

Archaeology at Fort Walsh

By Jeffrey S. Murray

Fort Walsh (pictured above) was the major commercial centre on the south-western Canadian plains prior to railway construction. At the time this photograph was taken in early 1880, the North West Mounted Police post had attained its maximum growth and expansion.

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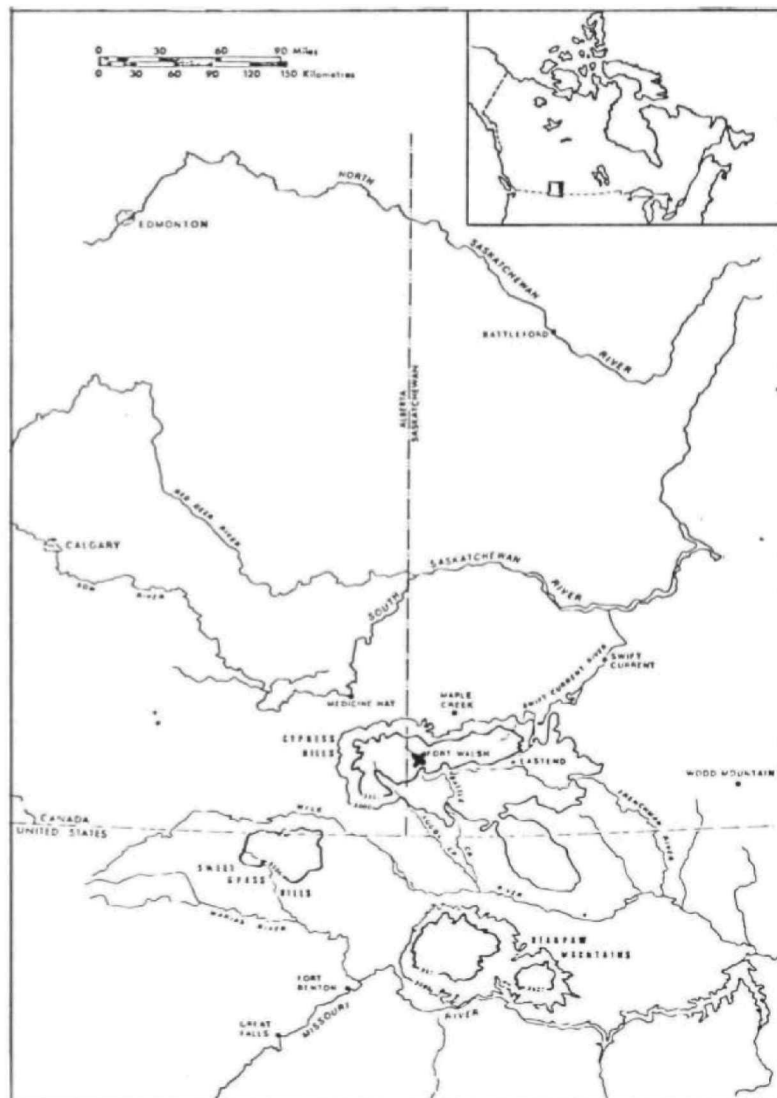
FORT WALSH in the Cypress Hills of south-west Saskatchewan was constructed in 1875, just two years after the Parliament of Canada brought the North West Mounted Police into existence. It served as the headquarters of the police force from 1877 to 1882. Together with outposts at East End, Wood Mountain, Pinto Horse, and Milk River, the fort's divisional jurisdiction extended to over 19,000 square miles of frontier.

This was a noteworthy responsibility since much of the territory, prior to the police arrival, had become a haven for American desperadoes escaping prosecution south of the international border. Two years before the establishment of the fort, the southern frontier had witnessed the bloody massacre of from twenty to thirty Assiniboine Indians by a group of American and Canadian frontiersmen. The fact that the police were able to maintain peace and order between the intrusive pioneers and local native populations in the face of such racial tension, speaks well of their ability as a law enforcement agency.

