The purchase of Rupert’s Land in 1870 had opened the way for surveys of a suitable route for a transcontinental railway. It was to be built across that part of the North-West considered to be the most promising in the view of the British-sponsored Palliser Expedition of 1857-1859 and the Canadian Dawson-Hind Expedition of 1858. Both expeditions expressed the view that the south-western prairies were quite unsuitable for agricultural settlement, an opinion also endorsed by the officers of the Hudson’s Bay Company as well as inhabitants and visitors of the Canadian prairies at that time. The Earl of Southesk while on tour of the west in 1859-1860 expressed in his journal the widely held opinion that the northern part of the area would be the main center of settlement:

Ere another century has passed, the Columbia and South Saskatchewan rivers and Winnipeg Lake may possibly enough take the place of the 48 [sic] parallel as the national frontier; the Americans possessing Red River and that central land whose direct communications run through the States, while Britain possesses two powerful colonies on the eastern and western oceans, and retains that vast fur-bearing territory of the north, which, being unfit for settlement, will require no greater facilities of access than at present belong to it in its water communication with Hudson’s Bay. Along the North Saskatchewan might be formed a chain of settlements sufficiently strong to protect the frontier, maintain communication between Columbia and Canada, and provide means for carrying on such government as the thinly populated northern districts require. If a Pacific railway were deemed necessary, this appears to me the best—perhaps the only feasible—line, as one more southern must pass through hundreds of
miles of barren prairie, incapable of growing crops or timber, and scarcely suitable even for grazing purposes.¹

Under the circumstances it was to be expected that the original route of the proposed railway would be extended from Red River in a generally northwesterly direction, following with some modifications and short cuts the old Carlton or Saskatchewan trail of the Hudson's Bay Company to Edmonton and beyond. The line was surveyed to run from Selkirk northwest to the narrows of Lake Manitoba, from there to the northern base of the Duck Mountains, then southwest along the Swan River valley to a point named Livingstone, 10 miles north of Fort Pelly. From Livingstone, the line was to continue westward past the north shore of the Quill Lakes to the elbow of the North Saskatchewan River, thence to Battleford, Edmonton and through the Yellowhead Pass to the west coast. Its total length from Thunder Bay to the Pacific was computed at 2,031 miles. A 132 foot right-of-way was cleared along this survey from Selkirk to beyond Battleford, with named stations at 10 mile intervals. Livingstone was one of these stations. The telegraph line following this right-of-way was completed and in operation as far as Edmonton in 1876.²

While the expectation of early railway and telegraph communications with east and west was no doubt a major factor in the selection of Livingstone as police headquarters and seat of the territorial government, this was by no means the only reason for the choice. The main settlements in Western Canada at that time were those located at the posts of the Hudson's Bay Company: Forts Ellice, Pelly, Qu'Appelle, Touchwood Hills, Cumberland, Carlton, Pitt and Edmonton and the settlements of Prince Albert and those of the Métis on the South Saskatchewan River. Fort Pelly was in a reasonably central position in relation to most of these points, being in a direct line less than 300 miles from Winnipeg, 210 from Carlton, 190 from Prince Albert and the Métis settlements, 110 miles from Fort Ellice, Qu'Appelle and the Touchwood Hills Post and 150 miles from the Saskatchewan River in the Cumberland region.

Fort Pelly had been for 50 years the headquarters of a much larger area, the Swan River District of the Hudson's Bay Company bordered by Lake Manitoba, the 105° longitude located between the present sites of Regina and Moose Jaw, the International Boundary and the Red Deer River. As such it had become an important point on the main trail of the Hudson's Bay Company between Fort Garry and the distant posts of the Columbia and Athabaska districts. This trail was substantially the route adopted by the railway survey. In addition the Fort Pelly area offered the advantage of having ample supplies of timber for building purposes and wood for the numerous stoves and heaters required for a large establishment.

The location chosen for the Swan River Barracks was near the confluence of the Snake Creek and Swan River, some ten miles north of Fort Pelly along a much

used trail leading to the most westerly crossing place of the Swan River. From the crossing, the trail continued along the north bank of the river to Swan Lake where by bygone days the Swan River Brigade had commenced its long journey to York Factory, loaded with the furs and pemmican of the Swan River District. The area on both sides of the Snake Creek had for many years furnished pasture for some 100 head of horses usually kept at Fort Pelly, while the river and creek offered an unfailling supply of water. Hay was available in quantity for feed in the immediate vicinity. Good farming land, timber and wood were also near at hand. 

