

Forts on the Twin Rivers

BECAUSE the Nelson and Hayes Rivers formed the chief highways from Hudson Bay into the unknown west, the place where they emptied into the sea was a favourite spot for fur trade forts. Ships carrying trade goods from England and France could anchor there, and their cargoes could be stored in the forts to await the arrival of Indian canoe brigades coming downstream from the fur country of the interior. Then the furs the natives brought could be loaded on the ships and taken across the Atlantic. With the Indians doing all the work of trapping and skinning the animals, bringing down the furs, and taking back the trade goods, it was an ideal arrangement from the traders' point of view.

Four weeks after the Hudson's Bay Company was incorporated, the Adventurers sent out the pink *Wivenhoe* to trade on Hudson Bay. On board were Radisson and the Company's first North American governor, Charles Bayly. They steered for the mouth of the Nelson River where they planned to erect a settlement that should be the Company's chief factory*, and on arrival there went ashore and took possession of the region for King Charles, "and in token thereof, nayed up the Kings Armes in Brasse on a Small Tree." But although they found an Indian wigwam there, in which they spent the night, no natives were seen, and the *Wivenhoe* was soon driven out to sea by a storm. Therefore, although wood and game and berries were plentiful, they decided to sail for Charles Fort in James Bay, where their companion ship *Prince Rupert* lay at anchor.

But as Grace Lee Nute says in her *Caesars of the Wilderness*, "With that keen insight which always characterized

him, Radisson saw at the outset of his career that Port Nelson was the key to the fur trade of inland North America." He soon left the service of the Company and returned to that of France, and twelve years after the Company's abortive attempt to found a factory there, he returned to that vicinity with Groseilliers and built the first fort on the Hayes River, not far from where York Factory later stood.

Radisson was by no means alone in his convictions, for in that year and the two following, no less than seven posts were built at the mouths of the twin rivers.

Three of these were built by the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1681 the Governor and Committee had affirmed that "we judge none [of our instructions] of greater moment than the speedy settlement of Port Nelson." And the next year they sent out Governor Bridgar in the *Prince Rupert* to start a factory there.

That frigate, commanded by Capt. Zachariah Gillam of *Nonsuch* fame, did not arrive in the Nelson until September 18, by which time Groseilliers and Radisson had already established themselves on the south bank of the Hayes River some 15 miles from its mouth. The ensuing struggle for York Factory is described in this issue by Dr. Nute. The appearance of York Factory in 1697, when it was captured by d'Iberville for the second time, is given in some detail by La Potherie. Briefly, he says it was in the form of a trapezium flanked by three and a half bastions, and armed with two brass mortars, thirty-four cannon, seven small pieces, and several swivel guns.

*The word factory here does not mean a place where things are made, but the residence of an agent or factor.

BY CLIFFORD WILSON

Page from the York Fort account book of 1715 listing armaments left by the French and brought over by the English. The "2 Deanish peices" were from Munk's camp at Churchill, and were still at York in 1716.

York Fort America 1715

The Acc^t of the Magazine Stores as left here by y^e French with what added of the English as came over w^{ch} of them is Expended & which is Unfit for Service & also the Remains here Aug^r 1715

<i>The Magazine Store at York Fort</i>	<i>Expended and Unfit for Service</i>	<i>Remains at the Fort Aug^r 1715</i>
<i>43 Great Guns of 20th Sizes</i>		<i>43 Great Guns of 20th Sizes</i>
<i>6 Batter rows without Chambers</i>		<i>6 Batter row without Chambers</i>
<i>The Carriages to 20th Sizes of Guns as here</i>	<i>all of them broke rotten & Unfit for Service not able to be used for firing of the Guns & also 1 pair of Carriages</i>	<i>6 English Carriages</i>
<i>770 Shot of the 20th Sizes</i>		<i>770 Cannon Shot</i>
<i>100 hand Grenade Balls</i>		<i>100 hand Grenade Balls</i>
<i>6 Horns for 2 Great Guns</i>		<i>6 Horns for 2 Guns</i>
<i>2 Trudges for Drawing of Cannon 3 Adles & 3 Horns to 2 Trudges & 3 hand Spikes of 400 halberts</i>	<i>all Broken Rotten & Unfit for Use being very Old</i>	
<i>380 of Match</i>	<i>50 of Old Match of the French rotten & Unfit for Use</i>	<i>330 of Match</i>
<i>1 Quire of Cartridge Paper</i>	<i>1/2 of it Expended</i>	<i>25 of Quire of Cartridge Paper</i>
<i>1 Bolt Bowdgo Barrel</i>		<i>1 Bolt Bowdgo Barrel</i>
<i>1 Muscovia Light & 1 Dark Lantern</i>		<i>1 Muscovia Light & 1 Dark Lantern</i>
<i>15 pick Axes 9 Old Crowes</i>		<i>15 pick Axes 9 Old Crowes</i>
<i>3 Chamber Pipes</i>		<i>3 Chamber Pipes</i>
<i>29 Guns & Muskets</i>	<i>Old & Unfit for Service</i>	
<i>Note of 2 Deanish peices & 1 Broken Cannon</i>	<i>As sent home</i>	

