

York Factory, 1982

By Arthur J. Ray

At the end of each century since its founding York Factory has faced crises. In 1782 it was sacked and burned by the Comte de Lap rouse. In 1882 it was readjusting to new economic and environmental circumstances, and in 1982, it is the heritage of the post that is threatened.

TODAY THERE ARE FEW REMAINS that hint at the important role that York Factory once played in the development of northern and western Canada. The vast intractable wilderness along the lower Hayes River is broken only by a small clearing in which the depot and a small outbuilding stand as the sole survivors of the once large bustling establishment.

The depot is a truly remarkable building. It was built in the early nineteenth century by Company carpenters, some of whom were ship carpenters, and exhibits careful craftsmanship throughout. It is the oldest standing wooden building in Canada erected on permafrost. It has survived in its hostile environment because of the many architectural and engineering innovations that were employed during construction. Among these were a series of drainage ditches that were dug under the building to carry off surface water and prevent the melting of the permafrost. Also, supporting columns and beams were joined in ways that made it possible to make adjustments to allow for the settling and heaving of the building.

The walls and floors of the depot give many clues about its past history. A window sill on the ground floor reveals that a scale was once located near by and one day Mr Christie, Mr Hargrave, Mr Simpson, Mr Rod McKenzie and several others weighed themselves and wrote the results on the wall. Another wall is covered with Company and post bale marks and brands suggesting perhaps an area where packing had once been done. The walls of some rooms show where shelves once held goods and supplies. Others reveal rooms that had been used for trading in later years. One is decorated with a curious three-legged horse.

Besides being a priceless architectural heritage, the York Factory area is a bonanza for archaeologists. Surface collecting alone has yielded an impressive array of materials and excavations beneath the floors of the building by Parks Canada reveal the remains of earlier structures, perhaps the older octagonal fort. Beyond the walls of the depot, salvage and survey archaeology has shown that much could be learned by a careful systematic archaeological sampling of the area. Work in the summer of 1981 by Parks Canada crews unveiled the former camping area for visiting Indians and the hearth the Company had built for them to reduce the hazards of accidental fires.

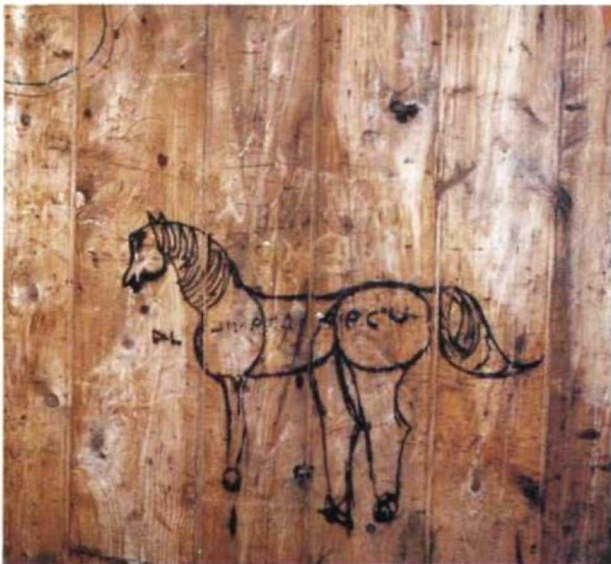
The remains of the old settlement and other historical occupations are found beyond the present National