It may be assumed that the government had knowledge of Dawson’s report of 1858 which described this particular area containing the site as follows:

Leaving Swan River ... to cross to Fort Pelly ... the road then follows for some distance a tributary of Swan River, [i.e., Snake Creek] which runs in a beautiful valley with alternate slopes of woodland and prairie. Numbers of horses were quietly feeding on the rich pasture of the valley as we passed, and what with the clumps of trees on the rising grounds and the stream winding among the green meadows, it seemed as if it wanted but the presence of human habitations to give it the appearance of a highly cultivated country.³

A very different description was given in the Winnipeg Daily Free Press in 1875:

.... visitors returning from Fort Pelly give gloomy account of the situation there. They report the country in which the new seat of the Government of the North West Territories is situated, as a rocky, barren waste surrounded by quagmires. The party report the country as fairly good as far as Fort Ellice, but where the road deviates north-westerly it is unvaryingly bad and covered with juniper growth and marsh.⁴

A balanced and accurate report on the locality was presented by the Marcus Smith Exploration of 1879:

Livingstone, or Swan River, barracks is situated on an elevated plateau, which is a vast accumulation of boulders in a sandy soil that cannot be used for tillage but is admirable pasture land. On both side of Swan River is land of very fair quality, though light, with gravelly subsoil. The Snake Creek, a stream 25 feet wide and two deep, runs parallel with the trail; its valley is very wide and deep. In this valley were many fine stacks of hay containing from five to six tons each.⁵

One peculiar aspect of doubtful value did not make the building site more attractive. In the spring of 1875 the construction gang had discovered thousands of garter snakes in small depressions a short distance from the buildings. No better description can be given of this spectacular feature than that by John Macoun on the occasion of his visit in 1881:


⁴ Daily Free Press, Winnipeg, August 12, 1875.

A Section of a Map prepared by Sandford Fleming, Engineer-in-Chief, showing the proposed route of the Canadian Pacific Railway, 1876.

SASKATCHEWAN HISTORIC

Fort Lihou
Garter snakes... last autumn... were gathering for their winter sleep when I was at Livingstone (Swan River Barracks), and as they were said to be numerous I went to see them. All accounts I had ever read fell far short of the reality. They were congregated in and around three basin shaped hollows, which were partly filled with very large boulders, and bordered by a few clumps of bushes. The grass for rods around was filled with them and the stones completely covered. As we approached, a hiss that caused a shudder to pass through me, greeted us from all sides. A few hurried steps and Inspector Giesbrecht of the Mounted Police and I, stood on the great boulder, in the center of the hollow, from which the snakes slid as we took possession. As soon as my excited nerves allowed me to look intelligently around, I saw a sight never to be forgotten. Coiled on every bush and forming cables from the size of a hawser up to writhing masses three feet in diameter, were snakes from one to five feet in length. Around the hollow, but more particularly on the sunny side, they lay in great heaps, so closely packed together that nothing but heads could be seen. It was terrible to look upon the glittering eyes that were fixed upon us by thousands, and see the forked tongues thrust out and withdrawn as the perpetual hiss unceasingly fell upon our ears. After a few minutes we became more accustomed to each other's society, and now instead of being disgusted with the writhing masses, we saw beauty in every fold. The rays of the western sun falling on their bodies at every angle caused a mingling of color that none but a master pen could depict.  

Unfortunately, and rather needlessly, the actual building site selected was on the stoniest spot of the district and was utterly devoid of shelter. Nor were the stones easily removed, consisting of boulders of sufficient size and quantity to discourage any but determined efforts. The Mounted Police had to work hard in order to clear an area suitable for a parade ground. Colonel S. B. Steele records in his memoirs that "... before enough space could be cleared to enable the men to form properly on parade we had to build large fires over the rocks and adopt the primitive method of causing them to split when heated by pouring water on them." This undesirable feature was present only in the narrow locality selected for the site of the barracks and is by no means characteristic of the district generally. Nevertheless this blunder served to discredit the general as well as the specific location. The poor quality of construction did nothing to enhance these somewhat bad surroundings and led to discomfort among the police and also to friction between the Commissioner of the North-West Mounted Police and the Government.

Hugh Sutherland, Superintendent for the Department of Public Works in the North-West Territories, received instructions at Ottawa on July 9, 1874, to proceed to Fort Pelly and there erect the buildings for the Mounted Police Headquarters. The machinery and all the supplies, with the exception of a few staples, had to be bought in Ontario. A portable sawmill, a shingle machine, ten teams of horses, harness, tools, building supplies and provisions for fifty men for six months had to be purchased before leaving Ontario. On August 12 the contractor

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and his outfit arrived at Fort Garry, where more horses, ponies, oxen and carts were bought. More men were added to the work gang owing to the short building season remaining. The whole expedition set out for Fort Pelly on August 20 arriving at their destination on September 10.