For the next seventeen years the fort remained in possession of the French; but the Treaty of Utrecht restored all posts on Hudson Bay to the Company, and in 1714 Capt. James Knight as governor on the Bay and Henry Kelsey as Deputy-Governor, armed with a commission from Queen Anne, took possession of York Factory.

They found it in an appalling state. Knight reported "... the Place as wee are come to is nothing but a Confusd. heap of old rotten Houses without form or Strength nay not Sufficient to Secure Your Goods from the

Weather not fitt for Men to live in without being Exposd. to the Frigid Winter my Own Place I have to live in this Winter is not half so Good as our Cowhouse was in the Bottom of the Bay & I have never been able to See my hand in it Since I have been here without a Candle it is so black & Dark Cold & Whett with all nothing to make it better but heaping up Earth abt. it to make it Warm . . ."

It would be impossible, he said, to repair the fort, and the only thing to do was to build a new one about half-a-mile downstream. "I design next Summer God Willing

to Gett Timber & all things ready in Order for Doing it against the Carpenters comes over." Later, "the best place to lye our Goods was out of the Doors for there it was dry over head wⁿ. done raineing but in the houses wee had the Drapping of them for Some hours After."

A month later, on October 20, he had made some progress: "I had a beddstidd put up for me to lye on I haveing laid on the Ground twill Now."

Knight and his men had to stay in that miserable place all winter. Not until October 1715 were they able to move into the new house which he described as "the best Lodging as ever Man had in this Country."

Next year they put another storey on the house in which to store dry goods and skins—"36 foot square wth. a Crane to hoist Goods up by." And they put up "Pallisados" all round it. To increase their armaments they set up "two Outlandish [foreign] peices formerly brought from Churchill River." These were presumably the "2 Deanish peices" referred to in an earlier list of magazine stores, which had been left by Jens Munk nearly a century before at the mouth of the Churchill.

Knight soon went north to build a post there, and left Henry Kelsey in charge of York. A report that Kelsey sent him shows that in 1718 they were still adding to the fort and mentions two guns in each flanker (bastion), a cook-room, smithy, trading room, powder room (18th century type) and 300 boards and planks which they had whipsawed the previous winter. In July he says he has "fetcht a Raft of 45 peices Timber 100 planck & 300 Stakes for the Trench from the upper Wooding place," which appears to have been at least twenty miles upstream.

James Isham, who has left us extremely interesting accounts of life at York and Churchill in the 1730s and '40s, intended to describe York Factory in his *Observations on Hudson's Bay (HBRS XII)*. But unfortunately two-and-a-half blank pages of his manuscript follow the heading, "A discription of York Fort Hay's River Vizt." After that comes a paragraph beginning "The Wall's of our housses we here Live in are 2 foot thick of Stone . . ." which obviously refers to Prince of Wales's Fort at Churchill where he was writing at the time. However, other contemporary accounts are to be found in four books written in the 1740s by Arthur Dobbs, Joseph Robson, Henry Ellis, and the Clerk of the *California*.

Robson, who was first sent out as a stone mason to Prince of Wales's Fort arrived at York Factory in 1745, and after inspecting the log construction told the governor of the fort that the foundations ought to be of brick or stone. His criticisms were not welcomed—though the marshy ground in that vicinity has always been one of the great problems in the preservation of the buildings.

York Fort [he wrote] stands above high-water-mark, about eighty yards from Hayes's-river, and four miles from the sea. It is built with logs of white fir eight or nine inches square, which are laid one upon another. In the summer the water beats between the logs, keeping the timber continually damp; and in the winter the white frost gets through, which being thawed by the heat of the stoves, has the same effect: so that with the water above and the damp below, the timber both of the foundation and super-structure rots so fast, that in twenty-five or thirty years the whole fort must be rebuilt with fresh timber, which with the great quantity used for firing, will occasion a scarcity there in a few years.