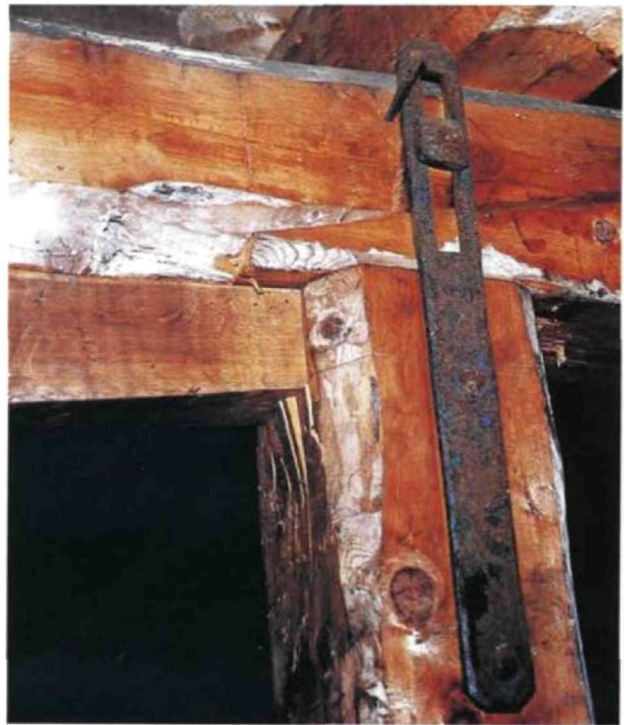
The York Factory depot is the oldest standing wooden building in Canada erected on permafrost. When this photograph was taken, it was being repainted. The small building (upper left) is the archaeologist's home; the large building (upper right) was the park superintendent's house, since destroyed by fire. Photographs are by the author.



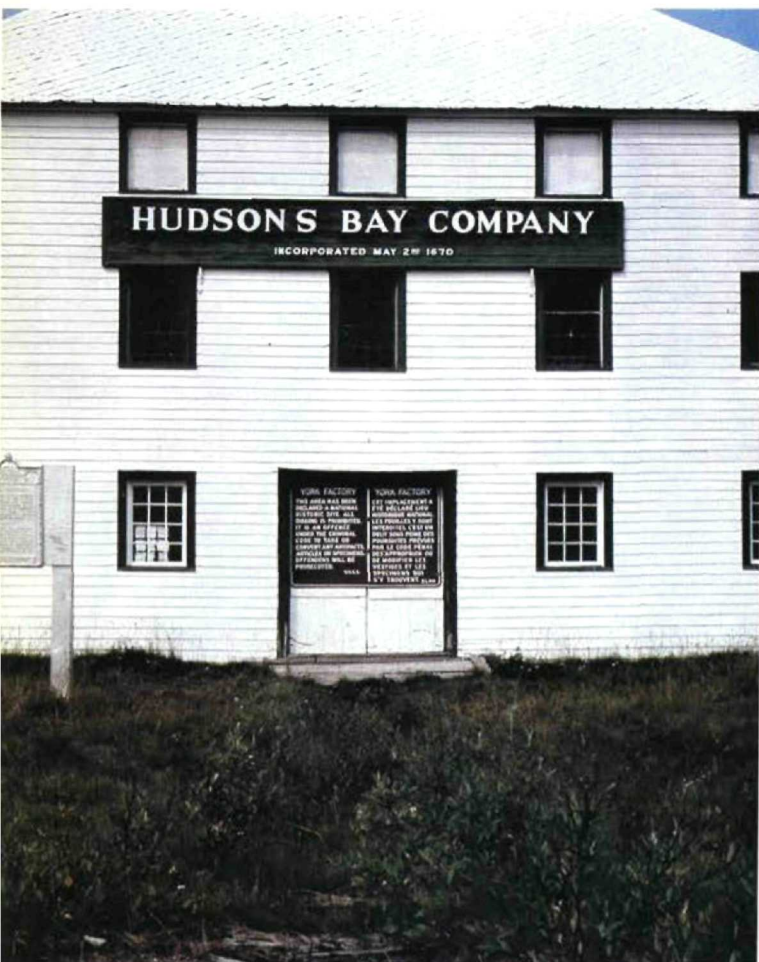
An old hearth built by the Hudson's Bay Company for visiting Indians, to reduce the hazard of accidental fires in the camping area.



A 'three-legged' horse.



Beam and support column inside the depot. By moving the wedge on the lower left, the beams could be adjusted to some extent to allow for settling and heaving.



A drainage ditch to carry surface water away from the depot once ran beneath the wooden walkway extending from the front door. Earth now chokes the ditch beneath the rotting walk.