For an outfit of this size to travel 350 miles in 21 days was a considerable feat when the obstacles are considered. In some areas the trail was scarcely marked. Many rivers and streams had to be forded or bridged and the crossing of the Assiniboine river, with banks nearly 250 feet high, took almost an entire day. Many of the river banks and parts of the trail had to be graded to make it easier to move the heavy machinery. Muskegs had to be crossed by making a firmer roadbed with brush, hay or corduroy roadwork.

Erecting the buildings was another enormous task when compared to the ease with which materials could have been obtained in Ontario. Before any building could be started, trees had to be felled, hauled to the mill and manufactured into lumber and shingles. Because winter was fast approaching and the Mounted Police were expected to arrive about November 15, the men worked from daylight to dark. However, the buildings were not in suitable condition when the Mounted Police arrived four weeks earlier than expected. 8

The police had just completed their epic march from Dufferin, in southern Manitoba, to the Sweet Grass Hills in southern Alberta. Two troops, under the command of Commissioner G. A. French, returned to Swan River fully expecting to find barracks to house them for the coming winter. One can imagine the disappointment of the Commissioner and men when they learned that the quarters were by no means ready for occupation, and those which were ready were in such a place as to have no shelter from the winter weather. This had situation was made worse by the fact that half the supply of hay which had been cut for winter use had been destroyed by a prairie fire which had swept to within twenty feet of the buildings. The workmen had barely managed to save the buildings from being destroyed by fire. It was quite obvious to French and his officers that they would not be able to winter at the Swan River Barracks. After an officers' conference to determine what should be done it was decided that the majority of “E” troop, consisting of six officers and 32 men would winter at Swan River while the balance, along with “D” troop and the headquarters staff would return to Winnipeg via Fort Ellice. Not finding suitable accommodation at Winnipeg, the police returned to Dufferin and occupied barracks there which had been vacated by the Royal Engineers who had just completed their survey of the International Boundary. The return to Dufferin was the end of the historic 2,000 mile march of the police. The last 400 miles were necessitated by the inadequacy of the Swan River Barracks.

The poor construction of the buildings was a factor which was to be a source of contention between the police and the government as long as Colonel French was the Commissioner of the force and for as long as the buildings were in great use by the police. From the records available it would appear that the Depart-

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ment of Public Works and its employees were remiss in the discharge of their duties in erecting the barracks. The Act establishing the police force was given royal assent on May 23, 1873, but it was not until July 9, 1874 that Hugh Sutherland received instructions to erect the buildings. This delay could have been caused by the resignation of the Conservative cabinet, led by Sir John A. Macdonald, in November, 1873, and by the difficulty which Alexander Mackenzie had in forming a new cabinet. However, these factors do not exonerate the Department of Public Works officials. Hugh Sutherland was in charge of building both the Swan River Barracks, 1874-1875 and the government buildings at Battleford, in 1876. The Mounted Police Commissioner's Report for 1878 written by Commissioner James F. MacLeod, contains the same type of complaint which Commissioner French made about the Swan River Barracks in 1875.

Battleford, the barracks, stables and storehouses at this point are still unfinished. Their state has already been reported upon, but nothing has been done, and portions of them look like the ruins of old buildings . . . .

Hugh Sutherland sailed from Sarnia only 22 days after receiving his instructions and commenced work at Swan River on September 11. He could not be accused of delay en route nor could he be held responsible for the green lumber which had to be used in 1874 because he arrived at Swan River too late in the year to allow time for the lumber to season. Although he approved of the location of the barracks, he could not be held responsible for the location as the site had been chosen before he arrived.

It had been mentioned in the House of Commons that the reason for Colonel French returning to Dufferin had been the unfitness of the buildings. However, Alexander Mackenzie, the Prime Minister and also Minister of Public Works declined to accept that as a valid reason and stated that he felt Colonel French's decision was very improper. There the matter ended as far as Parliament was concerned. However, by 1875 letters from Colonel French and from Major-General Smythe, commander of the Canadian Militia, should have been enough to stir the Department of Public Works to remedy the condition of the buildings.

On July 7, 1875, Colonel French returned to Swan River from Dufferin and found the buildings in no better condition than when he had seen them the preceding fall. He noted that "the style of material and workmanship was such that it was doubtful if the buildings could be occupied during the ensuing winter." Furthermore, he found that both men and animals had fared rather badly during the winter. A number of horses and cattle had died because of the long march of the previous year and the scarcity of good forage during the winter.