It has four bastions, but not fit for cannon: the distance between the salient angle of each bastion is ninety feet. On each curtain there are three pateraroes, or swivel-guns, and loop-holes for small arms; it is also surrounded by two rows of pallisadoes, some three inches thick, and the largest seven inches; but there is no ditch. The wall is of wood, eight or nine inches thick. The magazine is in the west bastion; its wall is of the same thickness as the fort-wall, its floor is raised two feet and a half or three feet above the level of the fort, and its sides are lined with slit-deal plastered. Upon the banks of the river are planted two batteries from twelve to six pounders, one of four guns, the other of ten. A guard of thirty men was kept in the fort during the late war. . . .

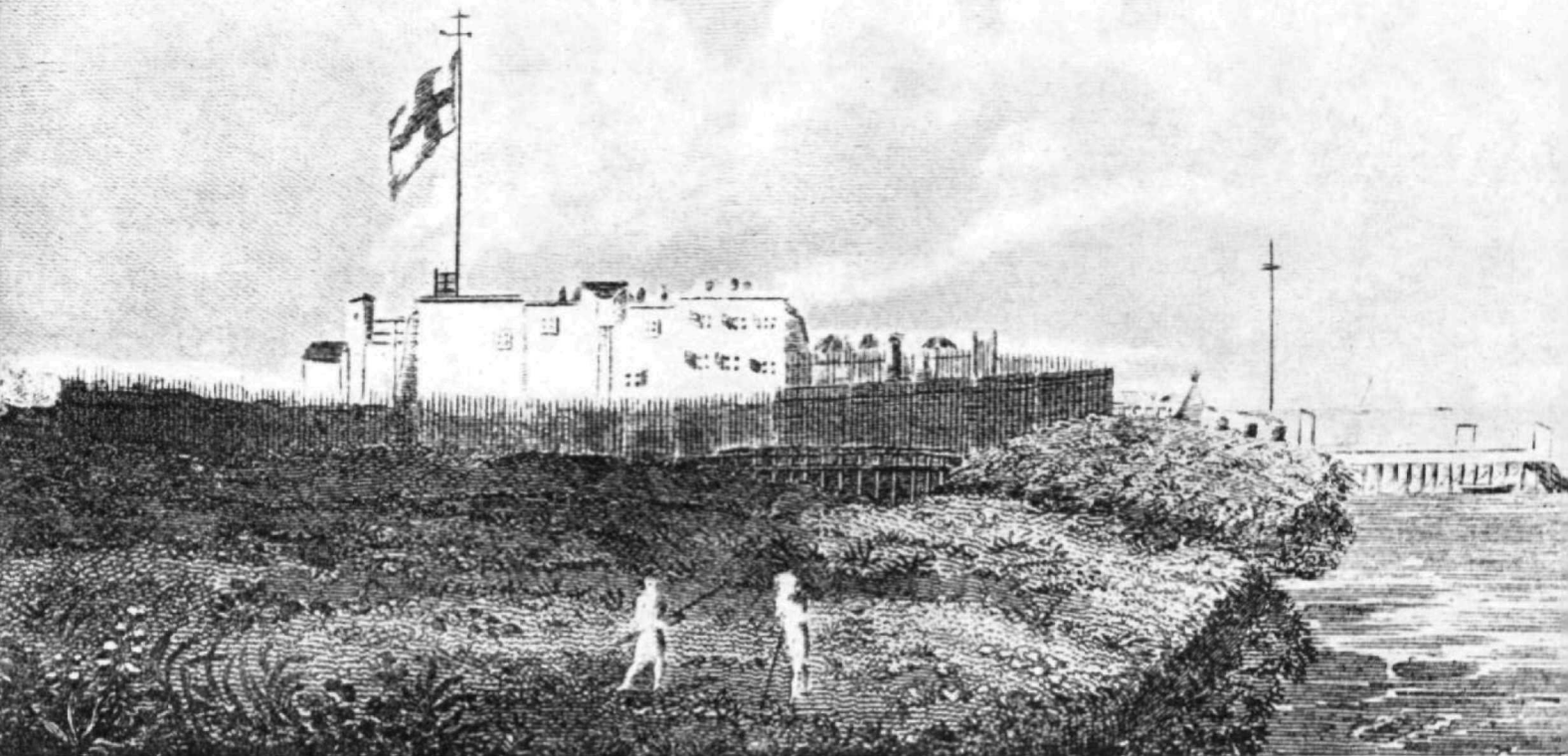
The plan in his book shows a creek flowing through the outer palisade, at the back and on the upstream side, and around the inner palisade—a feature which is found in at least two other plans, and which serves to show where the fort stood from 1715 to 1792.

