
ARMOURER JOHN MILES AT MOOSE FORT

By Michael D. Woods

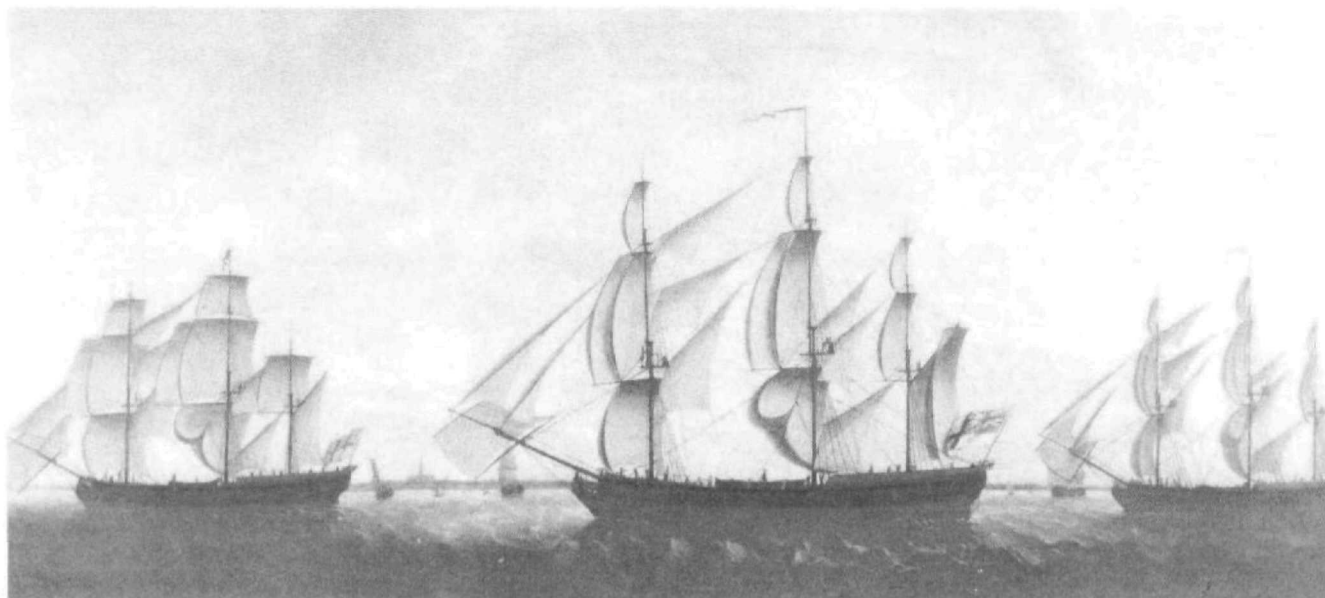
The sun had been up for three hours. Now, as the tide turned, sailors strained at the hausers and anchors were slowly pulled free from the mud. Moving slowly and cautiously past the East Indiamen and tea clippers that clogged the channels and wharfs, the ships paused and, as was the custom, fired a nine-gun salute. Thames-side, London, 2 June 1769, and the annual Hudson's Bay Company supply convoy, the *King George*, the *Prince Rupert* and the *Seahorse II*, prepared to sail three thousand miles to the wilderness of Rupert's Land in Canada. On board the *Seahorse*, a narrow "pink" of about two hundred tons, was sixteen year old John Miles.

Miles had been born almost within sight of these same docks, in the Minories, Stepney, on 1 August 1752. That was the year England adopted the Gregorian Calendar; his baptismal day, 2 September, was followed by 14 September and was marred by disturbances as the alehouse brigades rioted to protest the "loss" of eleven days. His early years were harsh, for Stepney was a place of slums, brothels and alehouses, its narrow streets crowded with poor and unskilled labourers. At age nine he was sent "hungry and naked" to an uncle in Birmingham who "took him in, fed and clothed him and set him apprentice". At the completion of this apprenticeship Miles had signed a five year contract as Armourer and was assigned to the Company's trading post at Moose River, at the "bottom of the Bay". His contract called for a salary of £20 for the first three years and £25 for each of the final two years.