As well there had been illness among the men, while provisions had been reduced to a tiresome diet of fat pork, biscuit, bread and tea, with an occasional variant of rabbit, prairie chicken, or buffalo pemmican. The men had been uncomfortable during the cold spells of winter and, despite the large Caron wood stoves installed, had often rolled out of their bunks

One can imagine how great the discomfort would have been had it not been for the Carron stoves which were a vast improvement over the open fireplaces still to be found in many trading posts. These conditions were to some extent offset by regular mail deliveries on the newly-established royal mail route in the North-West Territories, carried between Fort Garry and Fort Livingstone by J. R. Matheson and his dogteam. Social events contributed to make life at the new post as pleasant as circumstances allowed. Christmas, for example, was spent in an atmosphere of good fellowship with the staff and population of Fort Pelly. After an elaborate dinner and concert, a marathon dance concluded the celebration. It began at 8:30 and lasted throughout the night and the following day until midnight. Religious services were not frequently available during the first winter as the minister appointed to the charge, a Mr. Morrison, somehow failed to get through although his luggage arrived safely. However, the Rev. Joseph Reader of Touchwood Hills visited the garrison occasionally. These amenities, however, could not make up for the discomfort to which the men were subjected.

During the summer of 1875, Major-General Smythe had been sent by the government to make a tour of the North-West Territories as many complaints had been heard in Ottawa concerning the administration of the Territories. There were also accounts of Métis unrest. It appears that confidential instructions directed Major-General Smythe to inquire very closely into the affairs of the Mounted Police. On the whole, he was impressed with the force and its administration. There were two things about which he was critical: the state of the barracks at Swan River and the location of the headquarters. In a pointed manner he described the defects of the barracks in a letter addressed to the Minister of Justice dated at Swan River Barracks, July 27, 1875:

I think it comes within the sphere of my duty to bring to your attention the very unfurnished and uncomfortable conditions of the Buildings erected here for the Mounted Police, and in view of the approaching winter to recommend that steps should be taken to put them in habitable repair.

The buildings are constructed of green timber, felled, cut up and erected within a few days, therefore already warped and open at the joints. The planks are mostly unplaned and the floors difficult to keep clean, the barrack rooms too large and so difficult to keep warm, the joints of the planks should be plastered to make them air tight, ....

I think double windows and double doors should certainly be put up as a defense against winter severity and the rooms should be plastered inside, there is plenty of lime and sand in the vicinity and the police could assist with men and horses so that little expense need be incurred.

At present there is a great danger from fire in the winter as proper means have not been used to carry the stovepipes safely through partitions and ceilings, and I am sure that it is essential that skilled workmen should be sent as soon as possible to execute these very necessary fittings and additions.12

Some workmen remained at the Battleford station during the winter and returned in the fall. The land received its name from the waterfowl found there and a task which had to be done was the construction of a 200-foot bridge over the North Saskatchewan River. Prior to this, the only way to reach the west was by riverboat as there was no road. The only bridges were a one-lane plank bridge at Fort Battleford and a 60-foot bridge at Fort Pelly. The North Saskatchewan was the only river in the area through which a wagon road could be built. The bridge at Fort Pelly was built by the Métis. The bridge at Fort Battleford was built by the Hudson’s Bay Company.

11 Ibid.
Some workmen who had come out with the original gang in 1874, had remained at the barracks during the winter. John G. Oliver, who later settled at Battleford, was the foreman. These men finished the work left from the previous year and returned to Fort Garry on August 12, 1875. On August 19, Hugh Sutherland received instructions to arrange for the lathing and plastering of the barracks, a task which he felt was too large an undertaking so late in the season but which despite his misgivings he decided to carry out with no further delay.

Prior to the commencement of this work, Colonel French had written a very blunt letter to the Deputy Minister of Justice, dated at Swan River Barracks, September 4, 1875, concerning the condition of the barracks:

1st, the stables are unfinished, they are open at top, there are no lofts, or boards to make them, and still worse there are no logs to make boards, or as far as I can find out, any possibility of getting logs before winter sets in. All the accessible trees have already been cut down.

2nd. Only half of the married quarters are finished, and the families of both officers and men are in a most uncomfortable state, the rapid approach of winter in their present airy abodes giving just cause for serious alarm.

3. The men's quarters are believed to be uninhabitable in their present state, not even having tarred paper to protect them on one side. The Public Works Department retains possession of the only log building that is divided into rooms although a number of our Constables are still without quarters.

4. The shingles are neither laid in mortar, nor is there tarred paper underneath them. In the Officers' Quarters the rain not alone comes through the roof, but through the second floor into the Mess room and other rooms on the ground floor. This is also the case in the Mens' Quarters and in my own house.