Ellis in his *Voyage to Hudson's Bay (1748)* remarks that the fort undoubtedly appears formidable to the Indians, but though it "is looked upon to be in all Respects the most valuable of all the Hudson's-Bay Company's Settlements" it is utterly incapable of being defended from attack by a European enemy.

Robson had pointed out that with only logs for foundations, the buildings had to be repaired every 25 or 30 years. Ferdinand Jacobs, who was in charge in 1763, reported that the place was certainly decaying, and the Governor and Committee replied with instructions to bring stone from Churchill to rebuild the fort. But this was not done. In 1778 the newly appointed surveyor of the Company, Philip Turnor, made an examination of the fort, and the plan he made is still preserved in the Company's archives. He saw not the least necessity for rebuilding, but he did think it advisable to repair the men's flanker—that is, the bastion housing the staff—and it was rebuilt to accommodate 42 instead of 28 as formerly.

The roomier accommodation was not enjoyed for long. In 1782 the Comte de la Pérouse with three ships, fresh from the sacking of the great stone fort on the Churchill, anchored off the Point of Marsh between the two rivers and sent ashore by way of the Nelson a party of 250 men to attack the Factory, which they captured and burned.*

*This was one hundred years almost to the day after Radisson and Groseilliers entered the Hayes River to build the first post there in opposition to the English.



Though this picture was described in the "European Magazine" for June 1797 as Prince of Wales's Fort, it evidently depicts York Factory. The creek and the bridge over it alongside the palisade can be seen in the plan on the next page.

The following summer Humphrey Marten, who had surrendered the fort and been returned to England, was sent back to rebuild it, and a prefabricated house was sent with him to shelter the cargo of trade goods. Although the ground where the old fort stood suffered great damage from the break-up of 1785, Marten's successor Joseph Colen wrote in August next year: "No time shall be lost in the erection of a new Factory on the Foundation of the old one & intend to begin on the Eastern Flanker, on account of its good Cellar, and making conveniences for the men; which I hope to have completed before the arrival of the Ship next Season."

London had given orders that the new fort should be built in the form of a square house with four flankers, but Colen pointed out that "The Magazine remains entire that was in the inner Court of the Old Fort, if a square House is built *that* must be pulled down, on the contrary, if with Sheds nearly after the same plan of the Old One destroyed." The Governor and Committee retorted in 1787 that "A square House with four Flankers is more easily defended more roomy & takes less wood and spikes than a Fort with Sheds, for which Reasons we give the preference to the Square House." But in spite of this, Colen, with an ocean between, went ahead with his own plans. He sent to the London office an elaborate plan, reproduced herewith, utilizing the old powder magazine in the centre, and explained that "For the Flanker D and E—with all the Curtains FG. GH. are intended to be built in frame work,

without any other addition than that of Bricknoggen [brickwork in timber frame] and rough cast outside—this will be equally lasting and strong, as the flankers B. & C. which are to be built with Logs for warmth—between each Curtain and flanker—a stone or Brick wale will be built to prevent fire communicating in case of accident. . . . The Square House can be added after the flankers are built."

Next spring the Hayes rose 32½ feet and the damage done by the ice was so severe that Colen was forced to choose an entirely new location for the fort. This was about a mile farther up the river, on ground which had stood nearly four feet above the highest point of the flood. The buildings he had erected up to that time were "so constructed and bolted together that they can be removed at pleasure with only the trouble of taking down & putting up again—the Men's flanker excepted which is built with logs." And this was evidently the spot occupied from then on by York Factory.

Colen intended to build the foundations of the new fort of stone, "being more lasting than that of Brick in this Cold Climate," and in August of 1788 the council at the factory reported that one flanker was already erected while the others were well advanced; but Colen explained that he was more concerned with housing his goods and providing proper accommodations for trade than with anything else. However, over a year later he could only express the hope that "by next Season we shall be so forward as to remove to the new Plantation;" and even as

N^o. 2. A DESIGN for BUILDING A COMMODIOUS FORT

in Room of the present Ware Houses at YORK FACTORY North America.