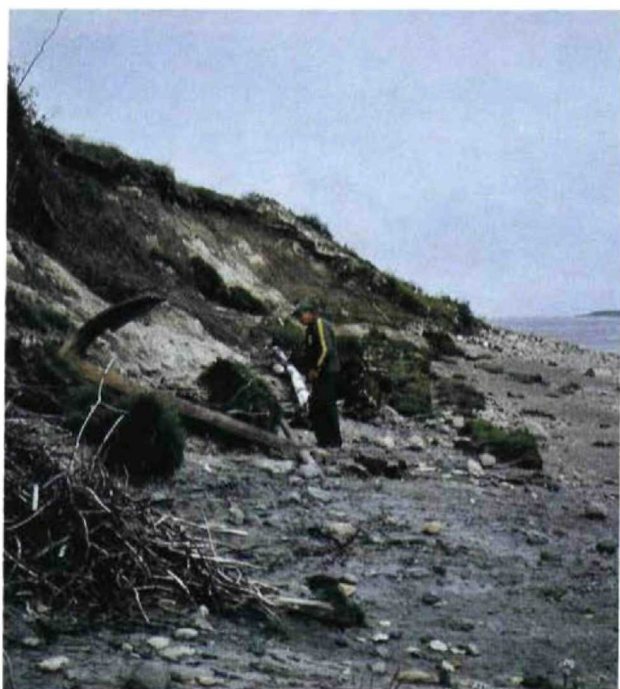


Shelf marks on an interior wall surround an opening that may have been a trading wicket. The floor is rotting away here, and in other parts of the lower storey.

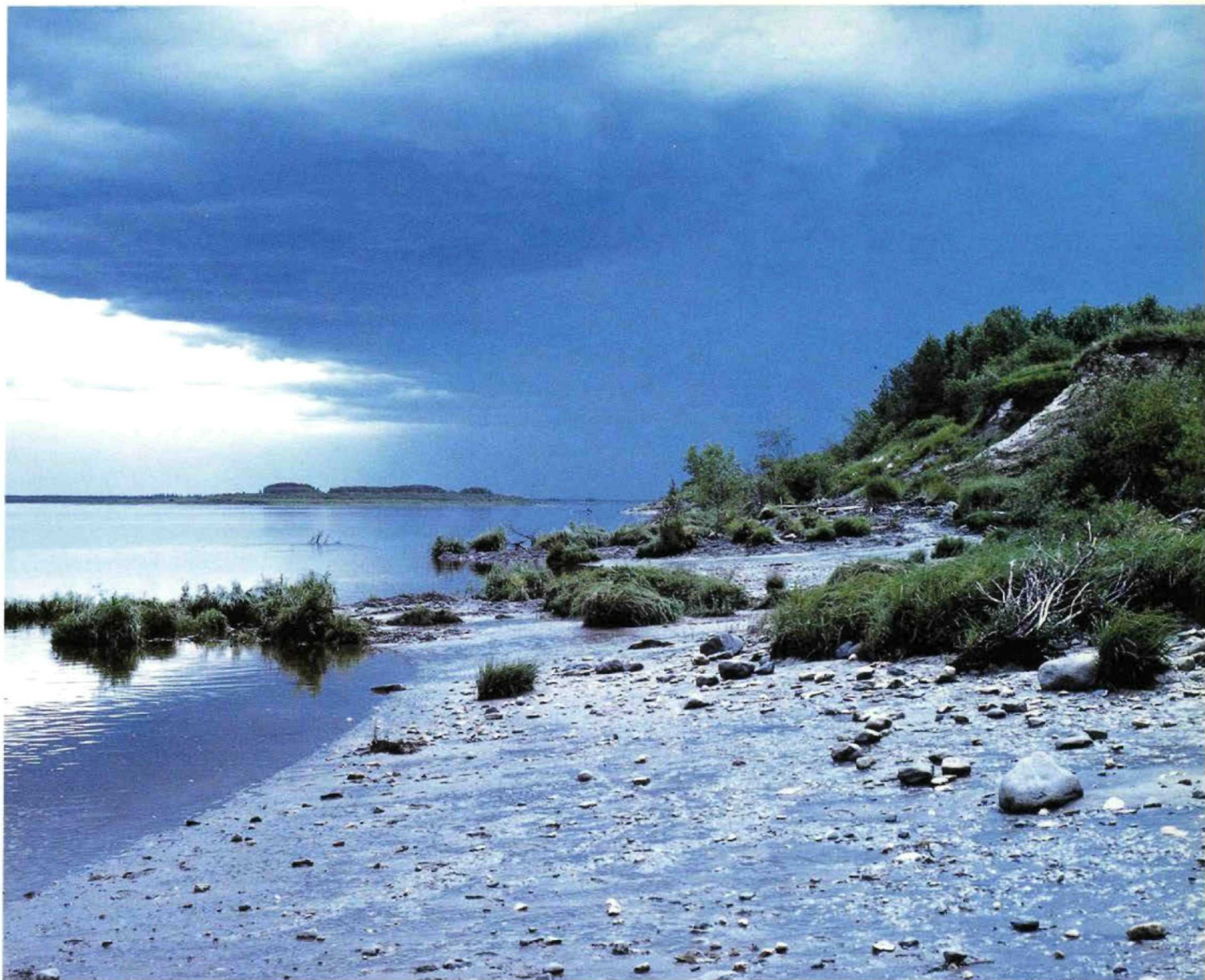
Historic Park boundaries. Just to the north-east is the old graveyard, the crumbling powder magazine, and an old slipway. Across the Hayes River and slightly upstream from the factory is Ten Shilling Creek, a sheltered, heavily wooded area where Company critic Arthur Dobbs wintered in 1746. An Indian encampment was once located here also. A mile upstream, also situated on the south-east bank of the Hayes, is the site of another former native community once occupied by the Indians of York Landing, Manitoba. A small trapper's cabin is located near by and is still used seasonally by the Redhead family from Shamattawa, Manitoba.