The responsibilities of the North West Mounted Police at Fort Walsh went beyond the bounds of normal police duties. The force constituted almost the entire legal system in the Northwest Territories. They arrested criminals, placed offenders on trial, and incarcerated the convicted. The police at Fort Walsh also collected customs duties, maintained contracts for mail couriers, and acted on behalf of the Indian Department in the distribution of treaty payments. In this context, the police were the main representatives of the Canadian federal government on the south-western plains and as such helped to re-establish Canadian sovereignty over an area which had been under the threat of possible American annexation since the 1850s.

Initially Fort Walsh was only a small police fort in the wilderness. It was situated to serve as an important centre in the existing trail system which extended north and south from Fort Benton on the Missouri River (the economic centre of the western plains) to Forts Calgary and Edmonton, and east and west from Fort Macleod to the Qu'Appelle Valley. The presence of a police force in the Cypress Hills stabilized hostilities between the native population and the traders, thereby opening the last major area of the plains to the fur trade. The trading activities concentrated around the fort where at least two Fort Benton entrepreneurs, I. G. Baker and T. C. Powers, established warehouses.

The Fort Benton trading ventures were unregulated and by 1878 the fur resources and the major bison herds had been significantly depleted. The police were therefore called upon to assist the local indigenous population in their constant struggle against starvation. The situation was further complicated by the arrival of 4,000 American Sioux under the leadership



Location of Fort Walsh in Western Canada.

of Sitting Bull. This group had defeated General George Custer and the United States Seventh Cavalry at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, and there were concerns between the Canadian and American governments for their return. The police force was subsequently involved on behalf of the Canadian government in the international negotiations. Such developments further concentrated the scattered settlement around the fort and the adjacent town. With the increase in the police staff to meet the additional law enforcement needs of a larger population, the settlement after 1878 increasingly relied on the pay cheques of the force and the bid for police contracts. This new form of revenue for the merchants of the Cypress Hills offset losses incurred through a decline in the fur trade and provided the economic basis for the development of Fort Walsh into one of the largest frontier commercial centres of the period on the Canadian plains.

With the advance of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the conclusion of successful treaty negotiations with



A town of 400, situated adjacent to the N W M P post at Fort Walsh, relied for revenue on the business of the force and government supply contracts.

A meeting of American Sioux at Fort Walsh in 1877. Sitting Bull and his followers sought refuge in Canada after the Battle of the Little Big Horn.



the native population, and the return of Sitting Bull and his followers to the United States, priorities for law enforcement changed. By 1883 Fort Walsh was no longer considered a useful administrative centre and was dismantled in favour of a new location near Maple Creek on the main line of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

In 1968 the site of the police post and the town of Fort Walsh were acquired by Parks Canada as part of its mandate to preserve and commemorate events in Canadian history. The Parks Canada program, which centres on commemorating the role played by the N W M P in the peaceful settlement of the Canadian prairie, has focussed on reconstructing the fort as it appeared in the early 1880s, the period when Fort Walsh was at the height of its power. The project has clearly demonstrated that while the more sensational developments in the history of the post are well recorded, the common and mundane activities of frontier life are usually unmentioned. In some cases, such deficiencies in the archival records present formidable obstacles in interpreting the site to the public, since the researcher is left with a less than complete portrayal of the life and times of the period. The problems of using archival records only to interpret past events at Fort Walsh are further intensified by the surviving photographs, sketches, and journals which provide only minimal evidence of the techniques used in the construction of the post, its ground layout, and building architecture. Archaeological research, with its emphasis on man's material remains as excavated from the ground, was therefore undertaken to validate and supplement the historical record and to provide an accurate picture of everyday life.

The work of an archaeologist is a destructive process in that it is impossible to return excavated material to its original position in the ground. Consequently, techniques used to record the excavations are particularly important if the data is to be preserved.