Among Miles's new companions on the *Seahorse* was John Thomas, who has signed on as a writer (clerk) at £10 per year. Servant Thomas would stay on at the Bay long after Miles; in 1774 he would become second-in-command at Moose Fort and, in 1782, its chief factor.

With a brief stop in the Orkney Islands to pick up additional Company servants, the voyage to the Bay took about three months. During that time Miles and the other passengers did "watch and ward" duty and trained in the exercise of small arms. They also shared the sailors' lot — the cramped space, the poor food — and weathered their share of Atlantic squalls. In late July, off the fog-laden coast of Labrador, the ships met the whalers *Duke* and *Mary*, out of Boston, and were warned of numerous icebergs in the area. On 1 August the convoy reached the Hudson Straits; it was Miles's seventeenth birthday. Even at this midsummer date the passage was a jumble of pack ice, ice floes and open water. In places the thickness of the ice required the crew of the *Seahorse* to use grappling irons to break open a path.

At Cape Diggs the *Seahorse* paused briefly when "esquimaux" came alongside to barter. Instructed to "encourage esquimaux to trade whole skins of any sort", the ship captains were nevertheless forbidden to fire the ship's cannon to signal the natives. Always fearful of attack by the French or other rovers, as the loss of even a single supply ship would mean great hardship at the posts, the convoy ships were to keep as low a profile as possible. Yet the captain and crew wanted



Three Hudson's Bay Company ships on the Thames, from an oil painting by Francis Holman, 1771. The ships are King George, Prince Rupert and Seahorse.

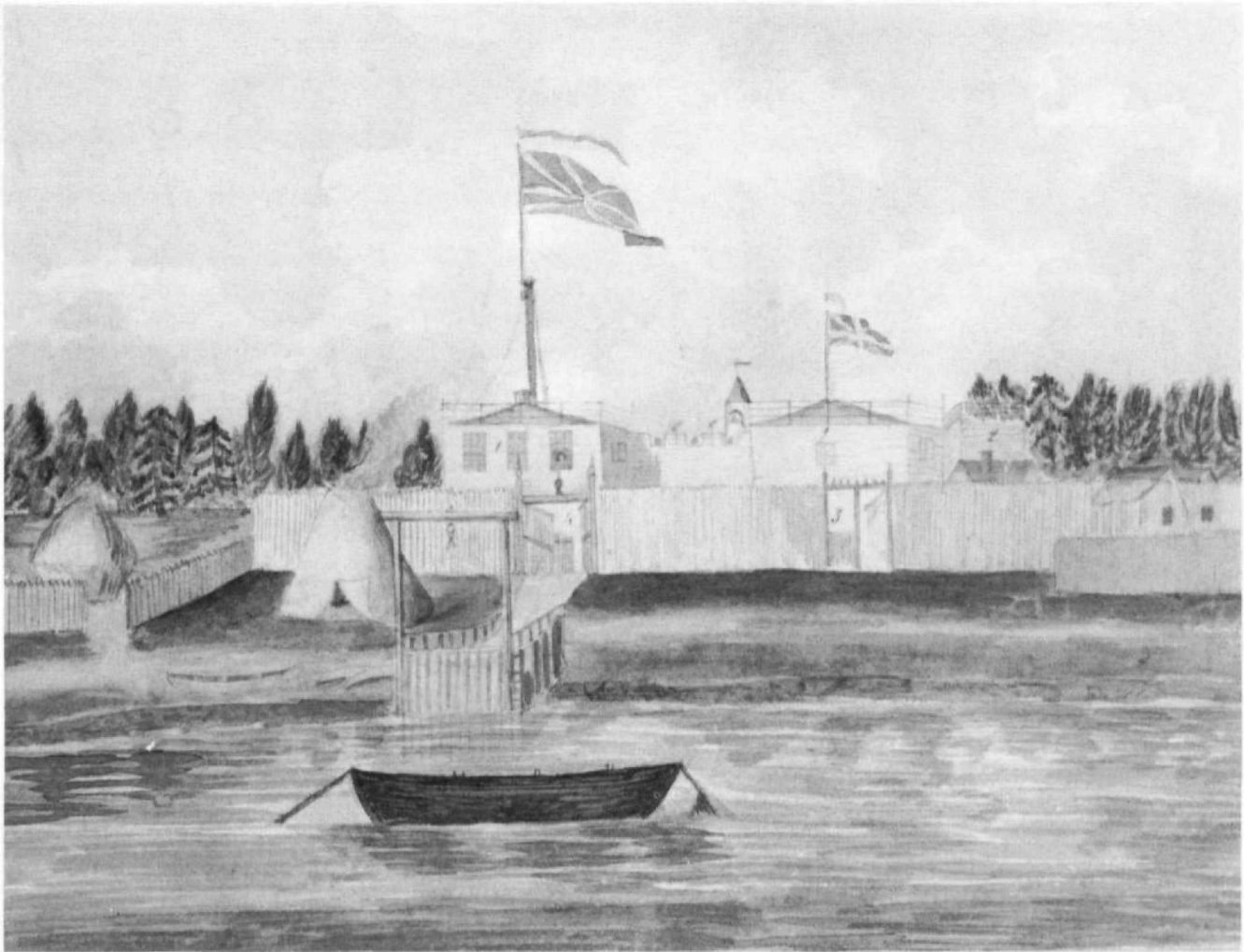
this trade. It gave them a chance for some private barter — for ivory carvings and seal and walrus oil for the ship lamps and the cannon's roar was the only effective way of sending word of the ship's arrival across the long gravel covered beaches. Captain Horner on the *Seahorse* solved the problem quite handily. The log of that ship records that on 4 August 1769 the fog was so thick that "guns were fired by the ships to keep track of each other". Horner could claim it was only coincidental that at 2 o'clock that afternoon natives came alongside.

