

OLD FORT WILLIAM

Can We Learn Anything?

In November, 1976, a 29-page critique of the Ontario Government's multi-million dollar reconstruction of North West Company Fort William was distributed to representatives of various public information, governmental, academic and professional organizations. The essential message in this critique was that "Old Fort William", as the reconstruction is called, is by no means historically "authentic", as claimed. The criticisms, based on archaeological and documentary evidence, fall under three major headings, and can be outlined as follows:

1. Improper Location The reconstruction is nine miles upriver from the original site, which sits on a delta where the Kaministikwia River meets Lake Superior. Originally, Fort William was a lake port harbouring schooners as well as large freight canoes, and could never have served as such at the reconstruction site. In addition, the natural settings of the old and new sites are vastly different.
2. Inaccurate Structural Characteristics. Serious inaccuracies in forms of reconstructed palisades and fencing, gross structural dimensions, kinds of construction materials used, types of building foundations, types of exterior wall coverings, styles of roofs, window and door locations, heating facilities, and divisions of interior space, are so all-pervasive that each of the approximately fifty structures involved are implicated in several of these ways at once.
3. Inaccurate Functional Interpretation. Serious misunderstandings of historical activities within buildings, functional relationships between buildings, and the nature and numbers of people who used buildings are as equally all-pervasive. They manifest themselves not only in many structural ways, but also in much of the verbal information disseminated as "fact" at the reconstruction.

As author of the critique, I was asked by the O.A.S. Executive to submit a summary of my thoughts for Arch Notes. My views are based on five years of full-time work on Fort William from the perspective of historical archaeology. This work was done in the context of the Fort William Archaeological Project -- a group hired under separate contract by the same governmental departments as was the private company (National Heritage Limited) which reconstructed Fort William on the basis of its own research. Responsibility for Old Fort William was taken first by the Department of Tourism and Information (1971-1972), then by the Ministry of Natural Resources (1972 - 1975), and presently rests with the Ministry of Culture and Recreation.

Since I had an extremely side-line view of the process behind the actual reconstruction, I cannot speak with the authority on the reasons why Old Fort William turned out as it did. In my own work, however, I became aware of certain points which, in the reconstructors' final product, seem to have been trouble-spots. Below, I have tried to express six of these points, primarily as aspects of historical archaeology. Except, perhaps, for part of the first point, I believe that they apply in some degree to prehistoric archaeology and to most other forms of historical research (including "reconstruction"). As examiners of the past, in whatever capacity, we might learn an important lesson from the "Fort William Affair" by simply realizing that the following points are not yet generally accepted or understood.

1. The body of direct information from which an historical archaeologist must draw seldom consists primarily of data found in the ground. It consists, as well (sometimes even more so), of data found in archives and other repositories for written or pictorial statements on the subject under study. Just as the ground data must be evaluated in terms of form, function, context and significance, so must the archival data be evaluated. An historical archaeologist, then, must be as much an historian as an archaeologist.
2. In examining any physical aspect of the main subject, it is important to consider form and function as inseparable. Where information is lacking on form, information on function may provide valuable insights, and vice versa. For example, there is no direct evidence on aperatures for the south sides of Fort William's two Corn Stores. When it is understood that the Corn Stores held goods which came in from the south and largely went out toward the south, however, one must consider south doors (which are absent at the reconstruction).
3. The subject under study has not been approached adequately until the known components have been integrated into some more-than-vague idea of a working whole. Failing to integrate can be disasterous. For example, the reconstruction provides accommodation for only half the number of men who can be shown from documentary evidence to have wintered regularly at Fort William. Had the number of suspected wintering houses been integrated with winter population statistics, this error would have been discovered before it was "reconstructed". As another example, south doors on the above-mentioned Corn Stores become almost certainties when it is known from direct evidence that the buildings on either side also held goods largely entering from and leaving toward the south, and that these buildings had several south doors each.
4. In order to see the working whole, it is necessary to have a basic appreciation of the subject's physical, temporal and social contexts. Had this been done for the reconstruction, for instance, a site would not have been chosen which excluded schooner traffic, two types of extensively reconstructed fences would not have belonged to a much later and distinct era, and the "farers" at Fort William would not have been conceived of as something akin to landed gentry.
5. Simple and conclusive "proof" in historical archaeology is largely a myth. This does not mean that one interpretation is as good as another. Good interpretation comes from logical conjunctions of lines of evidence drawn from demonstrably reliable and pertinent data. The best interpretation usually involves the most irrefutable evidence and the most irrefutable logic. It must also pass the test of integration. To be evaluated, the lines of evidence, the data from which they arose, and the logic drawing them together must be expressed. (At Old Fort William, there is not one publication to explain how the simplest reconstructed conclusion was reached. Nor are there historical justifications available to reseachers such as myself.)
6. The largest block of time involved in meaningfully productive historical archaeology is not spent on collecting data or on making relatively final statements. It is spent on becoming familiar with the data, evaluating it, analyzing it and synthesizing it. Conclusions (positive or negative) and "reconstructions" (on paper or otherwise) are the end product of these processes, and cannot be soundly formed during or prior to them. As implied above, Old Fort William was built before these processes had been completed on even a very basic scale. A major problem here is the all too common assumption that thorough research can be scheduled to a completion date. This is somewhat analagous to saying that, on a given budget, and within a given block of time, the cure for disease "X" will be

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discovered. At the outset of any research project, many problems and their magnitude are still to be discovered, and the time required for their best solutions cannot be even estimated, let alone pre-scheduled. An awareness of this from the start might help in setting up realistic priorities. Many aspects of Old Fort William are obviously the result of a very pressing schedule, wherein the quality of research has been severely sacrificed to meet deadlines.

- A. Marie Taylor