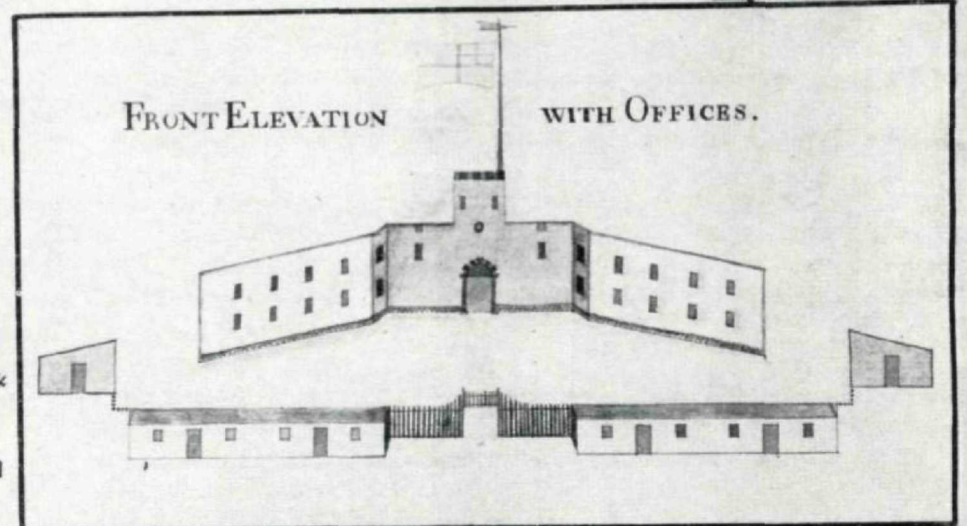
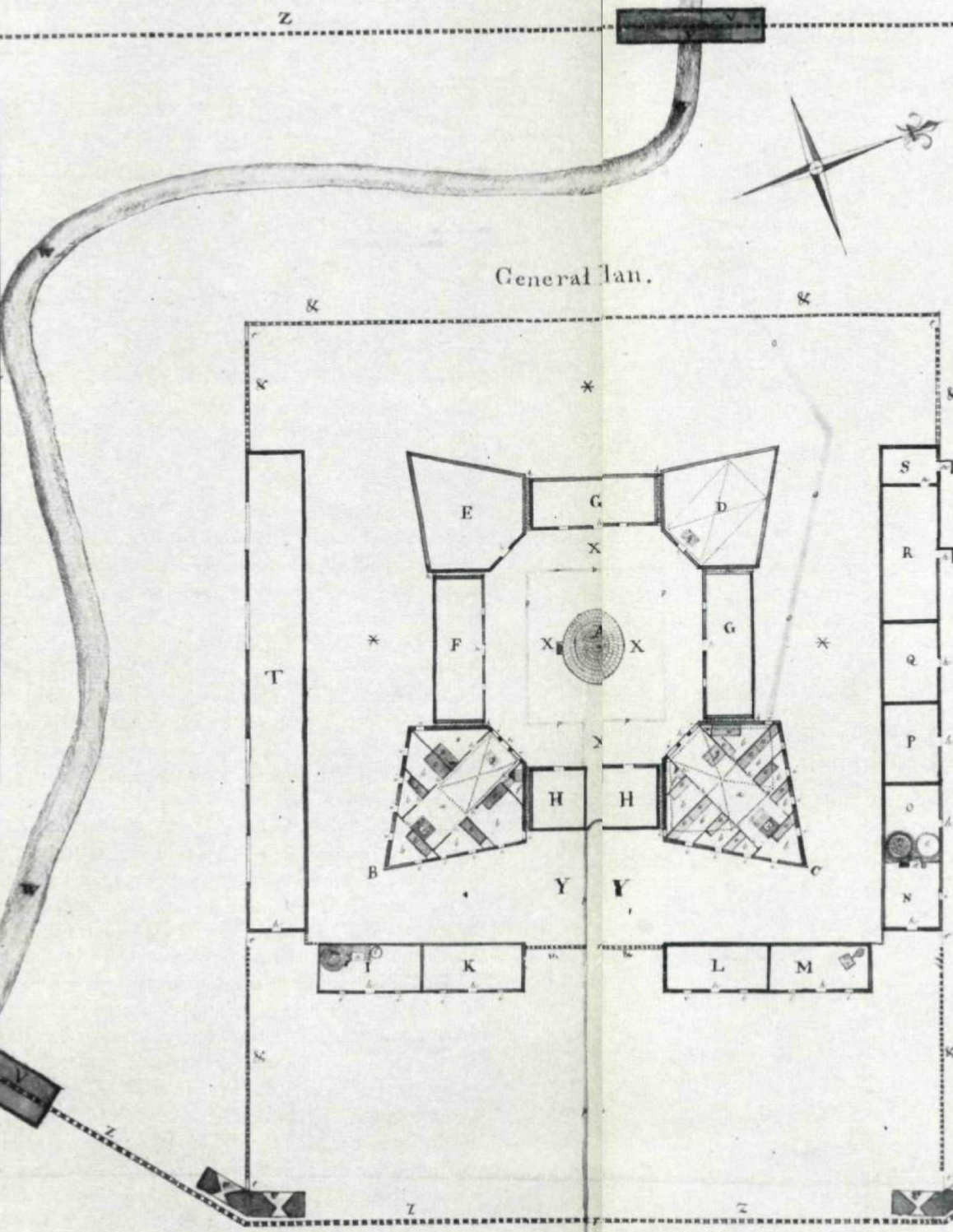
Humbly submitted to the Governor Deputy Governor and Committee of the Honourable the Hudson Bay Company by their dutiful faithful and very humble Servant