5. From scarcity of nails or other causes neither battens or shingles are properly put on, Daylight can be seen through the ceilings and roofs in many of the rooms.

6. There appears to be little likelihood of latrines, guard room, bakery, blacksmith's shop etc. etc. being constructed within any reasonable time. If in addition to the above, it is taken into consideration that this is one of the coldest places in the Dominion (Mercury being often frozen even in the daytime) that the material of which these quarters are built is green spruce, which frequently will not hold nails, and that (on the admission of the head foreman) many of the men employed were very inferior workmen a tolerable idea may be gained of the unfitness of the buildings for occupation.

I now enclose a letter from Mr. H. Sutherland, the gentleman who is supposed to supervise the construction of these buildings but who has not been here since the beginning of November 1874 nor likely to be here for some time, also answers to some queries by Mr. Stewart an under-foreman of the Department of Public Works. A perusal of these documents forces me to the conclusion that the branch of the above Department of this station is in a singularly disorganized state, and that owing to want of common foresight, there are no materials available for the completion of these barracks before an almost arctic winter is upon us.
While hoping that the plastering ordered by the Department of Justice may remedy in a measure many of the above defects, I would again respectfully recommend that some competent and independent person be authorized to make a thorough examination of these buildings. For I fully consider that in the interest of the Government as well as of this Force, a report should be made of their real condition.\(^{13}\)

About 10,000 yards of plastering had to be done but before beginning the work, lime kilns had to be built, limestone quarried, hauled and burned, and laths manufactured and hauled to the buildings. This work was finished within two months, and, along with the remedying of previous complaints by Major-General Smythe and Colonel French the buildings were in a fairly habitable condition. In a letter from Swan River, Jan. 1, 1876, addressed to the Minister of Public Works, Hugh Sutherland described the condition of the buildings as follows:

In addition to former instructions and at the solicitations of Commissioner French, I have made the following additions and alterations for the comfort and convenience of the force, and which has removed any reasonable ground for complaint viz.

A guard house has been built 22' x 28' of hewn logs with shingled roof, fitted up with cells, etc. complete; Latrines to all the buildings; Double sashes to windows of all dwelling houses, alterations in shifting partitions, doors, etc; making Tables, benches, chairs, desks, fitting up closets with shelving, etc. in fact nearly everything that has been required of me, and I have also agreed to build a kitchen to Hospital, which is really required.

I am glad to be able to inform you that a general feeling of satisfaction exists throughout the entire force as to the comfort and convenience of the barracks and other buildings.

The following is a brief description of the various buildings as they now stand.

1st. Commissioner's residence, a frame building two stories high, 35' x 40' on ground with kitchen, etc., fifteen rooms (15) and two large halls; building boarded and batted inside and out with felt on tarred paper between boarding, lathed and plastered over that, both inside and outside of the building, double windows, etc. a large comfortable and convenient house.

2nd. Officers' Quarters: a frame building 100 feet x 26 feet, two stories high, with kitchen 36 feet x 16 feet, same height, is constructed same as Commissioner's residence with exception of plastering on outside. Lower part fitted up with offices, Dining room, Reading room, etc and fourteen (14) large bedrooms upstairs. Corridors, stair case & double windows.

Nos. 3, 4 & 5; Companies quarters, three buildings 156 feet x 26 feet each, one of which is a frame building two stories high, with kitchen, etc. divided into Dining room, Day Room, etc. down stairs, and Dormitory up stairs, finished in every other respect, the same as Officers' quarters.

The other two buildings same size are built of logs, flatted on to the sides with circular saw to even thickness put up "Red River" style, one story

\(^{13}\) Ibid. File No. 53799.
high, logs chinked and plastered on both sides are intended for sleeping rooms only, fitted up complete with double windows, etc.

No. 6—Quarters for Married men, is a frame building 250' long by twenty-six (26) feet wide, one story high divided into nine (9) divisions suitable for nine families each division being subdivided into rooms. The whole building is finished in same manner as Officers' quarters, lathed and plastered inside, double windows outside, etc.

No. 7—Hospital 22' x 42 feet built of plank, one story high, lathed and plastered both inside and outside, divided into three rooms and hall, furnished with double windows, etc. complete.

No. 8—Bake house, 22' by 40' feet, built of logs one story high, plastered both sides, fitted with Bake Oven built of stones.

Nos 9, 10 & 11—Each building 20' by 40' feet, built same style as Bake house, all occupied as store houses.

No. 12—Guard House 22' by 28' as heretofore described.