At the Fort Walsh excavation, a grid system was surveyed across each North West Mounted Police building site. After the artifacts or structural remains were eventually removed from the ground, it was possible to relate the find to its original horizontal and vertical position, and thereby ensure an accurate reconstruction.

In one instance, the excavation of scrap leather and associated tools, including awls and needles, identified the presence of leather-working activities at the fort, and the location of the shoemaker's shop and saddlery.

In addition to locating buildings not documented in the historical records, investigations have indicated that simple techniques were used in the construction of the fort. Although the building of a frontier fort



*MAJOR J. M. WALSH
OF N.W.M.P.*

Superintendent James M. Walsh of the N W M P, who played a key role in negotiations for the return of Sitting Bull and his followers to the United States.

was no easy task, relatively sophisticated methods of log construction could have been used. The police, however, did not attempt such practices. Walter Hildebrandt, a historian with Parks Canada, Winnipeg, interprets the simple building methods as a response to functional efficiency. The police were required to keep expenses to a minimum; they used only local building materials and lacked trained carpenters on their work force. Possibly these factors contributed to the makeshift appearance of the post.

All structures at Fort Walsh were single storey and built from skinned, unshaped logs, chinked with sand and clay. The residential buildings and warehouses were built with the logs laid horizontally and the corners saddle-notched. The stables and privies, on the other hand, were generally constructed from upright logs placed side-by-side in a shallow footing trench. In all cases, the buildings were set directly on the ground without the benefit of raised foundations. Usually the ground was not levelled prior to construction, so that the flooring of some structures occasionally sloped as much as 30 centimetres.



Archaeologists use handtools to strip thin layers of earth from the N W M P building foundations. Over a five-year period forty-two of the buildings at Fort Walsh were excavated, and some 150,000 artifacts recovered.

Anne Fraser and François Kense map the horizontal and vertical positions of the building foundations so that future reconstructions can be located on the original site.



Lumber for the floor construction at Fort Walsh was pit-sawn by the enlisted men who earned extra pay for the work. However, the excavations clearly indicate that some buildings, such as the veterinarian's office and the one room in the officers' divisional stores complex, were not provided with a wooden floor until well after the fort was established. The data suggests that cut lumber was probably at a premium for several years because of the time and labour required to produce pit-sawn boards.

The archaeologist has also confirmed that methods of roof construction generally conformed to one of two techniques. The roofs of the residential buildings and workshops were low pitched, and built from split poles laid flush from a central ridge pole to the rafters. The roofs were insulated with from eight to fifteen centimetres of clay which was then covered with overlapping planks. Diaries and reports indicate that the clay roofs did little to keep out the rain. Complaints about sickness caused by the persistent dampness were frequent and during the summer months the men actually preferred living in their tents. Storage buildings, however, were usually built with a high-pitched roof and finished with a shingled surface. The extra expense of a shingle roof was apparently justified on the grounds that the building interiors would be kept dry and there would be less spoilage of goods.

Of particular importance, archaeological research has demonstrated that, despite the popular concept of a 'wild' frontier abounding in general lawlessness, defense was not a major concern in the construction and layout of Fort Walsh. The palisade consisted merely of logs, thirteen feet in length, set vertically in a shallow footing trench. Rocks or other materials were not used to stabilize the wall base and the upper section of the palisade was secured by a single horizontal plank nailed about four feet from the top of each post. The varying log sizes and the irregular spacing of the posts probably contributed to the rustic appearance of the post. The acidic soil acting on the untreated logs rotted the base to such an extent that it was not uncommon for sections of the palisade to collapse during wind storms.

The palisade and the two corner bastions were built without firing platforms or catwalks to protect the walls during an attack; they were roofed and used primarily for grain storage. This lack of effective defense structures suggests that the police did not really expect an armed confrontation with the local population. The palisade probably functioned more as an elaborate fence to separate the post from the neighbouring civilian community and to help keep order and control over personnel.