The barter completed, the convoy separated; the *King George* and *Prince Rupert* continued west across the bay to bring their supplies to the northern posts at York and Prince of Wales, while *Seahorse* headed south into James Bay. Near Akimiski Island, just before reaching Albany Fort, there occurred a final bit of adventure when a polar bear was sighted atop a large ice floe. Captain Horner approached in the jolly boat and shot the beast, but the animal sank before its fur could be salvaged. *Seahorse* stayed at Albany Post only a few days, exchanging supplies for furs and a few of its passengers. One of these latter was young Mr. Thomas who, apparently relieved to have solid earth under his feet once again, proceeded overland to Moose Fort, ninety miles to the southeast. Miles and the other servants were soon also on their way, reaching the Moose River on 2 September 1769. At its mouth the Moose River is tidal, with many treacherous shoals and sandy isles. On one of these, about twelve miles out from the shore, stood Moose Fort. Anchoring out in the "Roads", beyond these barriers, the *Seahorse* transferred its cargo to the Eastmain sloop. Oars

brought the weary travellers the final few miles to the post.

Built in 1673 as a wintering house, Moose Fort was captured by the French in 1686 and later, in 1735, accidentally burned. By the time of Miles's arrival however, it was really more a depot for shipping the beaver pelts back to England than a fort. Indeed, the term "fort" was even then being replaced with "factory". It consisted of a group of small buildings or flankers clustered around the main Factory, all of these enclosed within a wooden palisade. The latter, almost twenty feet in height, was built and maintained more to keep out the wind than to deter marauding savages. Hearne's map of 1774 shows the post to have been square shaped with a courtyard in the centre. Opening out toward the river was a large gate, half a foot thick, studded with nails and reinforced with bars of iron. From this gate a trail led down a steep slope to the water's edge where, across a few hundred feet of channel, lay Flat Island and, beyond that, the eastern shore of Moose River. In the meadow behind the post — the "plantation" — could be found a few Indian dwellings, their number varying with the season and the severity of the weather.

Besides Chief Factor Christopher Goston and his second-in-command, Eusebius Kitchin, Miles's fellow servants — twenty-three in all — included carpenters, clerks, a tailor, sloopmaster sailors, caulkers and labourers. The sailors crewed the two shallow-draft sloops, the *Moose* and the *Bonspirit*, used to transport men and supplies from post to post. When Miles arrived, he replaced William Cooley who had served as armourer since 1766.



Moose Factory as painted by William Richards, a Company servant in the James Bay area 1804-1811.