Visiting the York Factory area one senses history strongly. And, the challenge of preserving its rich heritage is immediately apparent. Extreme isolation has been both a friend and foe. The remoteness of the area has minimized, although not eliminated, the problems of vandalism and theft. It has also meant, however, that it is extremely costly to undertake any archaeological or heritage conservation work. Furthermore, given the low tourist accessibility of the region, there is the temptation to spend the needed funds elsewhere on higher profile projects.

The problem, however, is that York Factory is located in a very hostile environment. On a single summer's day it is possible to experience the weather of the four seasons as the winds shift from the south-west to the north-east usually accompanied by violent thunderstorms with their high winds and menacing lightning. The latter means the threat of fire is always present. The river which was York Factory's life-blood, is now relentlessly destroying the site.



The retreating riverbank yields countless artifacts. The anchor shown here rested in the 'front yard' only three years ago.



*York Factory is located in a remote and hostile environment.
The morning that this picture was taken was sunny and warm; by nightfall it was snowing.*

As the banks recede, countless artifacts and structures tumble down the unstable slopes to eventually be washed away into Hudson Bay. Parks Canada's five-year salvage archaeology program ended this summer and was barely able to keep up with the most threatened parts of the shoreline. In the near future, it appears as though the elements will claim the rest of this heritage.

Besides telling its history, the walls and floors of the depot also foretell its coming death. The drainage ditches that once carried water away from the building under the front walkway are now choked and water accumulates beneath the building in the summertime. Partly as a result, the floors are rotting in many sections of the lower storey and the lower courses of timbers upon which the building rests are tumbling away. Although the building has been painted in the past few years and other maintenance has been done, it is clear that the costly work needed to retard

the structural deterioration has not been undertaken. It is also unlikely that the appropriations needed for this work will be forthcoming under present economic circumstances.

This summer marked the 300th anniversary of the founding of the first York Factory. At the end of each century the post has faced crises. In 1782 it was sacked and burned by the Comte de Lapérouse. In 1882 it was experiencing the trauma of readjusting to new economic and environmental circumstances as the letters of Fortescue so amply documented (page 28). In 1982 it is the heritage of the post that is threatened. Unless an aroused (and interested) public makes a concerted effort to make sure that appropriate actions are taken to save the architectural and archaeological heritage, too little will be done too late. I am not optimistic. I have a sinking feeling that the post is in its twilight years. ◆