Joseph Colen.

References

A Engage in building the fort with stone
B Stone
C Brick
D Iron
E Stone
F Stone
G Stone
H Stone
I Stone
K Stone
L Stone
M Stone
N Stone
O Stone
P Stone
Q Stone
R Stone
S Stone
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Z Stone

1. The fort is to be built on the site of the present Ware Houses at York Factory, North America, and is to be a square fort with four bastions, each bastion to be a square with a circular tower in the center of each side. The fort is to be built with stone and brick, and is to be surrounded by a ditch and a rampart. The fort is to be built on a high ground, and is to be accessible by a bridge from the river. The fort is to be built in a commodious manner, and is to be capable of containing a garrison of 100 men. The fort is to be built in a manner that is suitable for the climate of the country, and is to be built in a manner that is suitable for the trade of the country.



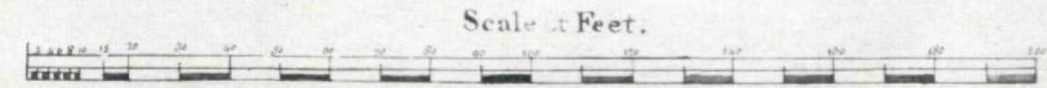
References to the Internal parts of Buildings &c.

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2. Barracks
3. Store Rooms
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99. Store Rooms
100. Store Rooms



Additional Reference.

It might be deemed needless to admit too many the bastions at one time into the fort. The Office marked letter K might remain as a landing place, and letter M a Carpenter Shop. The design of Building have been corrected, the bastions are occupied, as they mentioned. The Office marked P will be a good shop for the bastion, who works at present in the main's side Room, next every taken off for that purpose, which will not be taken down till other place were convenient are erected.



One of Joseph Colen's plans for a new fort sent to London in 1787 and referred to on page seven. Inset is a portrait of Colen wearing his Company uniform with H B C on the epaulettes and the coat-of-arms on the baldric.

late as the spring of 1792 the work was so little advanced that he had to move his lodgings from the old site up to "New York" in order to keep his eye on the laggard carpenters. Yet only six years later John Ballenden complained that "the Whole Building is a mere Shell and more calculated for Show than anything else. . . . The Cellars within the Factory must be pumped every two or three days."

What happened after that is a little difficult to determine. Colin Robertson, who visited the fort in 1816, says that it is built in the form of an octagon, inside a square of palisades 18 feet high, and that there are no bastions.

"Between the Stockades and Octagan are a few scattered houses for the men employed about the Fort. The Governor's abode, Officers' rooms, (or Cabins as they term them) and the Warehouses are all under one roof, and these buildings are of wood, and the rooms warmed by the means of stoves, so dangerously constructed by the pipes running through the roof, that it is astonishing to me no accident has happened by fire . . . From Mr. Bun's office you crawl up to the Stores by means of an ill made ladder, and such is the form that the different apartments are thrown into, that you must visit four or five rooms before you find the article that is wanted."