Throughout its occupation, Fort Walsh underwent considerable expansion and renovation to accom-

Metal artifacts analysed here by Marie Kense confirmed the location of the N W M P stable and saddlery.



Glass bottles from the excavations are catalogued by Sandra Olynyk. After cleaning, artifacts were accessioned with a coding system that identifies the exact location of each find.

moderate the more than 110 enlisted men garrisoned within the walls. Although increased building construction altered the original layout and shape of the fort, care was always taken to segregate different areas and buildings within the fort compound on the basis of rank. For example the residences, privies, kitchens, and mess rooms located along the east side of the fort were reserved for the exclusive use of officers, while separate facilities in the central area of the compound were used by enlisted men.

Historical research demonstrates that officers and enlisted men at Fort Walsh were recruited from families with different social and economic backgrounds. Officers generally had a university education and came from a military or professional background. The experiences of enlisted men prior to signing with the police force were usually limited to occupations in agriculture, industry, and commerce. The formal separation of these two ranks in their day-to-day activities at Fort Walsh appears to indicate that the North West Mounted Police wished to maintain social distinctions between personnel, even on the isolated frontier.

Studies of the artifacts discarded by the North West Mounted Police at the time of fort abandonment also provide reliable data to help the archaeologist describe frontier life. These studies, which have actually just begun, suggest that life styles of the officers and enlisted men differed considerably. Artifacts analysts with Parks Canada, Winnipeg, have been conducting detailed research on the Fort Walsh collection in an attempt to explain some of these differences. A study of the glass bottles from the site, for example, indicates that officers enjoyed expensive alcoholic beverages, such as wine, cognac, champagne and bottled beer, while enlisted men more frequently consumed cheaper proprietary medicines which contained a high alcoholic or narcotic content. Variability in the ceramic objects has also shown that more expensive ware types and decorations are found in contexts associated with officers rather than with enlisted men. For instance, unlike other ranks at the fort, the commissioner of the North West Mounted Police had a matching set of relatively expensive decorated tableware.

Analysts have pointed to discrepancies in pay rates and subsequent purchasing methods as possible explanations for different consumption patterns. With differences amounting to as much as 700 per cent in the pay scales, officers had the resources to



B. Fleming, Parks Canada

purchase goods through individual order. Enlisted men could occasionally afford some luxuries, but only by pooling their funds to buy the same materials in cheaper bulk form.

Similarly, Stephen Cumbaa of the National Museum, Ottawa, has studied the animal bones representing the waste from meals consumed at the fort; these indicate that beef was the major meat source for both ranks. However, officers were more frequently served the better cuts from the hindquarters and were able to add more variety to their diet by sometimes procuring wild game. This is a particularly valuable observation, as the nature of frontier subsistence is not well documented in the historical records. Sharon Keen, of Parks Canada in Winnipeg, has initiated detailed research on nineteenth-century canning technology, partially in an effort to define contents of the tin cans excavated from the fort. Hopefully she will be able to isolate other foodstuffs which the police were using to supplement their bland diet.

Fort Walsh occupied an important position in the history of the North West Mounted Police and in the development of the western Canadian frontier. Its story suffers from a lack of sufficient archival documentation, but archaeological research, with its emphasis on studying man's material remains, is helping to complete the historical record. ♦



Cognac and lager bottles (upper left) excavated from the commissioner's privy at Fort Walsh, and medicine and flavouring extract bottles (lower left) found in the enlisted men's area. It is believed bottles were discarded in the privy pits to hide evidence of liquor consumption.

A bottle of quality alcohol could cost an enlisted man a full week's pay; the cheaper proprietary medicines, which had a high alcoholic or narcotic content, became a popular drink with enlisted members of the force.



View of the partially reconstructed Fort Walsh in Battle Creek Coulee, 1978. Present reconstructions are based on information obtained from archival documents and from the archaeological investigations.