Miles, as armourer, was responsible for cleaning and mending, as necessary, all the guns already at the post and those brought in by the Indians. Almost 350 trade muskets had been unloaded from the *Seahorse*. Some of these were of poor quality. Too expensive and time consuming to return such wares back to England, the repairs had to be made at the Factory forge. The Correspondence Book at Moose records one such incident:

Our armourer [Miles] was obligated to take a piece out of one of your Indians new guns and braze it again. Joyner is the makers name. I am of the opinion most of his guns is [sic] very indifferent.

The post's Journal records often that Miles, as the settlement's blacksmith, was "at the forge". There he was engaged in making tools for his own use, forging bolts and hooks or hunting darts for the Indians or, as in 1773, making the plates used to cover the bars across the fort's gate. On other occasions he welded the men's saws and repaired the post bell. And of course he made the nails and spikes that held everything together.

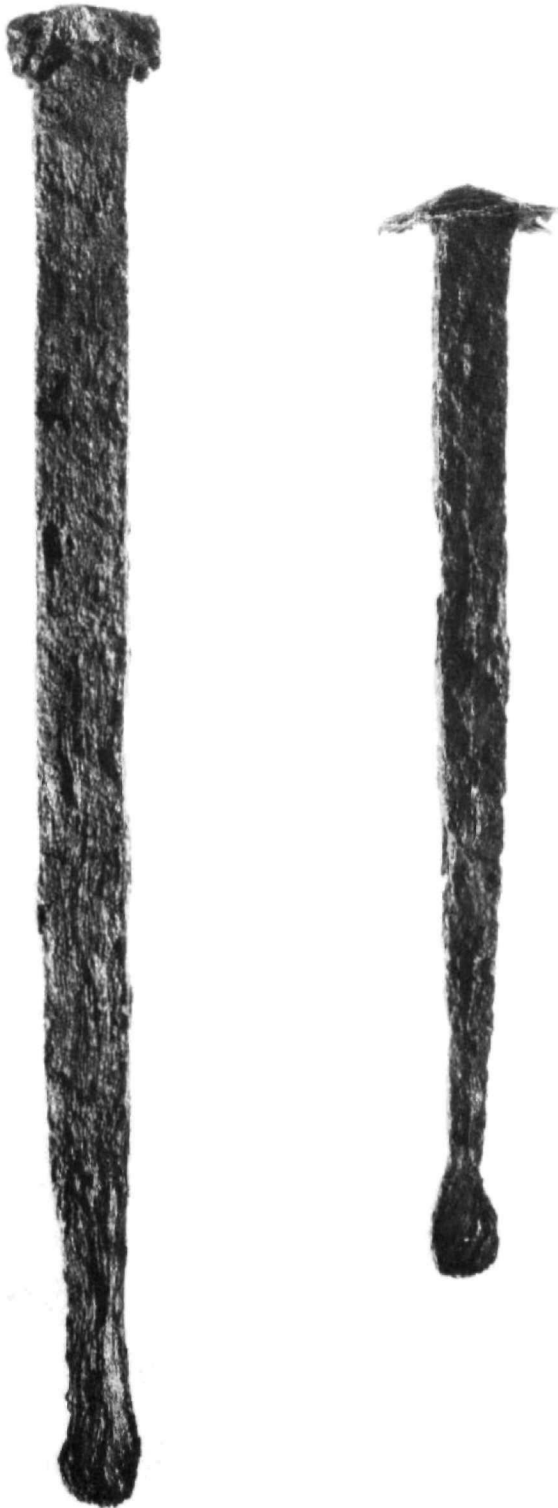
Today, along the shore of Flat Island can be found such nails and spikes, their heads still showing the striker's hammer. For much of his five years at Moose Fort, Miles's striker or assistant was Trolio, an Eskimo living with the Cree.

In addition to this type of work, the armourer had also to be a skilled woodworker, able to fashion or replace gun stocks and pistol grips, even, as when Chief Factor Garbutt died in 1772, to make a "board" for the grave.

Armourer Miles apparently had trouble in tempering some of the ironwork and his skill was sometimes criticized. In 1770, Chief Factor Garbutt requested his counterpart at Albany Post to send to Moose Fort some "falling hatches, as our armourer cannot make any". Later, in 1772, it was recorded:

Hatches and [ice] chisels made by the smith, the temper of them is not so good as the English manufacture — they only deceive the natives.