Capt. (later Sir) John Franklin who landed there in 1819 on the first of his three arctic expeditions explains that the buildings are two storeys high and placed in the form of a square, with an octagonal court in the centre (which is probably what the others meant when they said the building was octagonal) the whole surrounded by a 20-foot stockade.

Nicholas Garry, who was there in 1821, just after the union of the Hudson's Bay and North West Companies,

also says the building is in the form of an octagon "which appear to have been so erected to form Bastions but are now converted into dwelling Rooms and Warehouses. The Roof which forms a Sort of Walk or Look out is covered with Lead on which there is a Flag Staff, rigged as a Mast. In the Centre of the Building is the Hudson Bay Arms painted by Mr. Cooke. Within the Stockade are several Buildings, a small Garden and the Powder Magazine which is a Wooden erection covered with Lead. It is in a most dangerous Situation and should be removed."

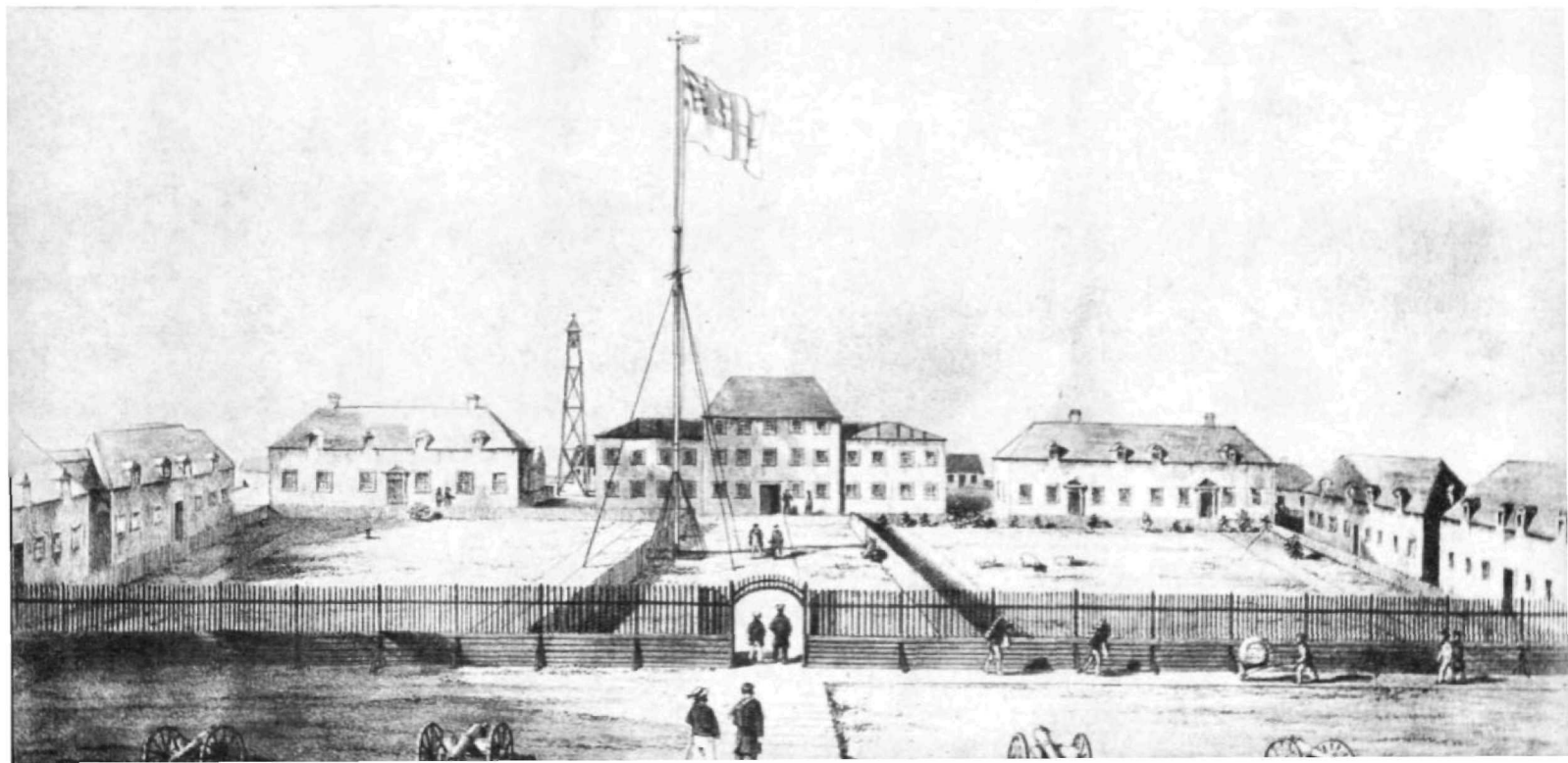
John McLean in his *Notes of a Twenty-five Years' Service* says that the buildings at that time were of the most wretched description—"the apartments had more the appearance of cells for criminals, than of rooms for gentlemen."