Nos. 13 & 14—Two stables 190 feet long each and 26 feet wide, built of logs, chinked and plastered, fitted up inside with stalls to accommodate one hundred and twenty eight (128) horses, also lofts, grain bins, etc. Harness room to each 32' by 26'... All the stables and harness rooms are laid with floors of two inch plank.

It will be also understood that all the buildings throughout are shingled with good sawn shingles 18 inches long, also proper cornices fixed, Door and window frames, casings, etc. are planed, doors properly hung, furnished with locks, etc. The usual preparations made for stovepipes in all rooms and upper floors, furnished with tin safes and the holes through the roof with sheet iron; buildings are also well banked up outside.

The following is an approximate estimate of the quantities of material principally used, in the construction of these buildings which in the absence of any kind of labour saving machinery or other conveniences usually applied in Ontario, will give an idea of the enormous amount of work by hand.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B.M. Sawn lumber</td>
<td>1,160,000 feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laths</td>
<td>150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shingles</td>
<td>550,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nails</td>
<td>14,000 lbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush Lime</td>
<td>1,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sand (hauled over 3 miles)</td>
<td>550 loads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windows</td>
<td>615</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite the improved condition of the buildings and the fact that $67,467.31 had been spent on the buildings with another $15,000 allotted for the erection of a Governor's House, events and changing conditions were already pointing to the fact that the Swan River Barracks would cease to be a principal establishment in the Territories.

After his tour of inspection in 1875, Major-General Smythe submitted a complete report on the disposition, equipment, housing, discipline and morale of
the Mounted Police. In this report he diplomatically stated that “many reasons apart from and far exceeding mere military strategy must weigh with the Government, ... and I have no doubt Swan River has been selected for sound considerations.” He then continued with an outline of the desirable qualities which should be looked for in locating a headquarters post. He then made a subtle suggestion that the headquarters be moved:

If, hereafter, it should be determined to establish the Head Quarter Station along the line of Railway, at or near where it will cross the South Saskatchewan, the barrack buildings at Swan River would come in well for Railway purposes, for store depots, and for quarters for a small party of police, ... the information afforded me does not hold out prospect of the land immediately north of the Swan River being well calculated for settlement, it is said to be rugged, stony, and broken, covered with a forest of dwarf timber on shallow soil.15

Upon the advice of Major-General Smythe, action was taken by the Minister of Justice to establish another station in a more central part of the Territories. Accordingly, on January 21, 1876, it was recommended by the Minister

... that the most convenient point would be either the vicinity of the crossing of the South Saskatchewan by the telegraph line or of the elbow of the North Saskatchewan on the junction of Battle River and the Saskatchewan ... The Minister recommends that arrangements be made for the selection of a site for the proposed post at the opening of the spring, and for the construction of huts and stables during the season with a view to occupation in the ensuing winter .... These works should be placed under the charge of the Department of Public Works.16

These plans were made public in the House of Commons on February 22, 1876, and it became clear that any chance that Livingstone had of becoming the permanent headquarters of the Police was gone. It is perhaps ironic that the first message transmitted from Telegraph Flat, Battle River, to Winnipeg on April 6, 1876, over the line that was originally one of the main factors in the selection of Livingstone, carried the news of its approaching decline:

... The headquarters of the force is to be here. The Cree Treaty is to be held here this summer. Hugh Sutherland’s mill leaves Pelly for this place. It is rumoured [sic] that the Government of the North-West is to be removed here .... The entire force of Public Works will leave Pelly for Battle River soon. They expect to have the lumber cut and the Government and Police buildings erected and ready for occupation by September 1st.17

A number of reasons other than Major-General Smythe’s report induced the government to make this change in plans. The center of settlement in the west had definitely shifted westward with the establishment of Fort MacLeod in 1874, followed in 1875 by Fort Walsh, Fort Saskatchewan and Fort Brisebois, later renamed Fort Calgary. Furthermore, the Canadian Government had information

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15 Ibid. File No. 57101.
16 Ibid.
17 Daily Free Press, Winnipeg, April 6, 1876.
that forces of the United States Army were being placed in strategic positions to carry out a determined attempt in the early spring of 1876 to force the defiant Indian tribes of Montana into reservations. This opened up a definite possibility of international complications if large bands of Indians sought refuge in Canada or made Canadian soil a base for operations against their American foes.

These apprehensions were well founded. In February 1876 word was received that General Crook had left with a force from Fort Laramie and General Custer from Fort Lincoln to operate against Sitting Bull's estimated 1500 warriors in the Yellowstone region. This estimate was doubled or tripled when the impulsive Custer and 264 officers and men met their tragic defeat and death by the Sioux and Cheyenne at the Little Bighorn in Montana on June 25, 1876. Colonel French mentioned later that the news of the disaster spread through the country like wildfire, being carried to Fort Ellice by Indian runners long before it became known in Winnipeg.