The following year Chief Factor Kitchin sent Miles



Miles created spikes similar to this one at his forge at Moose Fort.
Opposite page: Extract from Moose Fort account book, 1773-1774.
Note references to John Miles under "Mens' Debts".

to Albany Fort to be "introduced in the nature of tempering of [sic] mainspring to guns".

Miles's tenure at Moose Fort was a critical time for the Company. The Nor'westers or "pedlars", as the fur traders moving up from Montreal were called, had reached as close as the Abitibi River, only 250 miles to the southwest. To combat this competition the Company tried to establish inland posts. Much of the exploration for this task was organized by Joseph Stevens and John Thomas, Miles's companion on the *Seahorse*. Throughout most of July 1773 Armourer Miles toiled, making the ironwork on the long boat that Stevens used in his exploration of the Nottaway (Nodoway) River.

Life at the post was difficult at best. Though located at the same latitude as London, Moose Fort had winter temperatures that usually hovered at the -25°C level and often plummeted to -50°C . Double doors, double windows and a fireplace kept roaring could not always keep water basins in the living quarters from crusting over with ice; sometimes, the ink in the inkwells froze. Guns carried into a room from the outside would turn white with hoar frost; flesh touching such metal would adhere to it and be set free often with the cost of torn skin. Even summer sometimes conspired against the men. Frequently it was marked by violent lightning storms, the hot and sultry air enjoyed only by the myriad mosquitoes swarming over the trails.

Worse than the cold and darkness was the isolation and sameness of the men's lives. Each day was like the other. A man's companions were as cell mates with their often retold stories unwillingly memorized. A chance remark or event, as who sat where at the mess or the amount of butter set on the table, could lead to disagreements, grudges, or fights. Factions developed, each group certain that the other was plotting in some way to harm them or their career. Frits Pannekoek notes that both Joseph Isbister, the Factor at Albany Fort and his counterpart at Moose Fort, James Duffield (1740), believed that "their surgeons were trying to kill them, a plot for which there is no evidence." [*The Beaver*, Spring 1979] Indeed, after Kitchin sent Miles home to England in 1774, that Chief Factor reported to London that he had several other men he wished he could send home as "he has no confidence in them and conspiracies of murder [are] no mere farce". Paranoia, it seems, as well as "distemper" often came with the territory.

The sameness of their lives was accentuated by their meals. For most of the year Miles and his mates sat down to meals of beer, fried peas and salted meat. The latter was usually beef or pork shipped in from England or geese hunted during the seasonal migrations. In summer the diet was supplemented by dandelions, nettles, berries and, if an early frost or storm hadn't destroyed the gardens as happened in both 1772 and

Moose Forts

Mens Debts

Mens Debts

By Hand £ 5 2
 Brought forward - - 7 11 9
 Needles & gloves - Doz 1 - - 6
 Soap - lbs 1/2 - 6 9
 Vitry - yds 1 - 6

Rich Lorge *By Hand* £ 5
By Hand

Linklater Hugh D.
 of Albany Fort R 9
 Shirt White Pair - n° 1 - 1
 Shoes turn'd soles P 1 - 5 6
By Hand £ 10 9 6

Mills John D.
 Brandy - Gall. 11 2 15
 Cloth Blue plain - yds 1/2 - 3 3
 - red d. - 1/2 - 1 50
 Duffel red broad - 1/2 - 2
 Munnell - 1/2 - 2 37
 Shoes turn'd soles P 2 - 11
 - - - - 2 - 11
 Stockings grey knit - 2 - 6
 Tobacco roll English lbs 3 - 3
 Twine chain - n° 1 - 1 6
 Sugar - lbs 12 - 9
 Deer Skin - n° 1 - 3
 Paper - Quire 1 - 1

By Hand £ 15 12 10 1/2

Hoar Alexander *By Hand* £ 8
 Brays red - yds 1/2 - 1
 Blankets - n° 3 1 1
 Brandy - Gall. 12 3
 Cloth blue plain - yds 1/2 - 3 3
 Comb - n° 1 - 1
 Munnell - yds 1/2 - 3 9
 Glass Looking - n° 1 - 1
 Shirt check'd bl. - 1 - 1
 Shoes turn'd soles P 1 - 5 6
 Stockings grey knit - 2 - 6
 Throat - n° 1 - 6
 Tobacco leaf - lbs 8 - 1
 Twine - n° 1 - 1 6
 Sugar - lbs 20 1 1
 Needles & gloves - Doz 1 - 6
 Soap - lbs 1 - 6