In July next year (1822) the Council of the Northern Department of Rupert's Land meeting at York directed that Chief Factor John George McTavish, ex-Nor'wester, but then in charge of the factory, should build two new stores "to correspond with those erected last year;* also a Powder Magazine and winter dwelling houses."

The year Governor Simpson was married (1830) he brought his bride over to Canada and took her up to York via the Great Lakes and Red River (*Beaver* Dec. '53, Mar. and June '54). Like Garry she describes the Old Factory as an octagon building with the Company's arms over the gateway, and adds that in the shops one could buy groceries, haberdashery, ironmongery, cutlery, medicines, and even perfumery, at prices "lower than the same articles could be had at, in any retail shop in London."

*The last of the 1821 buildings was torn down in 1847.

York Factory at the zenith of its influence, in 1853. From a lithograph supposed to have been done from a sketch made by Chief Trader Alexander Hunter Murray. Of all these buildings, the depot in the centre, shown on the next page, is the only one left. On the right of it is the summer mess house, and on the left the guest house.





York Factory in the 1930s, looking towards the sea. In the centre is the depot. The first York Fort was built about half a mile downstream, and the second about half a mile beyond that.

Some time within the next ten years the great depot building, which still stands, was begun. For when Frances Simpson's sister, Isobel Finlayson, came out in 1840, she found a large warehouse, three storeys high, in the centre of the factory. References to "the new store" are found in letters and journals of 1832, 1836, and 1839, any of which may refer to this building. The present depot building—last relic of York in its heyday—stands in the form of an open square, two storeys high, and the three-storey section to which Mrs. Finlayson refers forms the centre block in front. A. B. McIvor, the last in the long line of managers at York, points out that its construction differs from that of the two-storey section. That it was built farther back than the first fort there is evident from the fact that in 1935, when a drain was being dug from the depot to the river bank, two old cellars were found which probably lay beneath the buildings of Colen's "New York."

The two-storey section of the big building was seemingly erected in the late 1840s for an entry in the Journal of October 1848 mentions that the lead is being placed on the roof of the General Depot. The lead-covered part of the depot was the two-storey section, as shown by a report of 1889. The three-storey section was roofed with tin.

1840 was also the year when James Hargrave brought out his bride, Letitia, to live at the factory, and her letters from there, published by the Champlain Society under the editorship of Margaret Arnett MacLeod, form the chief sources of our knowledge of social and domestic life there in the 19th century. "I was much surprised,"

she told her mother, "at the 'great swell' the Factory is. It looks beautiful. The houses are painted pale yellow. The windows and some particular parts white. Some have green gauze mosquito curtains outside and the effect is very good." The amenities had obviously come to York.

Mrs. Hargrave's description of the place agrees pretty well with those of Mrs. Finlayson, R. M. Ballantyne (1841) and Dr. J. B. Nevins (1842). They show the layout of the buildings to have been in the form of an H, with the guest house, depot, and summer mess house in the line forming the cross bar. The legs of the H were composed of four fur stores, and the arms contained the trading shop, provision store, clerks' house (Bachelors' Hall) and the house of the officer in charge—at this time James Hargrave. Various other buildings, such as a boat shed, oil store, lumber house, ice house, powder magazine, cooper's shop, and smithy, were scattered here and there.

Such was York at the height of its glory—the headquarters of the great Northern Department of Rupert's Land, the most important post of the Hudson's Bay Company in the days when its fur trade empire stretched from sea to sea, and when the Council of that Department, presided over by Sir George Simpson, was the governing body over by far the greater part of what is now the Dominion of Canada. The accompanying lithograph of 1853 depicts York Factory at the zenith of its power. Yet only five years later, that power had begun to decline, and Fort Garry on the route from St. Paul soon succeeded it as the Company's chief establishment. ♦