Under these circumstances it was essential that the main forces of the Mounted Police should be concentrated in areas adjacent to the International Boundary. It was decided to transfer the headquarters to Fort Macleod. The newly appointed Commissioner, James Macleod, left the Swan River Barracks on August 7, 1876, with all but a small part of “D” Troop. This reduced the number of men stationed at Swan River to 33, while at its outposts there were another 17. At the same time, out of the total complement of 335 officers and men, 251 were stationed at Fort Macleod, Fort Walsh and Fort Calgary. These latter detachments were further strengthened by possessing 4 seven pounder and 2 nine pounder field guns. The following year, the number of men in the Swan River district was reduced to 31 and by 1878, the Swan River Barracks were occupied only by caretakers, the men having been transferred to Shoal Lake, 150 miles south, where permanent buildings were erected by the police. This newer post was in a better position to intercept traders of illicit liquor from Manitoba. In 1879, the Commissioner's report shows that 2 men were again stationed at the Swan River Barracks.

The last summer of Fort Livingstone's brief existence as headquarters of the Mounted Police passed pleasantly enough. A parade ground had been cleared with much work and the detachment made good progress in a riding drill. Members of the force also inaugurated the Swan River Daily Police News, a cricket club and a police band which played for the first time on the Queen's Birthday, May 24. Quite a program had been planned for this occasion, beginning with the band playing "God Save the Queen" at reveille, the firing of a 21 gun salute at noon, and sports in the afternoon. Mrs. French distributed the prizes. On other occasions during the summer the members of the force engaged in a different type of sport by making up a purse every Saturday for the team able to catch the greatest number of snakes in half an hour. The equipment consisted of a wheel barrel with a barrel and a pitchfork. It is said that a drummer boy and his mate caught 600 in this manner within the time limit.

Fort Livingstone's days of usefulness were not over with the departure of the headquarters of the Mounted Police. In consequence of the proclamation of the North-West Territories, the seat of government was moved from Prince Rupert to Fort Macleod. The Mounted Police moved their headquarters from Fort Macleod to Fort Walsh on the 26th of June, 1876.

The Commissioner's report states:

"I have to report that at 9 o'clock on the 26th of August, I received information from the military authorities that the Northern Army was in a position to go into the field, and that the people of the North-West Territories were in a state of great alarm for their safety. The Mounted Police were, therefore, ordered to proceed at once to Fort Walsh. I at once sent out the order, and the detachment was on the move at 11 o'clock. The men arrived at Fort Walsh on the 28th of August, and were then ordered to report to the Lieutenant-Governor of the North-West Territories, who was then in command of the forces."
of the North-West Territory Act on October 7, 1876, Battleford became the territorial capital in 1877 while Fort Livingstone was to serve as a temporary seat of government. Lieutenant-Governor Laird lived in the dwelling formerly occupied by the Commissioner of the Mounted Police from November 27, 1876 to August 11, 1877 and it was in this building that the meetings of the Council of the North-West Territories were held. The inauguration of a territorial government within the boundaries of the North-West Territories attracted little more than passing notice in the newspapers of the day. No reporters were present and even eyewitness reports of this signal event in western history are far from abundant. Twenty-nine years later Amedee Emanuel Forget recalled on the occasion of his appointment as the first Lieutenant-Governor of the new Province of Saskatchewan in 1905 "a small gathering at Fort Pelly [Swan River Barracks] on the 26th of November, 1876, when I witnessed the swearing in of my esteemed, distinguished and venerable friend, Commissioner Laird, as the first Lieutenant-Governor of the North-West Territories."

The Council of the North-West Territories, consisting of Lieutenant-Governor David Laird, Stipendiary Magistrates Hugh Richardson and Mathew Ryan, and the Commissioner of the North-West Mounted Police, James F. Macleod, met at Fort Livingstone from March 8 to 22, 1877. Amedee E. Forget was appointed Clerk of Council. The Speech from the Throne was read by Lieutenant-Governor Laird and the Reply was given by Mathew Ryan. A number of bills were introduced and on the last day, twelve ordinances were passed respecting the registration of deeds, control of infectious diseases, the protection of buffalo, the prevention of gambling, the prevention of forest and prairie fires, and the administration of justice. The members of the council were not at all overwhelmed by their newly acquired dignity, nor were they unaffected by human frailties. Commissioner Macleod wrote at the time that, "The great Council of the mighty Territory met this afternoon . . . . There are three members, Richardson, Ryan and myself; the first two do not speak to each other and Ryan does not speak to me! I have proposed a triangular duel to settle the matter . . . ."