Alex Hoar *By Hand* £ 17 3

Otway William D.
 Brandy - Gall. 15 3 10
 Tobacco leaf - lbs 1 - 2
 Sugar - 20 1 1
 Paper - Quire 1 - 1

By Hand £ 15 15

1773, perhaps lettuce or walnut-sized potatoes. Bad as this was, it sometimes got worse. For the Cree out on the "plantation", winter was a time of hunger and the threat of starvation a spectre that grew as the temperature dropped. In the winter of 1772 that spectre reached into the fort itself and the men's food rations were reduced almost a third.

Some of the men sought escape from this world in "bumbo", a mixture of rum, water, sugar and nutmeg. To some it became the object of all activity, leading not a few to a "Northwester's Death", suicide. To others it led to a shortened career; the surgeon at Moose Fort in 1740 was described as a "complete Swob" constantly thirsting for liquor and later, Robert Watson, master of the sloop *Beaver*, had his contract cancelled because he was so "Adducted to liquor". Kitchin even attributed the death of his predecessor, Chief Factor Garbutt to excessive drinking.

Miles purchased his share of brandy; the Moose Fort Account Book showing that he bought from eight to twelve gallons each year. This amount was about average for the servants at Moose Fort, but, as the Committee men back in London noted, was double the quantity taken at Albany Fort. Those in London wondered if some of this excess was being used to trade, privately and illegally, with the Indians.

With minds and hands sometimes rum-befuddled, accidents from falls, cutting wood and the every-day chores of manhandling heavy loads were not infrequent. Miles hurt his hand at the forge in the summer of 1772 and his assistant, Trolio, lost part of his hand in 1774 when his musquet burst. At other times men went snow-blind or drowned. Even boredom sometimes led to tragedy; the Moose Fort Correspondence Book records that in December of 1768, before Miles arrived, John Kipling entered the cabin of Armourer William Cooley and, in horseplay, cocked a gun. It discharged accidentally, killing another servant, Christopher Hull.

Disease, especially arthritis and pneumonia, also crippled and killed. The limited diet insured slow healing and, often, broken bones that would not mend. Miles witnessed one such episode when a pushing match between the tailor, John Levach, and Richard Lovegrove, a laborer, resulted in a broken arm and collar bone for Lovegrove. The arm never healed and the man was permanently crippled. Scurvy, too, was an ever-present reality at the Bayside; its rapid spread limited, to a degree, by garden grown currants and strawberries. Spruce beer was also useful as an anti-scorbutic, but the scurvy, on occasion, rendered half the men incapable of duty.

In January of 1773 Miles and John Horne, sloop master, were sent as the winter packet to Albany Fort. The packet, a combination of letters and exchange of small supplies between the chief factors, was usually the only contact between the two posts during the win-



A "Miles" musket made in 1799 for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Miles supplied that state with 4,000 muskets.

ter months. It was an assignment given only to experienced travelers, for ninety miles of uncharted wilderness and over thirty streams, most unnamed even today, separated the two stations. Two men, pulling a toboggan could cover the distance in four days, but snowstorms and gale winds off the Bay made the journey always difficult and dangerous. To minimize the risk the packet was usually sent out in January, the coldest month, when the streams would be frozen solid and the risk of heavy snow reduced. Nothing about the weather could be guaranteed, of course. Only a year before, another servant, James Forker, had become lost in a January storm and perished just two miles from Eastmain Post.

The two men left on the 5th, a Tuesday; the day was clear, the air sharp. The following day, however, a northwest wind picked up and the drifting snow obscured the trail. On Thursday as they neared the ridge at Cockispenny Point, a spruce covered promontory jutting out into the Bay, Miles fell and injured his leg. By the next morning the foot was so badly swollen it could no longer fit into the snowshoes. Travel without these was an impossibility. Both men knew

that if Miles was to survive he would have to reach shelter quickly. Horne would have to proceed to Albany Fort alone and get help. With luck he would be back in three days with men to carry Miles to safety. He delayed his departure for a short while as he helped Miles gather firewood, more precious now than food. He placed the pieces near the small fire that Miles tended. Then, with a few words of encouragement, he was gone; the sound of his laboured breathing quickly swallowed up by the wind, his tracks by the drifting snow.

Miles was alone — almost alone. For several hours the activities of the two men had been carefully watched. This winter had been a lean time for all the hunters of the woods, man and beast. Now, a gray timber wolf, a hundred pounds of muscle and jaws, its mottled fur contrasting sharply with the white fur of its throat, lay in the bush just yards from Miles's huddled figure.

We know the weather over the next few days remained bitterly cold, with a biting northwest wind. And, we know that for part of that time a gibbous moon shone down on the stricken traveler; but the rest — the pain, the creeping numbness of the cold and the fear Miles must have experienced — can only be imagined by us; the details are buried with him. The Albany Post Journal records simply:

It is very remarkable that a wolf lurked a few yards of John Miles all the time he was by himself and it is probable would have seized him, but for his fire.

On Sunday evening, the 10th, Horne stumbled into Albany Post. Totally exhausted from his thirty-five mile forced trek, he could only report that Miles was "on the ridge, Moose (south) side of Cockispenny Point". At daybreak two men, James Robertson and John Kipling, were sent to his rescue. They reached him early the next day; he had been on the trail a week and by himself four days. He was near death. Hoisted onto a sled, Miles was hauled, feverish and his body racked with chills, to the post at Albany. Helped by Surgeon Jarvis who met them a half day out, rescued and rescuers reached safety on the 15th. Jarvis made note that Miles's hands were much "mortified".

For two weeks Miles's body fought the pneumonia. At times he slipped into deliriums, but, amazingly, kept hidden from the doctor the fact that one of his toes was badly frozen. Humphrey Marten recorded in the Post Journal that the toe was "in almost a mortifying condition he [Miles] having neglected to inform Mr. Jarvis of it". Miles, no doubt, had decided to trust the recovery of his limbs to his own youth and stamina, not the surgeon's saw. As late as the 20th he was still feverish and "full of pain", but by the 23rd the Journal records "John Miles, tho' exceedingly weak, yet out



The cemetery at Moose Factory. The sword-shaped marker in the foreground is possibly similar to one for which Miles made a "board" when Chief Factor Garbutt died in 1772.

of danger, blessed be God for it". Within the week Armourer Miles, grateful to be alive, bought "all hands (a round of) brandy". His hands were still bad; he could not sign the debt book, but it was witnessed by John Favell, second-in-charge at the post. By mid-February he was sufficiently recovered to work with the Albany Post blacksmith. As noted earlier, it was to be taught the art of tempering the ironwork that Miles was sent on the almost-fatal trip.

In early March, his feet still too swollen to wear snowshoes, Miles limped and hobbled his way back to Moose Fort. Even with two men helping him the return journey took almost seven days. At Moose Fort Chief Factor Kitchin felt that Miles was "all hearty and well, except his frozen toes which he will soon get the best of". In reality, Miles did not recover quickly. Before month's end he was again sick; another relapse followed in late April. Trolio, the Eskimo, had to be used in Miles's stead — "our armourer is not able to do anything in his branch of business".

When his contract expired in 1774, Miles, at first, indicated he would accept a new contract at an increase in salary. In fact, he did sign on for three more years. At the last possible moment he changed his mind. Early on the 20th of September, as the *Prince Rupert*

made final preparations for its return to England and Kitchin was, literally, closing the Post Journal for shipment home, Miles appeared before the chief factor and demanded passage to England. Kitchin, understandably, was livid with anger. Miles's departure would leave the post without a gunsmith for an entire year. But, he had no choice. He "discharged the armourer from the Factory". Later, Kitchin would describe Miles as a "Man of a very contumacious disposition" and claim that Miles had been "guilty of much insolences toward me".