At the conclusion of the Council Meetings, most of the members left for the east, the Macleods on the return journey to Fort Macleod and Colonel Richardson to bring his family to Battleford. Mrs. Laird and her family of six travelled from Prince Edward Island to Montreal, from there in company with the Forgets and Scotts to Sarnia, by steamer to Duluth, by railway to a point on the Red River and by boat to Winnipeg. From here they took buckboards, wagons and carts to Battleford. Lieutenant-Governor Laird left Fort Livingstone on August 11, 1877, to negotiate the Indian Treaty at Blackfoot Crossing before assuming his duties at the new capital, Battleford.

Despite its imminent decline, Fort Livingstone was far from being insignificant in appearance. Constable Scott, who served in “D” Troop from 1876-1879
recalled that during the winter of 1876-1877 "there must have been about 90 stoves in use, and on a bright day, instead of Fort Livingstone being a Mounted Police Post and Seat of Government, one would think it was a large manufacturing place, to see the volumes of smoke going up from all the chimneys." 20  A young English visitor to the Canadian prairies, B. Peyton Ward, saw Fort Livingstone in January 1877 and described it as follows:

There are quite a large number of buildings here, and, as we approached the place, it looked almost like a town; and, to me, it appeared fully to represent the temporary seat of Government of the North-West Territories.

Accustomed as we are to look upon the discovery of one "shanty" as a matter for congratulation, on arriving in front of this long row of buildings we were quite at a loss to know where to turn. However, we soon made our arrival known; and, from the Honourable David Laird, the Governor, downwards, everybody has been particularly kind to us.

I cannot express my joy at seeing and talking to English gentlemen, or at meeting once more the pleasant Canadians. It was like returning to Europe again. The mounted police were there, and their captain—one Herkmer—is a charming fellow. The sight of English papers lying about, of comfortable rooms, combined with the most gushing hospitality, were calculated to quite intoxicate the worn-out and "roughing it" traveller. It was well for him that he could intoxicate himself in this harmless fashion for the drink was nothing but pure water. All the same, the police fellows complain that they are worse off than the half-breeds, as they cannot even get a "permit", as it is called, to have spirits . . .

The Governor is a strict temperance man, and is going to lay down even more stringent laws than already exist against the importation of alcohol in any form. He is about seven feet high, a Scotchman, and also a Methodist. He speaks with a succession of jerks most trying to listen to, and is constantly delivered of specimens of that old grim humour which was such a salient characteristic among the early Scotch reformers. He invited us to dinner, however, and to us it was a magnificent banquet. The presence of napkins, a tablecloth, and even a table was very refreshing. Soup, roast beef and tart made up what I then thought a princely feast; although six months ago I should probably have turned up my nose at it. The Christmas number of the Graphic was there, and after having seen no newspaper for so long, it struck me as something quite beautiful. In the evening we played a slightly dull game of whist, and did not get to bed until after midnight, full of good food and good spirits . . .

Being offered a real bed, hot water, mirrors and all the little luxuries of life after an exhausting trip by dogteam across the wintry west made Fort Livingstone seem to Peyton "like a bright oasis in the desert of our journey, like sugar in pemmican, like a bath in summer, . . ." 22

21 Ward, B. Peyton, Roughing it in the North-West Territories of Canada Twenty Years Ago, (London: Warrall and Robey, 1896), pp. 120-121.
22 Ibid, p. 119.
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Honourable David Laird, Lieutenant-Governor of the North-West Territories, 1876-1881.
After the Council members left Fort Livingstone, its importance declined very rapidly. J. F. Clark of Clark's Crossing saw Fort Livingstone in 1879 and stated that "The buildings are only shells and around them are scattered rusting and rotten implements of every description for the police to use." At the time of John Macoun's visit in 1881 it was still occupied by a handful of police but was abandoned the following year. In 1884 the buildings were destroyed in a prairie fire. To-day, a cairn marks the spot where the first legislative session was held in the area which is now known as the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The fact that Fort Livingstone was ever considered as the territorial capital may seem strange under present conditions. The underlying cause was not blundering but the unexpectedly rapid transformation of the Canadian west. In 1874 the choice of Fort Livingstone as a police headquarters and seat of government was as logical as that of Battleford in 1876 or of Regina in 1883. In each case the proposed railway line and the pattern of settlement were the determining factors. The re-routing of the railway surveys shattered many dreams, not only those of the people at Fort Livingstone, but of the people at Battleford, Fort Ellice and Fort Qu'Appelle as well.

J. F. Klaus.

Quoted in Hawkes, John. op. cit., p. 528.