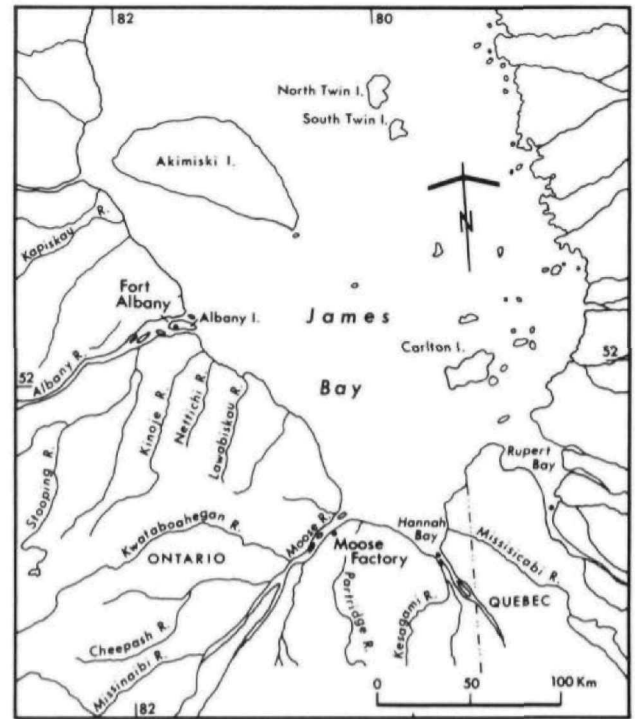
Miles's companions aboard the *Prince Rupert* included David Hatt; Hatt's return was almost as "last minute" as Miles's. Two weeks before he had threatened to crush Chief Factor Kitchin's head with one of the heavy iron bars off the front gate and so won himself an early trip home. Also on board was Matthew Cocking, the Company servant who had explored the Saskatchewan Valley area in 1772, and Humphrey Marten, who had served at Albany Post during Miles's recuperation there. Marten had recorded that "Miles hath behaved well" while at Albany; no doubt the two shared some reminiscences and some brandy on the trip home.

Both Cocking and Marten would return to the Bay. In 1781 they both faced a smallpox epidemic and, a year later, an invasion by the French. When the French captured Fort Churchill from Samuel Hearne in the summer of 1782, Cocking managed to escape in a sloop. Not as lucky, Marten surrendered York Fort. Both Hearne and Marten remained prisoners of the French for some time.

The journey home to England was uneventful. Thirty-eight days out of Moose Factory, the *Prince Rupert* sailed up the Thames past Gravesend Beach, past Limehouse Reach and, on 28 October 1774, docked at the Company warehouse. Alongside was the *King George*, just returned from York Fort.

It was not unknown for returning Company servants to try to smuggle furs home. Detection meant the loss of accumulated wages. Despite the risk enough had succeeded at this bit of private enterprise to force the Company to search all the passenger chests and trunks as they were unloaded. Even the package of 'Natural Curiosities' — fish skeletons, bird feathers, etc. — destined as a gift to the Royal Family was inspected. Having passed this final bit of scrutiny John Miles descended the gangplank and set foot, once again, on the cobbled streets of London.

The London to which Miles returned had changed little in his absence; the world, however, was changing rapidly. As he disembarked from the *Prince Rupert* the American Continental Congress was meeting in Philadelphia. In six month's time eight militia-men would die on Lexington Green and England and her American colony would be at war. In January 1775,



a month after receiving back wages of about £50 from the Company (and from the account of Richard Lovegrove, a labourer remaining at Moose Fort — he of the unhealed broken arm — the sum of £2 16s) John Miles married seventeen year old Mary State. They would have seven children. Three years later he joined the London City Militia, as a sergeant of the Yellow Regiment. He served with this unit during the London "Gordon Riots" of 1780. In 1786 he moved to Birmingham to enter the button and thread business with his uncle, the inventor John Miles. This was the same uncle who had taken Miles in as a child. Sadly, the business venture failed and the two men parted and remained estranged. Shortly thereafter, Miles emigrated to America, settling in Philadelphia where he opened a "Gun and Pistol Manufactory". He supplied weapons for the Commonwealths of Pennsylvania and Virginia. These are much sought after today by collectors. He died, age fifty-five, in May 1808 and was buried at Torresdale, Pennsylvania. His oldest son, John Miles, Jr., also became a gunsmith and served as an officer in the New Jersey Detached Militia during the War of 1812. ♦

A graduate of the College of the City of New York and Brown University, Michael D. Woods is a teacher in the East Islip, New York, school system.